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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 31 January 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost of Living

1. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales. [901218]

4. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales. [901221]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The UK Government fully recognise the challenges posed by cost of living pressures that have come about as a result of the covid pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. That is why they are providing £104 billion over 2022 to 2025 to support households and individuals across the UK—an average of £3,700 per household.

Carolyn Harris: On Monday evening, ITV News featured a Bevan Foundation study on pensioner poverty in Wales. With nearly a quarter of Wales's population being over 65, more pensioners are experiencing poverty in Wales than anywhere else in the UK. The “make do and mend” generation, who experienced imposed rationing as children, are now self-denying, with one in 10 pensioners skipping meals and one in five going without heating at some point this winter. What do the UK Government intend to do about this dire situation?

David T. C. Davies: The UK Government fully recognise the importance of supporting pensioners. That is why we have committed to the triple lock and made sure that, even through the difficult crises we have faced over the past few years, pensions have risen in line with inflation. On top of that, there has been an extra payment of £300 for pensioners, and the UK Government's policy of bringing down inflation is going to help everyone in Wales and the UK, including all pensioners. I hope the hon. Lady will agree that that is a much better focus than, for example, bringing in road user charging, which is going to hit pensioners who want to drive cars in Wales.

Wayne David: Citizens Advice Cymru has stated that during 2023, it referred over 21,000 people to food banks in Wales, almost double the number for 2021. What does that say about the impact of the Government's policies on ordinary people in Wales?

David T. C. Davies: As I have just outlined, the UK Government are absolutely focused on supporting those with the least in Wales and across the United Kingdom. That is why the UK Government's policy of bringing down inflation to around half has helped everyone, and it is why the UK Government have made sure that benefits have risen in line with inflation. Households where there are benefits have received a £900 payment, and households where there is disability have received a £150 payment. I do not for one moment doubt the fact that many people are facing serious difficulties at the moment, but this Government are committed to helping them. When I visit food banks, I am told that all sorts of people have to go and visit food banks on a temporary basis—they should not be used to score cheap political points.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Welsh Labour's reduction of business rates relief from 75% to 40% is already having an impact, with small businesses in Wrexham saying that they are going to fold. Despite the UK Government maintaining the rate at 75%, the Welsh Government are focusing more on wasting £140 million on a 20 mph scheme and increasing the number of Senedd politicians. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Welsh Labour Government should focus on what the people of Wales need, not what socialist Senedd politicians want to dictate?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is disgraceful that pubs in Wales are going to be paying, on average, thousands of pounds more in business rates because the Welsh Senedd Government have not passed on the money that has been given to them by the UK Government, and it is disgraceful that small tourism businesses are facing a tourism tax levy. If the Welsh Government want to focus on the priorities of small businesses and communities in Wales, they should indeed scrap the plan to spend £140 million on extra Senedd Members.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways in which the Welsh Labour Government can help with the cost of living is by helping businesses create jobs and supporting employers, such as the iconic Lobster Pot on Anglesey, rather than increasing business rates punitively and increasing the number of Senedd Members by a staggering 60%?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She is a huge champion of businesses in her constituency, and it is a shame that the Senedd does not look to her example of championing businesses instead of imposing all sorts of extra taxes, while—as she mentioned—wasting money on schemes such as creating extra Senedd Members and bringing in road charging on the M4. Even my own Labour council is suggesting bringing back Severn bridge tolls.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Some 8,000 homeowners in Wales face the Tory mortgage bombshell this month, with households projected to pay an extra £240 per month as their fixed-rate deals come to an end. Despite the Conservative party's opposition, the Welsh Government have put in place measures to prevent

repossessions, and a UK Labour Government would require banks to protect homeowners. What is the Secretary of State doing to help homeowners facing massive bills caused by the Conservative party's economic mismanagement?

David T. C. Davies: The UK Government have put in place a number of measures to support any mortgage holders facing difficulties at the moment, but the most important measure has been to bring down inflation. Inflation actually peaked at a higher rate in Europe than in the United Kingdom. Inflation is now down at 4%—much less than half of what it was previously—which will have a beneficial impact on mortgage interest rates over the longer term. I ask the hon. Lady whether, in all fairness, she thinks that her party's plans to borrow £28 billion a year, which is going to increase inflation and have a very bad impact on mortgage interest rates, will be good or bad for homeowners?

Mr Speaker: I call Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Llefarydd. The Government's own estimates warn that new Brexit border checks will increase the cost of fresh imports by £330 million and worsen food inflation. The Secretary of State used to dismiss warnings of Brexit border controls as scare stories. Will he now admit how wrong he was, and recognise that the best way to reduce food inflation, which sits at an eye-watering 8%, would be to rejoin the single market?

David T. C. Davies: I make no apologies for rubbishing the scare stories that came out before Brexit took place. We were told that it was going to lead to the collapse of the economy, to the collapse of house prices, to the end of fresh fruit and veg being sold in shops, and even to no more Magnum ice creams. I think we were even going to run out of Viagra as well at one point. The reality is that none of those scare stories has happened, but it is a bit ironic that the right hon. Lady, the leader of the Plaid Cymru group, is demanding that we rejoin the European Union while at the same time wanting to take Wales out of one of the most successful financial unions—

Mr Speaker: Order. Secretary of State, I am this way, not that way, and you are getting a little carried away. There are a few more questions, and Liz Saville Roberts has another one for you.

Liz Saville Roberts: That is a Brexit fantasy, and now we look at the wonder of the UK. Northern Ireland is set to receive over £3 billion and a fairer funding settlement from the Treasury, which I welcome. That includes millions of pounds to help balance budgets. Meanwhile in Wales, councillors face a budget black hole of £646 million, which is set to decimate our social services over the next three years. These cuts will be devastating for people left without resources during the cost of living crisis. As Wales's man in the Cabinet, what has the Secretary of State done to demand equivalent fair funding for Wales?

David T. C. Davies: First, I must point out to the right hon. Lady that, since leaving the European Union, our growth rate has been better than that of Germany, and our manufacturing has now exceeded that of France. As far as fair funding for Wales is concerned, we receive

20% more per head to spend on devolved services than is spent in England. One thing the right hon. Lady and I might agree on is that it is high time the Welsh Labour Government explained why we have longer waiting lists and lower educational standards, despite having more money to spend on devolved services.

Energy Mix

2. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of the energy mix in Wales. [901219]

10. **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of the energy mix in Wales. [901231]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): That was lively, Mr Speaker.

The UK has a secure and diverse energy system, and Wales continues to play a key role. The UK Government are going further to ensure our energy security by supporting our oil and gas industry, and investing to scale up our renewable energy production, such as floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea.

Stephen Doughty: Many of my constituents make the long journey round to work at Hinkley, yet we have had this Government in power for 14 years and we have seen no new nuclear delivered in Wales, despite our proud history of generation, with its significant opportunities to lower energy bills, deliver high-quality jobs and reduce carbon emissions. Where on earth is their plan, and why are they not getting on with delivering it?

Fay Jones: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman mentioning nuclear. I seem to recall that, when his party was in power, Labour did next to nothing to advance the cause of nuclear energy in this country. It gives me ample opportunity to pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), who has committed the Government to everything we have done on Wylfa so far. Progress is being made, in stark contrast to the record of his party.

Anna McMorris: We have had 14 years of successive Tory Governments, who have all had the chance to invest in the transition to net zero. Instead, they have chosen to backslide on climate commitments, and it is working people across my constituency of Cardiff North who are paying the price. With this Government intent on issuing new oil and gas licences, what does the Minister say to families in my constituency who are now paying treble for their energy bills?

Fay Jones: I would point out that it is this Government who stepped in with £96 billion of support to mitigate the impact of those energy bills. I completely disagree with the hon. Lady's assessment of our record on net zero, and I would point out that, when her party was in power, 7% of our energy supply came from renewable sources.

Anna McMorris: Fourteen years!

Fay Jones: If the hon. Lady will let me finish the point, the figure is now just under 50%, and that is the record of this party's 14 years in power.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions the new industry of floating offshore wind, which has huge potential to create a large number of high-quality jobs in places such as Milford Haven and Port Talbot. The two ports both have bids in with the UK Government to the FLOWMIS port infrastructure scheme, which will be key to seeing this vision realised. When can the ports expect to hear back about those bids?

Fay Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for that question. I am delighted that today the Crown Estate is hosting a bidders day to drive forward plans for innovative floating wind projects in the Celtic sea. The UK Government are supporting FLOW through our contracts for difference scheme, securing a long-term pipeline of projects in the Celtic sea. I would be happy to write to him with a further update on when more progress can be discussed.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): On the issue of the energy mix, the Tata workers I met last week know that the virgin steel they make is vital to supporting our renewable energy aspirations, such as offshore wind in the Celtic sea, so the loss of 3,000 jobs is a kick in the teeth for our proud and skilled Welsh steelworkers. It will devastate local economies and the sovereign steelmaking capacity that would build the wind turbines we need, yet the Business Secretary told us at the weekend:

“It’s not about the job losses”.

Does the Secretary of State agree with her comments?

Fay Jones: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has me replying to that question, not the Secretary of State.

It is important to recognise that the investment from this UK Government has saved thousands of jobs across the United Kingdom. Of course, the transition board is now working with the individuals affected in Port Talbot, which is the proper and right thing to do. I am glad that both the UK and Welsh Governments are working towards that; it is absolutely the right outcome. We need to think about these things in the wider context, which is our responsibility.

Jo Stevens: The Minister boasts about the transition board, but that only exists because of the Government’s failure to protect jobs and vital industries. Each year, Port Talbot provides enough virgin steel to deliver the UK’s 2030 wind targets by itself. Can she tell the House where that steel will come from when her Government’s intervention shuts the blast furnaces early? Will it come from India? If so, we will be surrendering our ability to create jobs, investment and cheaper bills here in Britain.

Fay Jones: Mr Speaker, it will not surprise you to learn that I completely disagree with the hon. Lady’s assessment. I would point out that this Government have provided the transition board with £80 million. We have not seen any of the £20 million that the Welsh Labour Government have promised, but indications so far are that moving away from steelmaking would not have a direct impact on national security.¹

1. [Official Report, 6 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 4MC.] (Correction)

Speed Limit: Residential Roads

3. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with the Welsh Government on the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit on residential roads and pedestrian streets in Wales. [901220]

7. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): Whether he has had discussions with the Welsh Government on the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit on residential roads and pedestrian streets in Wales. [901227]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Welsh Government’s policy on the blanket 20 mph speed limit is damaging communities and businesses across Wales. All of us support 20 mph limits if there is a safety reason outside schools, hospitals or old people’s homes, but the blanket 20 mph limit is, by the Welsh Government’s own figures, going to create a £4.5 billion hit to the Welsh economy.

Dr James Davies: In my constituency, bus services no longer serve Dyserth’s high street or the Tweedmill shopping outlet in Trefnant, which impacts on some of the most vulnerable people. Arriva has stated that the Welsh Government’s 20 mph policy is a key reason for that. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Welsh Government have failed in multiple ways to properly consider the impact of their policy and that they should repeal it in full?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Not only have the Welsh Government not considered the impact of this policy on the economy, businesses and commuters, but they have failed to consider the impact on users of public transport. We are seeing bus timetables across the whole of Wales being ripped up because of this daft policy. The Welsh Labour Government seem determined to apply a handbrake to the Welsh economy.

Scott Benton: Blanket 20 mph zones do not command widespread public support and, as a consequence, are widely ignored and unenforceable. Furthermore, there is very little evidence that they improve road safety or air quality. The roll-out of the scheme in Wales has proved to be an utter farce. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the Labour party has not learned its lesson and would no doubt seek to impose this costly and disastrous policy in England were it to be elected?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is correct. Not only have the Welsh Labour Government not considered this policy, but they have ignored the fact that 468,000 people have signed a petition calling on them to reconsider—the largest petition in the history of the Senedd. He is also correct to say that if a Labour Government were ever elected in this country—I certainly hope that will not happen—it is inevitable that they would pursue anti-motorist policies such as the 20 mph speed limit, a ban on new roads being built, and congestion charges and emission zones being set up all over the place.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The *South Wales Argus* of 28 December 2022 informs us that the Secretary of State for Wales outlined his “anger” that the 20 mph speed limit in Caerwent was not being enforced properly by the police. Is he still angry?

David T. C. Davies: I began my response earlier by saying that all of us in this House support 20 mph speed limits where there is an issue of safety, and I could not be more clear about that. What I do not support is a blanket 20 mph limit. Alongside that blanket 20 mph limit on 30 mph roads, the Welsh Labour Government are using underhand methods to bring down the speed limits on perfectly safe dual carriageways from 70 mph to 50 mph. That is what lies in store if Labour is ever elected to government in the rest of the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Clearly the 20 mph speed limit that is being enforced in Wales will restrict people in their movement. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Welsh Assembly on providing more buses to take people out of their cars, and will there be more provision for cyclists? If there is not that provision, this system cannot work.

David T. C. Davies: Unfortunately, Welsh Senedd Ministers do not seem interested in reconsidering the policy. Frankly, there is an anti-motorist agenda with the Welsh Labour Government, which has seen blanket 20 mph speed limits, speed reductions on dual carriageways, congestion charges being considered and charging to use the M4. Most shockingly of all, my own Labour council is considering bringing back Severn bridge tolls.

Rail Infrastructure

5. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of rail infrastructure in Wales. [901222]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): I have regular discussions with colleagues across Government on rail infrastructure. The UK Government are committed to building a strong rail infrastructure network across Wales, which will improve connectivity and drive economic growth. We have provided over £390 million for Welsh rail in recent years, and we recently announced a further £1 billion to fund the electrification of the north Wales main line.

Karin Smyth: The Welsh Affairs Committee highlights the need for greater connectivity between Swansea, Cardiff and Bristol, which would be of huge benefit, particularly for sports and music fans coming to Ashton Gate in my constituency. Why has the Wales Rail Board failed to initiate recommendations and other further improvements?

Fay Jones: The hon. Lady's constituents will be greatly affected by the project that she mentions and by the performance of Great Western Railway, which is not sufficient. The Office of Rail and Road has launched an investigation into poor train punctuality and reliability in Network Rail's Wales and western region, and we await the recommendations of that review. I add that industrial action has affected things.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Network Rail and its subcontractors on completing the repair works on the longest wooden rail bridge in Europe across the Mawddach estuary in Gwynedd?

Fay Jones: I certainly will join my hon. Friend, and I am delighted that he takes such keen interest in Welsh rail infrastructure and raises it here on such a regular basis. He is right to flag that project, which is an example of this Government's record investment in rail infrastructure in Wales. I was pleased to visit the project and give it my full support.

Steelmaking

6. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the steelmaking industry in Wales. [901225]

8. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the steelmaking industry in Wales. [901228]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Government are investing £500 million to secure the future of steelmaking in Port Talbot for generations to come. It is one of the largest UK Government support packages for steelmaking in history, and it will protect 5,000 jobs directly with Tata and many thousands more in the supply chain.

Chris Elmore: Last week, the Secretary of State stated in the steel debate that he understands

"the devastation that people will feel in Port Talbot—the whole community, but especially those people who face the loss of their jobs"—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 264.]

at the plant and beyond. Why is it, then, that the Secretary of State or the Business Secretary did not put in a red line on job losses while this work was being done, especially given that Tata has this morning doubled down on those losses at the Welsh Affairs Committee? It is nothing short of a disgrace.

David T. C. Davies: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Tata approached the UK Government and said it was intending to pull out of the United Kingdom. If Tata had pulled out completely, that would have immediately cost 8,000 jobs and many thousands more in the supply chain. The Government therefore acted to take the only deal available, which was to build the electric arc furnace and save thousands of jobs.

Alex Cunningham: I do not think that thousands of jobs will be saved at all. The people of Teesside, who saw the Tory Government abandon them and end virgin steelmaking at Redcar, leading to the loss of 3,000 jobs, will sympathise with those in Wales. The failure of the same Government will see virgin steelmaking also ended in Wales, with the loss of another 3,000 jobs, and leave the UK even more reliant on imports, as they are surrendering the market to other countries. Why would the Government want to do that when steel is a foundation industry and, with the introduction of new technologies, could have a bright future?

David T. C. Davies: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be aware that 100% of the materials—the iron ore and coke—used to produce steel in Port Talbot are imported from abroad. At the same time, we are exporting 8 million tonnes of scrap steel, so building an arc furnace to make use of that scrap steel will make us less dependent on other countries for our steel.

As far as job losses are concerned, the UK Government have put aside a budget of £80 million, combined with £20 million from Tata, to support anyone who loses their job. Thus far, we have not had one single penny towards that from the Welsh Labour Government—who, by the way, are able to find £100 million to create a whole load of extra Senedd members in Cardiff Bay. I know where my priorities are: with the steelworkers.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Steelmaking is essential to our national security, as is reaching net zero. The problem is that the Welsh Labour Government cannot make their mind up about which is more important. After trying to kill off the steel industry with their green measures, they now complain that the UK Government are not doing enough to support that industry. Does the Secretary of State think that they do not really know their ACAS from their NALGO?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government have looked carefully at this, and very little steel being produced by Port Talbot is going into the defence industry, but the defence industry is being supplied with steel from an electric arc furnace by Sheffield Forgemasters. There is absolutely no reason why an electric arc furnace built at Port Talbot, using UK Government support, cannot help support our defence industry in the years to come.

Victims of Crime

9. **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting victims of crime in Wales. [901230]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues on a range of topics including on justice matters. The Government are committed to supporting victims. By 2025, we will have quadrupled funding in England and Wales for victim and witness support services from 2010 levels.

Emma Hardy: Nine in 10 crimes went unsolved in Wales in the last six months. What does the Minister say to the victims of the 82,000 unsolved crimes?

Fay Jones: I would point to the Government's record on crime. Last week's Office for National Statistics crime survey shows drops in all major crime types, with an average reduction of about 50%. Violent crime is down by 51%, neighbourhood crime is down by 48%, and theft is down by 46%. That is due in part to the fact that the Government have met their commitment to provide 20,000 extra police officers. My own force, Dyfed-Powys, has now got an extra 143 officers.

Levelling-up Funding

11. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of levelling-up funding on Welsh communities. [901232]

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and delivery teams in the Department for Levelling Up,

Housing and Communities on the progress of levelling-up fund projects in Wales. I look forward to hearing more about the projects taking place in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Robin Millar: The Môr i'r Mynydd—sea to mountain—active travel route in the Conwy valley received an £18.6 million boost through levelling-up funds. The projects will make a positive difference to communities in Glan Conwy, Betws-y-Coed and Trefriw. Apart from unlocking the Conwy valley to visitors, it will help young people get to school safely and workers to their jobs. I meet regularly with Conwy County Borough Council about the progress of those projects. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that levelling-up funds are being delivered effectively in Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being such a champion of levelling-up fund schemes in his constituency. The levelling-up funds have allowed us to keep our post-Brexit promise to ensure that Wales continues to be generously funded. That is one of many such projects, such as the levelling-up funds, the freeports and the investment zones that are ensuring that Wales levels up.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Like the towns and villages I represent, coalfield communities in Wales are still bearing the brunt of deindustrialisation. I am delighted that we will have a debate tomorrow on miners and mining communities, and I encourage Welsh colleagues to attend. Can the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure that levelling-up funding in Wales and across the coalfields in the UK is targeted at the most deprived, left-behind areas, which have suffered most?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say we need to target the areas most in need, but that is exactly what this Government have been doing. It is not just about levelling-up funds; we have had four growth deals across the length and breadth of Wales, three rounds of levelling-up funding, two investment zones, two freeports, an electrified rail line in north Wales and an electrified arc furnace in south Wales. The reality is that while we are committed to levelling up, the Welsh Labour Government are committed to levying further taxes on people and businesses on Wales.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I want to say that recent exchanges have been lively, to the point where it is becoming difficult for colleagues to hear what is being said clearly, and there has been an escalation in unhelpful exchanges across the Floor of the House from sedentary positions and the attempted use of props. Some of the language used in questions has also fallen short of the standards of good temper and moderation that should characterise the proceedings of this House. I know there is a general election approaching, but I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to exercise greater self-restraint in their choice of words and in their general behaviour, both when they are asking a question and when they are not.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901295] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 31 January.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): On Monday I met the families of Grace O'Malley-Kumar, Barnaby Webber and Ian Coates, who were killed in Nottingham. I assured them that we would do whatever it takes to get the answers that they want. Following constructive dialogue over past months, I welcome the significant steps the DUP has taken to make restoration of the Executive possible. I also thank the other political parties in Northern Ireland for the patience they have shown. After two years without an Executive, there is now the prospect of getting power-sharing back up and running, strengthening our Union, giving the people the local, accountable government that they need and offering a brighter future for Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary will be making a statement shortly. This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Joanna Cherry: Last week I met a constituent who was employed not by the Post Office, but by a supermarket that operated a franchise post office. She was wrongly accused of dishonesty as a result of the faulty Horizon system and put through a disciplinary process by her employer, the supermarket, which had a profound impact on her life. She is not alone—there are others in her position—yet there is no provision for compensating people who worked in franchise post offices, as she did. Will the Prime Minister give me a commitment that he will include those victims in the Horizon scandal compensation scheme?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. and learned Lady's constituent's case. As I have said, it was an awful miscarriage of justice and everyone affected deserves not only justice, but compensation and answers. I will make sure we look into the precise details of her constituent's case—surely there will be others like that—and will make sure that the Minister gets back to her with all due haste.

Q2. [901296] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Sustainable aviation fuel plays a significant part in the sector's decarbonisation. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister commit to further policies for a SAF mandate to generate greater demand, and for a revenue support mechanism of the kind that other sectors, including solar and wind-powered generation, have? Will he give a commitment that work will start by the end of next year on the five promised sustainable aviation plants here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that we are committed to ensuring the SAF mandate will be in place by 2025. By mandating the use of sustainable aviation fuel, we will be able not only to

deliver carbon savings, but to create a brand-new UK market. As one of the steps in introducing the revenue certainty mechanism that he talks about by 2026, the Department for Transport will be consulting in the spring of this year on options for how that should work in practice.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in welcoming the DUP's statement on the return of the Northern Ireland Executive? This is an important moment, but we now need all sides to work together to get Stormont back up and running for the people of Northern Ireland. I, too, met the families of Grace, Barnaby and Ian on Monday. It is impossible to express in words the horror that they have been through, and continue to go through. We must all redouble our efforts to do everything we can to help them with their campaign. This week, two young lives—16-year-old Max and 15-year-old Mason—were taken in Bristol. I know the whole House will join me in sending condolences to their families and friends.

One of the most difficult experiences for any Member of this House is speaking to those at the sharp end of this Government's cost of living crisis. Nobody could fail to be moved by the plight of the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). His mortgage has gone up £1,200 a month, and he has been forced to quit his dream job to pay for it. A Tory MP counting the cost of Tory chaos! After 14 years, have we finally discovered what they meant when they said, "We're all in this together"?

The Prime Minister: Thanks to the mortgage charter that the Chancellor introduced last year, millions of mortgage holders across the country are benefiting from mortgage support. Rather than take the approach that the right hon. and learned Gentleman just did, it is important to focus on the practical support in place to help people who need it. Someone on a typical mortgage is able to save hundreds of pounds thanks to those reforms. Recently, we have seen mortgage applications at a multi-month high, as a result of confidence returning. If he really cared about helping people with the cost of living, he would do more to celebrate and acknowledge the fact that, thanks to our plan, millions of working people will start to pay hundreds of pounds less in tax from this month's payslip. We all know that is not a priority for him. He said he wanted to back people on the cost of living, but I read that he has described tax cuts as "salting the earth". It seems that his shadow Chancellor is equally confused; in Davos, she said that she backed tax cuts, but back here in Westminster she called them a "scorched earth" policy. She obviously cannot decide which Wikipedia page to copy this week.

Keir Starmer: For every £2 the Prime Minister says he is giving people back, he is taking £10 out of their back pocket through higher tax. He thinks they should be dancing in the street and thanking him. There are 200,000 people, just like the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), coming off fixed-rate mortgages and paying more each and every month, because the Conservatives crashed the economy. Does the Prime Minister know how much their monthly repayments are going up by?

The Prime Minister: As I said, someone on a typical mortgage of about £140,000 with 17 years left is currently paying around £800. As a result of the ability to extend their mortgage term or switch to a six-month interest-only mortgage, someone on the average mortgage will be able to save hundreds of pounds. Again, the right hon. and learned Gentleman says that he cares about the cost of living, but what would have the biggest impact on everyone's cost of living is his idea to spend £28 billion; a shadow Treasury Minister confirmed just this morning that they remain committed to that. But he has no plan to pay for that £28 billion—no plan at all. That is typical Labour economics. They want to keep the spending but drop the payment plan. At the weekend I saw the former Labour leader—the right hon. and learned Gentleman's mentor—who was clear that Labour will make their sums add up with tax rises on people's assets: their homes, pensions and businesses. It is the same old Labour party—no plan and back to square one with higher taxes.

Keir Starmer: The Government have crashed the economy, mortgages are through the roof and they have doubled the debt, and the Prime Minister thinks he can stand there and lecture other people about fiscal responsibility. He did not answer the question. Hundreds of thousands of people are coming off fixed-rate mortgages and facing huge mortgage increases, and the Prime Minister will not even do them the courtesy of answering the question. *[Interruption.]* No, he didn't, so I will ask him again.

Mr Speaker: Order. I was very clear at the beginning. My constituents want to hear—if yours don't, please leave.

Keir Starmer: Does the Prime Minister have any idea how much mortgages are going up by this month for those coming off fixed-rate mortgages?

The Prime Minister: Again, I point the right hon. and learned Gentleman back to my previous answer. Everybody's situation will be different. Someone on a typical mortgage of around £140,000, who is currently paying £800, will be able to keep their mortgage payment essentially the same by using the facilitations the Chancellor has put in place. That is what we have done to help people. Again, it is incumbent on the right hon. and learned Gentleman to explain to the British public how his policy of decarbonising the grid by 2030 will be funded. He will not give the answer, but helpfully the shadow Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), popped up at the weekend in an interview in *The Sunday Times* and said that Labour does not need a plan to pay for it because, in his words, it will “produce real savings”, and it makes clear “economic sense”. The Leader of the Opposition does not want to talk about it at all. All these years later, it is the same story: the right hon. Member for Doncaster North has carved a promise in stone, and everybody else just looks away in embarrassment.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister just does not get it. The Government have crashed the economy; mortgages are skyrocketing; they are doubling the debt. They say they are going to max out the Government's credit card at the next Budget—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Chief Whip is getting very carried away. He does not want to lead everybody for a cup of tea, does he? Come on.

Keir Starmer: The Government have forfeited the right to lecture others about the economy. Somebody coming off a fixed-rate mortgage will be paying an average of £240 more each and every month—a constant reminder that working people are paying the price for the damage the Government have done to the economy.

This week, I met an employee at Iceland in Warrington—Phil. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Gibson, the same voice keeps appearing again, and it will not appear any more. I am just letting you know now.

Keir Starmer: Laughing at an Iceland employee who is struggling with his mortgage—shame. Phil told me his mortgage is going up by a staggering £1,000 a month. He does not want other averages—other people, other stories. This is what is happening to him. If the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk, on £120,000, cannot afford this Tory Government, how on earth can people like Phil?

The Prime Minister: Thanks to the management of the economy, Phil and millions of people like him are now ensuring that inflation is less than half the rate that it was when we were talking a year ago; that is putting more money in their pocket. Thanks to this Government, Phil and millions of other workers—not just at Iceland, but across the country—are benefiting this month in their pay packet from a tax cut worth hundreds of pounds for someone on an average salary.

I hope the right hon. and learned Gentleman explained to Phil the cost of his policies. Did he explain how Phil is going to have to pay for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's £28 billion green spending spree? Did he explain what it will cost Phil in higher taxes, with more coming out of his pay packet? Did he explain to Phil that he would be better off sticking with our plan, rather than going back to square one with him?

Keir Starmer: I invite the Prime Minister to get in touch with Phil and explain to him how paying £1,000 more in his mortgage is making him better off, because that is not how he feels. The Prime Minister is so out of touch, it is unbelievable. Finding hundreds of pounds extra per month may not seem like a big deal to the Prime Minister, but let me tell him that most people do not have that sort of money knocking around.

If that was not bad enough, this week, the Prime Minister told every council in the country to put their council tax up by the maximum of 5%. That is 26 tax rises now, Prime Minister. He says everything is fine, and people are better off, but when people see their mortgage going up, their council tax going up and food prices still going up, who does he expect them to believe: his boasts, or their bank account?

The Prime Minister: Again, I was puzzled—the right hon. and learned Gentleman resorts here, as always, to the politics of envy. I was genuinely surprised that, after recently and repeatedly attacking not just me but the Government for lifting the bonus cap, the shadow

Chancellor has announced, just today, that she now supports the Government's policy on the bankers' bonus cap—I do not know whether he mentioned that to Phil when he was having his chat, but I am sure he can fill us in. I can tell him that trust and economic credibility come from sticking to a plan, but it is becoming clear that we cannot trust a word he says. When the shadow Chancellor claims that they will not borrow much or raise Phil's taxes, we now know that those promises are just not worth the Wikipedia page they were copied from.

Keir Starmer: I actually did not expect the Prime Minister to be laughing at Phil. I did not expect that—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Look, I made the statement very clear. It is very serious that we make sure that people hear both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It matters to the people who watch the proceedings of this Chamber. The behaviour that seems to be carrying on is not good.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister just does not get how hard it is for millions of people across the country like Phil. That is the primary problem: they are struggling with their mortgages, their bills and the spiralling cost of living. The Prime Minister's response is never to take responsibility, and never to show contrition or even any level of basic understanding. He is so detached that he thinks he can paint a world in which their problems simply do not exist. The problem is that he cannot even fool his own MPs, let alone anyone else. The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk says he is "exhausted" and is looking forward to new opportunities outside of Parliament. Why does the Prime Minister not do him a favour and call an election, so that he and the whole country can move on?

The Prime Minister: Whether it is Phil or everyone else across the country, the plan that we are putting in place is working to help people and we are making progress: just this week, taking action to stop children vaping; just this week, ensuring that people can visit their pharmacies to get the healthcare they need, freeing up millions of GP appointments; and just this week, millions of working people starting to see hundreds of pounds of tax cuts delivered in their pay packet. That is a plan that is working. All the right hon. and Learned Gentleman is offering is £28 billion of tax rises. And that is the choice: a brighter future with us or back to square one with them.

Q7. [901302] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): The Prime Minister likes to attend live sport, so I wonder whether he will join me in welcoming the planning inspector's decision to uphold Rugby Council's rejection of an application for development at Brandon Stadium in my constituency, to keep the doors open for it to remain a sporting venue so that future generations will enjoy the thrills and spills of motorcycle speedway and stock cars.

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute and being proud of Britain's rich history in the automotive and motorsport sectors. The stadium he talks about is an historic motorsport venue. While it has been a shame to see it fall into disrepair, I hope that the

decision he refers to will enable the possibility of both speedway and stock car racing to return. I know that he will continue, rightly, to champion this cause.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): When the Tories scrapped the cap on bankers' bonuses in the autumn during a cost of living crisis, the Labour party rightly opposed it. Yet here we are, just three months later, and the Labour party supports scrapping the cap—shameful. Is the Prime Minister comforted by the fact that he is now no longer alone in this House on being completely out of touch with public opinion?

The Prime Minister: As I said at the time, we supported the decision of the independent regulator because it was the right thing for financial stability, and because we on this side of the House have a set of convictions and we have a plan and we stick to it. But the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the flip-flopping, U-turning and no convictions of the party opposite.

Stephen Flynn: Of course, scrapping the cap on bankers' bonuses was only made possible because of Brexit. What the Westminster parties are now telling the public is that it is OK for bankers to have unlimited Brexit bonuses, but the public who are sitting at home and struggling to feed their families have to suck up and deal with additional food costs as a result of Brexit red tape. That is the cost and that is the reality of broken Brexit Britain. Is it not the case that the great achievement of this Tory Government is getting the Labour party to agree to that bleak future?

The Prime Minister: We are actually delivering benefits for people across Scotland, not least the new free trade deals that are opening up markets for Scottish exporters, freeports that are attracting jobs and investment, and the Brexit pubs guarantee that is cutting the cost of a pint in Scottish pubs. The hon. Gentleman talks about the cost of living, but what he could do to help the most is ensure that Scotland is not the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom—and not just for high earners; everyone earning £28,500 or more is paying more tax in Scotland than they would in England, thanks to the SNP.

Q8. [901303] **Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): One punch thrown, two days on life support, then three children left without a father. A four-year sentence is handed down and the perpetrator is released after two, but one grieving mother has to live a life sentence of agony. Sentencing for one-punch killers is not working in this country. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time to finally introduce a specific offence and a tougher minimum sentence for one-punch manslaughter?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done to bring attention to so-called one-punch manslaughter and to highlight the anguish that—as she knows well—those cases cause to the families of the victims. I know that the Ministry of Justice has looked very carefully at the amendment that she has proposed, and that she will shortly be meeting the Minister for Safeguarding to discuss both her specific amendment and how we might best address the wider issue.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Mr Speaker—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order! Ed Davey.

Ed Davey: My constituent Millie, a wheelchair user, had a serious accident at a sporting event. Millie was left waiting on the floor in pain for over two hours before an ambulance arrived. During her months in hospital since then, she has been dropped, badly, multiple times; left stuck in her bed for days on end; and even told to soil herself when there is no one to take her to the toilet. Before all this, Millie was living independently and working, but the prospect of her returning to work is being destroyed by the crisis in the NHS and care system. I am sure the Prime Minister will agree that no one should ever have to go through what Millie has been through, so will he look again at our proposals to ensure that every patient receives the high-quality care that they need?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about Millie's case, and I am sure that if there are specific aspects of it that need to be examined, the Health Secretary will follow them up with the right hon. Gentleman. More generally, we want to make sure that everyone gets the care they deserve, which is why we are not just investing record sums in the NHS but ensuring that there are record numbers of doctors, nurses and new, innovative forms of treatment such as surgical hubs and virtual wards. All that is showing that ambulance times, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, are lower today than they were this time last year.

Q11. [901306] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): The No. 1 reason for children's hospital admissions in my constituency is dental treatment, but we have no NHS capacity and no orthodontist in Barnstaple. Our dentists cannot recruit, even with a large golden hello. The emergency dental plan seems to have been stuck at the Treasury forever. Might my right hon. Friend use his spare set of keys and pop round to rescue it for us? My constituents and I would be ever so grateful.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has rightly championed the provision of dentistry in her area. We are investing £3 billion a year, and the reformed contracts in dentistry from the NHS have improved access while ensuring fairer remuneration for dentists. We are also providing more financial support for those who need it the most—about half the courses of treatment last year were delivered to those who are non-paying, both adults and children—but yes, more needs to be done, and that is why our dentistry recovery plan will be published shortly.

Q3. [901297] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): More than two decades ago, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, misled this House by promoting and endorsing the Post Office Horizon IT system as perfect, protecting the large corporation that created it and causing untold harm, damage and misery to innocent people. Can the current Prime Minister think of anything he has promoted, in partnership with huge businesses, as safe and effective that has ultimately harmed the British people? Will he use this opportunity to correct that safe and effective statement, or will he choose the same line as Tony Blair and sit back, do nothing and let the misery continue to pile up?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that the Horizon scandal is a terrible miscarriage of justice, and we are doing everything we can to make it right. To what the hon. Member was more broadly insinuating, let me be unequivocal from this Dispatch Box that covid vaccines are safe.

Q12. [901307] **Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The shocking revelations of the Horizon scandal highlighted the Post Office's financial incompetence, and my right hon. Friend will know that the public's confidence in the institution is at an all-time low. Does he agree that as high street banks are closing branches across the country, we should look at developing new community banking solutions rather than giving the Post Office sole responsibility for providing access to cash and other banking services in poorly served neighbourhoods?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, but I would just say that we should not make the mistake of conflating this scandal with the actions of many hard-working local postmasters and sub-postmasters. Customers can access cash and banking services through a wide range of channels, including a contract with the Post Office Counters service, which provides a valuable channel. I agree with her, however, on the importance of access to cash, which is why the Government have legislated to protect that as part of the recent Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, to ensure that the vast majority of people should be no more than 3 miles away from such a cashpoint.

Q4. [901298] **Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): One of the Nolan principles—integrity—states that holders of public office should not act to gain material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. On 6 January the Prime Minister tweeted a link to the Conservative party website that seemed to scrape people's data and place unwanted cookies on their machines. The Good Law Project is now pursuing this. Can he assure the House that no laws have been broken by his party?

The Prime Minister: Of course our party follows all laws.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): A first responsibility for Government is to fix the housing crisis that young people did not cause. Three years ago, we dragged house building in this country up to the highest level since 1987, after the last Labour Government left it at its lowest level since the 1920s. But house building is weakening and we need to do more. Will my right hon. Friend consider using the Budget to do as he and I did together during the pandemic: cut stamp duty to boost housing starts, reignite the economy and support thousands of businesses across our country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that since 2010 we have delivered 2.5 million additional homes, and we are on track to deliver 1 million just in this Parliament and help over 850,000 families into home ownership through schemes such as Help to Buy and the right to buy. Obviously, tax decisions are a matter for the Chancellor, but I would point out that our existing stamp duty relief for first-time buyers ensures that the vast majority of first-time buyers in our country pay absolutely no stamp duty.

Q5. [901299] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment has today published polling that found that nearly half of employers exclude blind and partially sighted people from their workplaces and that one in four said that they would not be willing to make workplace adjustments. The disability employment gap remains stubbornly at 30% and the pay gap means that blind and partially sighted people effectively work for free for 47 days of the year. Will the Prime Minister meet me and sight loss organisations to discuss how we can create a more inclusive workforce?

The Prime Minister: I share the hon. Lady's ambition for an inclusive workforce. The record in supporting those with disabilities into work over the past several years has been incredibly strong. I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is actively looking at that and making sure that our accessibility plan is up to date and inclusive. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Having visited recently, I know that Israel remains in shock following the rape, murder and butchery carried out by Hamas. All of us want to see a peaceful and demilitarised Palestinian state. However, Hamas remain in control in large parts of Gaza, support for them is growing in the west bank, polls show that nearly two thirds of Palestinians reject co-existence with Israel and the Palestinian Authority has continued to promote hatred of Jews. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any recognition of a Palestinian state must address these issues and can come about only as part of a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians?

The Prime Minister: The Government's position is clear. My right hon. and learned Friend is right that steps and conditions need to be put in place on this journey: first and foremost, the removal of Hamas from Gaza; a Palestinian-led Government in Gaza and the west bank; a concrete plan to reform and support the Palestinian Authority; a reconstruction plan for Gaza; and a two-state solution, which we have long supported. Let me be clear: we stand with Israel. The terrorist threat it faces must be eliminated and Israel's lasting security must be guaranteed.

Q6. [901301] Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On 15 November last year, I appealed to the Prime Minister to choose de-escalation and peace over violence, death and destruction, but he called me "naive". So far, over 26,000 souls have perished in Gaza. In a powerful and moving open letter in Monday's *New York Times*, the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council cited Deuteronomy—

"I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life"—

and accused President Biden of choosing death. If the Prime Minister will not listen to me or the International Court of Justice, will he listen to the Rabbinical Council, or will he call it "naive" too?

The Prime Minister: I have been clear multiple times that we are deeply concerned about the impact on the civilian population of the fighting in Gaza. Too many people have lost their lives and there is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support in Gaza. I will not go over all the debates we have had about the conditions that are necessary for an immediate pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, but I assure the House that we are doing everything we can to get more aid into the region as quickly as possible.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Chatham docks support over 800 local, high-value jobs which are at risk because the owners are continuing in their pursuit to displace successful businesses, such as ArcelorMittal Kent Wire. The Labour council is failing to honour the commitment it made before the local elections to protect the docks and the jobs. Even the Leader of the Opposition said he was "proudly backing" the Save Chatham Docks campaign. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to see how we can protect the docks and save those jobs for my constituents? Is this not just another example of how Labour and its leaders change their position depending on which way the wind blows?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has been a constant champion of Chatham docks and I am disappointed to hear that the local Labour council is failing to honour the commitments it has made. As she points out, I am not surprised that the Leader of the Opposition has said one thing and then consequently done another. The docks support hundreds of jobs and I join her in calling on the council to rethink its approach.

Pharmacy First

12.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): With permission, I shall make a statement on the launch of our Pharmacy First service.

Pharmacies are at the centre of our communities. They are an accessible front door to our NHS for millions of people. Alongside general practice, optometry and dentistry, pharmacy is one of the four pillars of primary care in England. Four in five people in England live within a 20-minute walk of a community pharmacy. Pharmacies provide fast, fair and simple access to care and advice for the kinds of illnesses from which people suffer every day. Our constituents can now walk in off the high street whenever it suits them—whether they are at home, at work, or visiting somewhere.

Our pharmacists are not only conveniently located, but highly skilled professionals with years of training under their belts. The number of registered pharmacists in England has grown considerably under this Conservative Government—up 61% compared with 2010. None the less, these skilled healthcare professionals still represent a rather untapped resource in our NHS, so this Government are bringing forward reforms that will make the most of their expertise: giving people up and down the country a variety of quality care and wise advice, quickly and easily, saving them a trip to the GP; freeing up appointments for patients who need GPs the most; and driving our plan to cut waiting lists. The benefits are clear. That is why this Government have consistently taken the decisions that allow community pharmacists to deliver more clinical services and supply more treatments—whether that be other parts of the NHS referring patients suffering from minor illnesses to community pharmacists for advice and the sale of over-the-counter medicines, offering lifesaving blood pressure checks in pharmacies, or making it easier for women to access oral contraception in pharmacies. I am proud of everything that we have accomplished so far.

To unlock the full potential of our pharmacists, we need to go further and faster. That is why I am delighted to inform the House today that we are launching the Pharmacy First service—a personal priority of the Prime Minister, who is himself the son of a pharmacist. This will give pharmacists the power to supply prescription-only medications, including antibiotics and antivirals for seven common conditions: sore throats, ear aches, infected insect bites, impetigo, shingles, and minor urinary tract infections in women. More than 10,000 community pharmacies have signed up—over 95% of pharmacies in England—which is a brilliant sign of their approval.

The next time that anyone is suffering from any of those seven conditions, for most people their first port of call will be a quick trip or a call to their pharmacist. They will not need to see their GP first. They will not need to spend time making an appointment, and they can turn to their pharmacist whenever it suits them. That benefits everyone involved: people get the care they need faster; GPs can focus on more complicated cases; and pharmacists can make better use of their knowledge and skills. This is a common-sense reform. Pharmacists see and advise people with these sorts of conditions every day, but we

have now enabled them to provide prescription-only medicines where clinically appropriate, so that they can help people more easily.

All this will deliver results. Pharmacy First will make it easier for millions of people to get the care they need on the high street and, together with the expanded blood pressure and contraception service, it will free up as many as 10 million GP appointments, in turn reducing unnecessary trips to A&E, reducing the pressure on GPs, and driving forward our plan to cut waiting lists for patients.

The investment that we are putting into Pharmacy First will also level up digital infrastructure in community pharmacies up and down the country, streamlining referrals to and from GPs, giving pharmacists better access to relevant information from patients' GP records, and allowing them to share relevant information quickly in return.

Pharmacy First is not just about delivering care faster, but about making care fairer by driving down health inequalities. That is because there is double the number of pharmacies in the most deprived communities in our country. Getting the right care, the right contraception and the right test will now be faster and simpler for all those people in our more deprived communities than it ever has been before. Thanks to Pharmacy First, they will be able to take full advantage of their pharmacists' expertise and use them to complement the care they receive from their GPs and throughout the NHS.

Pharmacy First was made possible only through close collaboration with Community Pharmacy England, which I thank for all the work it has done and will continue to do to support community pharmacies to gear up and deliver this new service for our NHS.

We on the Conservative Benches have a clear plan for the NHS: getting patients the care they need faster; making the system simpler for staff; and making it fairer for everyone. That is our plan and I look forward to working with pharmacists up and down the country to deliver today's announcements as we build a brighter future for families right across the country. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.40 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

Let me start by paying tribute to the many organisations that have been involved in preparing for this launch and the thousands of pharmacies across the country that have embraced this initiative. Labour has long been arguing that pharmacists should play a greater role in the NHS, so we support this move.

As the Minister has said, pharmacies already do far more than just dispense repeat prescriptions and sell shampoo: they are medicine experts within the NHS; they are highly trained; they are easily accessible right across the country; and, as we saw during the pandemic, they are a highly trusted part of their communities. But their skills and knowledge are often under-utilised. Therefore, bringing more services to British high streets for patients to get treated more quickly and

[Preet Kaur Gill]

conveniently is absolutely right. It is why, as we announced last week, we want to bring NHS out-patient appointments closer to people through high street opticians too.

The Minister is right to say that pharmacists can take pressure off GPs. However, let us be clear: this announcement will not make up for the 1,000 pharmacies which have been closed under the Conservatives, or the 2,000 GPs that have been cut since 2015. Patients today are waiting over a month to see a GP, if they can get an appointment at all. When Labour was last in office, people could get an appointment within 48 hours.

That is the thing with this Government: they give with one hand and take with the other. Will the Minister explain what has happened to the Government's pledge to deliver 6,000 more GPs this year and what she is doing to support community pharmacies, which are already facing a perfect storm of inflationary pressures for running costs, recruitment challenges and an unstable medicines market?

The Government press release issued today claims that patients in England will be able to get treatment for seven common conditions at their high street pharmacy from today. I would like to dig down into whether that is actually the case. Healthwatch England has warned that it will take time for pharmacists to be trained in order to provide the services that Ministers have announced, so can the Minister tell us when she will be able to guarantee that the services advertised will actually be available?

Let me also ask about IT integration. To facilitate this roll-out, pharmacists were supposed to have access to GP Connect, so that details of patient consultations would automatically be sent to general practice through the clinical IT systems. The Government have had 12 months to get that ready, but from what I am hearing this morning it is still not live. Pharmacists are telling me that they can access only a summary of GP records, that they have to use another system to input what they have prescribed, and that they then have to download that and email it across to the GP. That is cumbersome. What estimate has the Minister made of the time that will be wasted at a local level to address that issue, and how long will it take before the system is ready?

Finally, what is the Government's plan in the longer term to integrate the increase in independent prescribers who are being trained as part of the long-term workforce plan, and does the Minister agree with us that we should be accelerating the roll-out of independent prescribing to establish a community pharmacist prescribing service covering a broad range of common conditions? That would support patients with chronic conditions, which is the big challenge facing the NHS. Does the Minister agree that community pharmacies will have an important role to play in supporting GPs in the management of long-term conditions such as hypertension and asthma and in tackling the serious issue of over-prescribing, which is responsible for thousands of avoidable hospital admissions every year?

We agree that patients should be able to go to their local pharmacy to receive some services that they currently get at GP surgeries, such as vaccinations free of charge on the NHS, allowing patients to be seen faster and freeing up GPs to see more complex cases. By bringing healthcare into the community, patients will have greater

control. The NHS should be as much a neighbourhood health service as a national health service, with healthcare on the doorstep, there when it is needed—and with Labour, it will be.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Well, the very first appointment under Pharmacy First happened at 8.30 this morning.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): It was 8.31!

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Oh, was it 8.31? I thank the Secretary of State. When will the services be available? I should think that many more are taking place already.

I am afraid that, while welcoming this, the hon. Lady is being a little pusillanimous with her praise. A lot of her suggestions, as she will know, are simply not true: already, well over 2,000 new GPs and tens of thousands of nurses are working in our NHS. Many thousands of additional practice staff are working in GP practices, and, as she will know, our brilliant GPs have made 50 million more appointments available each year ahead of the target in our manifesto. Good on them. They are doing an amazing job, and Pharmacy First will ease the ever-increasing burden on them.

The hon. Lady talks about technology. I am pleased to tell her that ensuring that the technology was in place was key in deciding when we could go live. There is a very short window in which some systems will have elements of manual intervention, but only for a few weeks. The whole system will be fully automated and will provide the ability to inquire into GP records and to swap advice, which is important for pharmacists to deliver the excellent service that they are already delivering.

Finally, the hon. Lady will know that community pharmacists have for some time now been delivering blood pressure checks, which in some cases are truly lifesaving. This is amazing patient access and patient convenience. The Labour party should, for once, simply praise it and be glad that the Government have stuck to our plan and got on with it.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I am so pleased to hear today's announcement that we are delivering. It was one of the key things in our plan for patients that I wanted to ensure happened. In particular, many Members of this House, current and past, have had infections and, as a consequence of not dealing with them, have ended up in hospital. This is the sort of sensible approach that, frankly, met some resistance during my time in the Department, with worries about over-prescribing. It is about treating pharmacists like proper professionals and, most important, providing quicker access to necessary care, which patients will now properly enjoy.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: May I say a huge thank you to my right hon. Friend for her contribution to kicking this project off? I feel very fortunate to be at the Dispatch Box on the day we launch it, because many others were involved in setting it up. She rightly highlights some of the problems with spotting things such as sepsis infections, which pharmacists are trained to spot. They really can be the first line of defence. Being able to walk in off the high street to see a pharmacist is incredibly valuable to us all.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): As a long-standing supporter of the idea of Pharmacy First, I welcome the right hon. Lady's statement and the specific reforms she has talked about introducing. She will be aware, however, that pharmacists in my constituency and further afield are very concerned that they are unable to do the job that they are already expected to because of lack of capacity and problems in accessing certain drugs that they need to prescribe. Can she indicate how the existing problems will be dealt with, so that they can do what is promised in Pharmacy First?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the programme. There are around 14,000 licensed medicines, the vast majority of which are in good supply. The Department works very closely with the sector on finding alternatives and sourcing supplies of medicines, and most of the time we are able to meet the demand. Occasionally there are challenges, but that does not change in any way the ability of community pharmacists to be the expert medicine suppliers that they are, and to meet the need that members of the general public have for treatment and advice.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement. This initiative has the potential to transform primary care and access to treatment, but does the Minister agree that to realise its full potential, we need to invest in new technology—she mentioned digitalisation—to make sure that community pharmacies are set up to take advantage of these new opportunities? We also need to invest in the pharmacy workforce as part of the Government's long-term workforce plan, so that those in alternative roles within pharmacies, such as pharmacy technicians, have the capacity to take the opportunities she has outlined.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Investing in technology is vital, but so is investing in the workforce. We have seen a 61% increase in the number of registered community pharmacists since 2010, and we aim in our long-term NHS workforce plan to increase that by a further 50%. We have already increased the number of training places for both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I, too, welcome Pharmacy First, which I think is a very good initiative. In recent weeks we have seen the closure of two pharmacies in my area, on Beverley Road and Chanterlands Avenue. I am also told by leaders in the Humber pharmacy community that our area has one of the largest numbers of temporary closures because of problems accessing pharmacists. Will the Minister look favourably, therefore, on my idea to attach a school of pharmacy to Hull York Medical School? We need a school of dentistry, too. If we could have a centre of excellence in the Humber area, it might solve some of our specific workforce problems.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am always happy to speak to colleagues on both sides of the House about their ideas for new dental and pharmacy schools. It is an ongoing interest.

England is, in fact, blessed with huge numbers of community pharmacies—well over 10,000—and four in five of us are able to walk to a community pharmacy

within 20 minutes. The number of pharmacies in more deprived areas is double the number in more well-off areas. We are very well served by our brilliant pharmacies, and I hope the Pharmacy First programme will improve their footfall and their value in each of our communities.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome this initiative to encourage our pharmacies to provide more frontline healthcare. People need to know about this, because they often do not think of going to the pharmacy. What work are the Government doing in larger population centres such as Harwich and Dovercourt, which has over 20,000 people but no out-of-hours pharmacy cover? People have to make a round trip of more than 40 miles to collect a prescription on a Sunday, for example. Are the Government doing any work on 24/7 pharmacy coverage for larger population areas?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Pharmacists will keep their community pharmacy open for up to 72 hours a week in most cases, and up to 100 hours in some cases, which means there is weekend accessibility. We keep this under review, but the availability is very good.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have long supported calls for Pharmacy First, and the National Pharmacy Association, based in my St Albans constituency, has been calling for it since at least 2017. This is a welcome move, but it is long overdue. The Minister will be aware that there have been almost 700 permanent pharmacy closures since 2015, and the Company Chemists Association now estimates that eight pharmacies a week are closing, including one in my constituency. What steps is she taking to make sure there are no more closures this week, next week and every other week this year?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady might remember that the Liberal Democrats were in government for a good part of that period. She talks about pharmacy closures, and we see pharmacies opening and closing. There has been a small number of net closures, but we are very well served across England and we keep a close eye on that. Pharmacy First is a new boost to community pharmacies across England.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on bringing in this initiative. I have fantastic community pharmacies in South Derbyshire—although, sadly, when the boundary changes come, I will lose Hatton to Derbyshire Dales. They are leaders in their field and they are trusted in their communities. This is a brilliant initiative, and I cannot thank my right hon. Friend enough.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That was a perfect answer. I have to tell the House that we have a lot of business to get through today, and I will therefore need short questions and admirably short answers, because otherwise not everyone who is standing will have a chance to ask a question.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not agree with most of what the Minister has said today. We are all in favour of pharmacies, but I think this statement is a distraction from the real problems in our health service, our GP service and much else.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please ask a question?

Mr Sheerman: Has the Minister looked at the number of pharmacies that have closed in the poorest areas of our country? Lastly, what is she going to do about companies like Boots? It has even closed its local branch in Westminster—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Because of his seniority, I have allowed the hon. Gentleman a little leeway. One question, one answer.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The more deprived parts of England are much better served by community pharmacies than better-off areas are.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): We have amazing pharmacists in Watford, and I have championed community pharmacies such as Sigma, which is a fantastic local business. Can the Minister provide an assurance that the general public will be made massively aware of this fantastic new service?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Yes, there will be a significant communications package, beginning today.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister does not appear to be concerned about the record number of community pharmacy closures under this Conservative Government. Why does she think it is happening?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: There has been a 61% increase in registered pharmacists since 2010, with plans to increase that number by 50% in the next few years.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her excellent statement, but how will she tackle the issue of funding for prescriptions? Community pharmacies are struggling, and she will understand that the NHS tariff does not pay them the full price of products. Will she look at that as she rolls out the scheme?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The Government currently contribute £2.6 billion to community pharmacy, quite apart from the £645 million addition for Pharmacy First. We are about to start negotiations for the 2024-25 period.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The three pharmacies in Shirley, in my constituency, have been there for decades. They are very well known and very trusted, but they are all on the edge of having to close. To stay open, one pharmacist is using their own savings and not paying themselves a wage. I welcome your announcement, but would you read a letter from them—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There may have been lax obeying of the rules at other times, but would the hon. Lady please refer to the Minister as “she”, not “you”?

Sarah Jones: Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker. That was an error.

Would the Minister read that letter, consider these issues and perhaps meet us to talk about it? They are good people, and we want to keep their pharmacies open.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am of course happy to read the letter, but I would say that Pharmacy First offers a significant new boost to community pharmacies.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that, across Cheshire and Merseyside, including my Eddisbury constituency, 535 community pharmacies will be starting the Pharmacy First initiative today. Particularly in rural areas, pharmacies are a lifeline for many people. Can she reassure patients of the clinical competence of pharmacists to make prescriptions, and can she reassure pharmacists on the issue of clinical liability?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I can assure my hon. Friend that pharmacists are highly skilled and better trained than ever before in this country. They are fully equipped to meet the demands of their new prescribing role.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the Pharmacy First initiative—its roll-out is long overdue—but what expectations are we creating in the minds of patients attending pharmacies? Will pharmacists be trained in denying medication to people who turn up expecting to be given a prescription of some sort? Clearly, the initiative will encourage more people to present in order to get medication when it may not be necessary.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Of course, pharmacists will be prescribing for seven common conditions. Plenty of referrals will be made to GPs, and from GPs to pharmacists, to give patients the accessibility and the appropriate level of assessment for their needs.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Pharmacies in Horsham have asked for such a scheme, so they will very much welcome it, as do I. However, as the Minister is aware from our one-on-one discussions, for which I am grateful, there are currently issues of access to pharmacies in Horsham. Will she ensure that the sector is appropriately resourced and has the right training in order to ensure that the scheme is the great success that it deserves to be?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely, and I am always happy to discuss that further with my right hon. Friend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland's minor ailments scheme, and this Pharmacy First initiative, are acknowledgments that GPs can spend up to 40% of their working day on minor ailments, but the scale in Northern Ireland is different from what has been proposed for England. Is there capacity for a UK-wide roll-out of Pharmacy First to take pressure off our GP services? If there is, that would be the right thing to do.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I seriously look forward to the re-establishment of the Stormont Assembly so that it will be possible for Northern Ireland to implement such a scheme itself.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement. I have been a strong champion of pharmacies in my constituency. We are experiencing challenges, however, when the likes of Boots withdraw their services. It is difficult to transfer or apply for licences, despite the fact that we have a number of keen applicants who want to provide important pharmacy services. What more can the Government do to speed up and make the licensing application procedure smoother and better?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I would love to hear more about that from my right hon. and learned Friend. I will be happy to look into it.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In recent months, Boots has closed two of three pharmacies in the Hampton area of my constituency. That has left Hampton North, which is one of the most deprived wards in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, without a single pharmacy, so elderly residents and those with long-term conditions have to walk for a lot longer than 20 minutes to access a pharmacy. Local GPs tell me that it is just not viable to set up a community pharmacy facility. Will the Government review the pressures on community pharmacy and consider the community pharmacy contractual framework so that we can make this initiative work and take the pressure off GPs?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I have already mentioned, there are many community pharmacies starting up all the time, as well as closing down. The hon. Lady will appreciate that the Pharmacy First initiative is a real boost to community pharmacies. I am happy to discuss it with her, but I would imagine that there will be the capability to open new community pharmacies in her area.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and her Front-Bench colleagues on rolling out this initiative. The Isle of Portland had two pharmacies, both run by Boots, but one is now shut. Can I meet my right hon. Friend and Front-Bench colleagues to discuss how we can ensure that deprived areas such as Portland retain the pharmacies that they desperately need?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): With so many of my constituents waiting a long time to see GPs, any boost to primary care capacity must be welcomed, so I thank the Minister for today's announcement. The GPs and pharmacy staff I meet raise concerns about recruitment to open roles. What assurances can the Minister offer that this will not be another policy, like the childcare announcement, that lacks the workforce or sectoral strategy to really gain the full benefits?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will know, our NHS long-term workforce plan intends to increase by 50% the number of registered pharmacists. That work is under way and includes increasing the number of pharmacy technicians.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is great that people will be able to go to the pharmacy for their prescriptions, as well as for the products that they need, without the need to visit a GP. Chelmsford has some great community pharmacies, but Boots is closing three branches. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can ensure that the people of Chelmsford will be able to get to a pharmacy, in order for the initiative to work?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The community pharmacy in Wem in my constituency has struggled to find a full-time pharmacist, relying instead on locums. That means that opening times are erratic, people cannot rely on the service, and the pharmacy is loss-making because locums are so expensive. How will the Minister help pharmacies in rural areas to recruit the full-time pharmacists and reduce their reliance on locums?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that, although a few are owned by GP practices, community pharmacies are usually private businesses. We are training the registered community pharmacists that we need. Obviously, it would be for that local area to put in place its own recruitment policies, but I would be happy to meet her to discuss that further.

Cheryl Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I put on the record my thanks to all the pharmacists who work in my constituency. The geography of my constituency can often mean that someone's nearest pharmacy is about a mile and a half away across the water, so they end up driving 11 miles around to get to it. I believe that the mapping needs to change. Will she meet me to discuss it?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. Just to let her know, 100 pharmacies in Cornwall are signed up to Pharmacy First.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): This brilliant announcement has the potential to free up many thousands of GP places in areas such as Peterborough, but the initiative will be the success that we need it to be only if more people know about it. My right hon. Friend touched on an awareness campaign, but what efforts will she make to ensure that it reaches difficult-to-reach communities, such as those for whom English is an additional language?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: There will be a big communications plan, which I am happy to share with my hon. Friend. Well over 100 community pharmacies in his area have signed up to Pharmacy First, which is brilliant news. It is incumbent on us all—and the purpose of the statement—to ensure that our constituents know about this excellent new service.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Although my right hon. Friend and I share a common scepticism of the sclerotic state of the European Union, there are lessons to be learned from Europe. I am glad to see that, like France, we are now respecting community pharmacies. However, I have one specific question. In her statement, she said that one thing on which the pharmacy can act is female urinary tract infections. Why not male?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I wish my hon. Friend a happy Brexit day. I will have to come back to him on that issue. The point is that the service is limited to minor urinary tract infections. That might be why it does not include men, but I will certainly get back to him on that point.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I and many—if not all—of my constituents very warmly welcome the statement. On integration with other NHS access services, if an individual were to dial NHS 111 with one of the conditions mentioned in the statement, would they be diverted to a pharmacy or to a GP first?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: To a pharmacy. NHS 111, GPs and urgent and emergency care can all refer to pharmacists for those particular common conditions.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I join others in welcoming the new scheme. Will my right hon. Friend ensure, as part of the communications, that the NHS website is updated to show which pharmacies have signed up to Pharmacy First, and will she continue to encourage those that have not yet signed up to do so?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: What is brilliant is that over 95% of all community pharmacies have signed up, including 172 in my hon. Friend's area.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Key to the service's success will be pharmacies actually offering it when patients turn up. Does my right hon. Friend know how many individual pharmacists have been trained to provide the services, and is there a way of gathering and publishing data on when pharmacies will offer the service, so that patients will not have a frustrated journey and we can see where the gaps are?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I say, more than 95% of all community pharmacies have signed up to the service, and all their pharmacists have been trained in how to deliver it.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): As someone who has championed the role of community pharmacies throughout my time in this House, I warmly welcome today's statement. I am particularly delighted that we were able to host one of the pilot schemes in Cornwall, which was hugely successful, resulting in 7,500 consultations that took 6,000 appointments away from GPs and 75 A&E appearances. Will the Minister join me in thanking all the pharmacies in Cornwall that took part in that pilot, which was so successful?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. It is only by trying these things that we can see how successful they can be, and I do believe this service is going to radically improve patient access to care.

Northern Ireland Executive Formation

1.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): With permission, I will make a statement on Northern Ireland Executive formation.

This Saturday would mark two years without a fully functioning devolved Government in Northern Ireland. That is two years without locally elected Ministers able to take important decisions on Northern Ireland's schools and hospitals and the broader economy, and above all, it is two years in which Northern Ireland has been held back from achieving the massive potential of this unique part of the United Kingdom.

It was nearly two years ago that the then First Minister resigned over the old Northern Ireland protocol. The Government recognised that the protocol did not deliver to the people of Northern Ireland the same freedoms that leaving the European Union delivered for the rest of the United Kingdom. As the party of the Union, this Conservative Government have sought to address those concerns by replacing the protocol with the Windsor framework. I maintain that the Windsor framework was, and is, a good deal for Northern Ireland that addresses the issues around the old protocol and sets out a new way forward. However, it alone did not prove sufficient to allow the devolved institutions to function with the cross-community support that is such an essential bedrock of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

As such, for the past few months, my team and I have been holding discussions with the Northern Ireland political parties on how we could see the return of devolved institutions. Those discussions have been long and necessarily tough, but that is testament to the patience of all Northern Ireland's political leaders, who—as I have seen at first hand—work tirelessly to make sure that Northern Ireland is the most prosperous and safe society it can be. One of the people I have been talking to most is the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). It has been a pleasure to work with him on these matters, and it was also a pleasure to confirm recently that the Government will support his Bill that seeks to create a dedicated route for eligible Irish nationals who wish to apply for British citizenship. If passed, that legislation would support the close historical and geographical ties between Ireland and the UK, and I commend him on championing that cause.

I am also pleased to be able to outline today the package of measures we are announcing, which has four key elements. First, it further protects Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom by demonstrating our commitment to restoring power sharing so that it has the broadest support from across the community in Northern Ireland. I know that I am not alone in believing firmly that the long-term interests of the Union are served by persuading those who might not vote for Unionist parties, or even think of themselves as Unionists, that Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom offers the best solution for them and their children. I have always believed that making Northern Ireland work—indeed, making Northern Ireland thrive—is the surest way to safeguard the Union, and I commend all Unionists on taking bold steps to make that case for the Union, too.

We will also legislate to reaffirm Northern Ireland's constitutional status, including as reflected in the Acts of Union. We will also recognise in domestic law that, with the vital democratic safeguard of the Stormont brake that a new Assembly would wield, the idea of automatic and permanent dynamic alignment of EU law no longer applies. We will also future-proof Northern Ireland's position within the UK's internal market against any future protocol that would create a new EU law alignment for Northern Ireland, and with it, barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, the deal promotes and strengthens the UK internal market, delivering new legislation to guarantee and future-proof unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods to the whole of the UK internal market, and ensuring that internal trade within the United Kingdom takes place under a new UK internal market system. Only yesterday, we saw how quickly progress has been made, with a joint legal solution reached with the European Union on tariff rate quotas. That solution, which will be taken forward at the next UK-EU Joint Committee, will ensure that Northern Ireland traders can benefit from the UK's independent free trade policy when importing agrifood goods, reflecting Northern Ireland's integral place in the UK's customs territory. To maintain that focus on delivering in the interests of businesses for the future, we will put in place new structures, such as a new independent monitoring panel to ensure a practical and pragmatic approach without gold-plating.

Thirdly, the deal will recognise the importance of the connections across the United Kingdom, now and in the future. A new UK-wide east-west economic council will bring businesses and Ministers together to identify the opportunities that unite us across all parts of the United Kingdom, and a new body—InterTrade UK—will promote and facilitate trade within the United Kingdom, recognising that while international trade is important, so too is the vital trade that occurs within our internal market.

Finally, the deal will help put Northern Ireland's public services on a sustainable footing, with funding totalling over £3 billion to support public services in Northern Ireland and provide a solid foundation for the Executive to deliver better outcomes in the day-to-day lives of the people in Northern Ireland. That funding is part of a financial package I announced before Christmas that will help address public sector pay pressures; provide an updated Barnett formula for Northern Ireland, now and into the future, reflecting the needs and unique circumstances of the people of Northern Ireland; and give the Executive significant funding to stabilise public finances.

Much of what I am announcing today is the result of a significant period of negotiations between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party, led by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). Many of us in this Chamber last week could not have failed to be struck by his unshakeable advocacy on behalf of the Unionist cause. That same determination, fortitude and tact was at the heart of his approach during those detailed discussions, and further to the right hon. Member's comments in this place last week, I am absolutely sure that the whole House will join me in expressing support for him in utterly condemning those shameless figures who have tried to threaten and intimidate him for simply doing his job. [HON. MEMBERS:

"Hear, hear."] The right hon. Member is a man who is truly committed to Northern Ireland. He is truly committed to the Union, and has always worked hard to find solutions and improvements when others have taken the far easier path of simply criticising and heckling from the sidelines.

The result—as I hope hon. Members will agree—is a deal that, taken as a whole, is the right one for Northern Ireland and for the Union. With this package, it is now time for elected representatives in Northern Ireland to come together, end the two years of impasse and start work again in the interests of the people who elected them. This week, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley was clear that this depended on the Government demonstrating their commitment to the Union, not just in word but in deed. That is exactly what we will do. Today, I am publishing the details of the deal, but I am also laying before the House the statutory instruments that enshrine several of its commitments in law. Those instruments will be debated in this place tomorrow, subject to a change in its future business with the will of the House, as an immediate show of good faith.

Once those instruments are passed by this House, as I hope they will be, I trust we will have the conditions to move onwards and to see Ministers back in post in Stormont swiftly. As those Ministers take their places, they will face massive challenges, but they have the tools to grasp those challenges, not least in moving to resolve the public sector pay issues that have been so disruptive. They will also be able to grasp the opportunities offered by Northern Ireland's unique economic position and the good will that it enjoys across the world.

It is only right that I acknowledge that, for many in the community, an important part of this will be seeing Michelle O'Neill take her place as First Minister following the democratic mandate she won at the May 2022 Assembly election, recognising that the First and Deputy First Ministers remain equal in law. I look forward to working with the new First Minister and Deputy First Minister and all their colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to improve the lives of people from all backgrounds, whether Unionist, nationalist or other. As we move forward swiftly to give effect to our commitments, I urge the parties to do the same thing by notifying the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly to recall Stormont, electing a First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and appointing new Ministers to the Executive.

It is time to build on the progress of the last 25 years. Today, we have presented a plan that will deliver the long-term change that Northern Ireland needs. It will strengthen Northern Ireland's place in our Union and guarantee the free flow of goods across the entire United Kingdom. It is only by sticking to this plan that we will become a more united and prosperous country together, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.20 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

This is a very significant moment. It is our chance to restore to the people of Northern Ireland what they desperately need but have been without for almost two years: a functioning Government. It will also mark a first in Northern Ireland history when Michelle O'Neill

[*Hilary Benn*]

takes up her position as Sinn Féin First Minister in a power-sharing Government with a DUP Deputy First Minister. I would like to thank the Secretary of State for his tireless efforts that have brought us to this point. His is a great achievement.

I would like to acknowledge the courageous and decisive leadership of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), who in the face of abuse has consistently and persuasively made his case for change, while always being clear that he wanted to return to government with an agreement that was acceptable to all communities. I also want to thank the other party leaders in Northern Ireland—and I join the Secretary of State in doing so—who, with great wisdom, have allowed the time and the space for this deal to be reached, as well as to express my thanks to all the officials involved.

On the legislative changes that the right hon. Gentleman the Secretary of State has set out, I welcome the Government's commitment not to ratify any new Northern Ireland-related agreements with the EU that would create new regulatory borders. This will be a helpful brake on divergence. Could the Secretary of State say when the new UK internal market lane will come into being?

We will of course examine in detail all the proposals in the statutory instruments to which the right hon. Gentleman referred—I understand that we are likely to debate them tomorrow—because we need to get on with this so that the Assembly can be recalled and the Executive established as quickly as possible. I have always made it clear that we believe in Northern Ireland's place in the internal market of the United Kingdom, and that we support any practical measures to reinforce it that are consistent with the Windsor framework, which we also support, and that have the support of nationalists as well as Unionists. On that basis, we will vote for the legislation.

The money that the Secretary of State has announced, including the needs-based funding formula and the stabilisation funding, will enable a restored Executive and Assembly to give public sector workers a pay rise, for which they have waited too long, and to start to tackle the huge challenges facing communities and public services and make the most of the great economic potential of Northern Ireland. We also welcome the plans to defer and then write off Stormont's overspend, provided that the Executive produce a new fiscal sustainability plan. How quickly does the right hon. Gentleman expect the money to be transferred, and when does he think the new Executive will produce a budget?

Finally, as we reflect on the importance of this moment, since the Good Friday agreement was signed the people of Northern Ireland have been without a devolved Government for over a third of the time. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need to work together—all of us in the House—to prevent the institutions from collapsing again in the years ahead? Stability is everything, especially to the people of Northern Ireland after all they have been through, and we all have a duty to ensure that it endures.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his very kind words and for all the work he has done with me on these matters. I really do appreciate

the way we have been able to work together. It has contributed to our getting to this point and it has made a big difference, so I thank him for that.

The shadow Secretary of State is completely right that everyone in this House will need to work together to ensure stability for Northern Ireland and to ensure that the institutions do not fall again. It is vital that we all understand the responsibility that sits with us in this place: we are guarantors of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We have a responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland, and in every way we should consider that in everything we do, because this Union is stronger for it.

The shadow Secretary of State asked some questions. We hope to have the UK internal market lane in operation as soon as possible, and we obviously need some legal changes—I mean, other changes—to have that done. The money will flow as soon as the new Executive is up and running, and I very much hope that a new Executive will be sitting very soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I warmly commend the hard work of my right hon. Friend—and good friend—the Secretary of State. It is only a week ago that we passed legislation to extend the election period, and heard the impressive and powerful speech of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). He has demonstrated, with his colleagues in the DUP, that to lead is to choose and to make difficult decisions. They have done that, and I think respect and praise are due in large measure for their hard work.

I am particularly pleased that the Command Paper incorporates many of the sensible recommendations from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), which we share, on further legislation to make sure that the position of Northern Ireland within the UK internal market is absolutely cemented. I am particularly pleased that the Command Paper looks forward to new investment—not just the important investment in public services, but the enhanced investment zone proposal of £150 million, which will be at the centre of how we attract new inward investment to realise the huge potential that Northern Ireland presents for jobs and the economy both here in the UK and across the wider world.

It is tempting for this Parliament, once it passes the secondary legislation, to say that the job is done, but we cannot afford to devolve and forget. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that this Government will not devolve and forget?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his welcome for this package of measures. It is a package, and it has been negotiated over a long period of time, with a better understanding of all the things that Northern Ireland needs to be an active and wonderful part of the Union. I welcome his comments on the investment zone, and he is absolutely correct in what he said at the end. Northern Ireland will never be forgotten in this place, and I hope we are demonstrating that today.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Can I just say on behalf of my party that we very much welcome the progress that has been made? We are firmly of the view that Northern Ireland is governed best when it is governed locally, and we welcome the publication of the Command Paper.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the distance that has been travelled by all parties in getting to this point, but we were brought to this point by a failure of politics around the manner in which the UK chose to leave the European Union. Now that the politics has moved on, it is time for the politicians in Northern Ireland to step up, and we wish the MLAs well in that endeavour and look forward to seeing the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister taking office in what will be a very significant moment in history for all in these islands.

The Secretary of State describes his party as being the party of the Union, and I say to him that it has not gone unnoticed in other parts of the Union that Northern Ireland has for some time had the offer of a status, in its access to the UK market and to the European market, that other parts of the Union are now deprived of. I am sure that voters will draw their own conclusions from that.

I want to ask two questions. When might the details of any new fiscal framework emerge? While I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the new east-west economic council, can the Secretary of State clarify what role there might be for the other devolved institutions in these islands to make that new council as successful as it possibly can be?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, his welcome and his help in the past few weeks and months, which has been much appreciated. Again, it has helped us to get to this place. He is right to recognise that Northern Ireland is a special place, and has a special place as the only part of the United Kingdom with a land border with the EU. In the past, that has created disadvantage, but we hope it will create advantage for it in the future. Everyone recognises that; it was recognised in the Windsor framework and, as he will see, in various choices we are making in the Command Paper.

On the fiscal framework, I very much hope that the incoming Northern Ireland Executive and Ministers responsible will work with His Majesty's Treasury in great detail to make sure that we get that absolutely right. I have never conducted a negotiation with His Majesty's Treasury in that sort of way, but I imagine that it has quite tight pockets, is very difficult to get hold of and probably would not want ongoing commentary. However, I am sure that it will make the matter as public as it can, when it can. Finally, on the east-west body, it is important that it works with all parts of Great Britain.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his patience on this deal, as well as the Prime Minister and the DUP on negotiating such a tough and positive document. The Northern Ireland parties have been incredibly patient through the past months, and I pay tribute to them. I put on record my thanks to the Labour party and the shadow Secretary of State for Labour's support for the Government's

deal. This deal will be a huge relief to many across Northern Ireland, who have got to the end of their tether, whether the issue for them is public services, waiting lists or other elements of society. Does the Northern Ireland Secretary agree that the deal is a significant boost to the economy, to peace and to the Union?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for his kind comments. Yes, I absolutely believe that this deal will bring greater prosperity to Northern Ireland. When I was given this role, I was, in essence, given three tasks by our Prime Minister. The first was to help him find a route through the Northern Ireland protocol conundrum, and that became the Windsor framework. The second was to try to get Stormont up and running, so that local people make decisions for their fellow people in Northern Ireland, and I would like to think that we are getting there. The third was to make Northern Ireland one of the most prosperous parts of our United Kingdom; I think we can all agree on that aim.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On occasions such as this, it is courteous to thank the Minister or Secretary of State for the statement, but may I, on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and my party, thank the Secretary of State most sincerely for his steadfast endurance in our negotiations, for his commitment to ensuring that we got to this stage, for not giving up, and for resolving the issues that have been an impediment to devolution operating sufficiently and properly in Northern Ireland? He will know that on Monday evening and into Tuesday morning, my party took a significant decision to move forward, on the basis of what we know to be in the Command Paper published today.

Although we were told that the Windsor framework could not be reopened, we have succeeded. Although we were told that there would be no change to the green lane, it is gone. We were told that there would be no removal of barriers to trade between GB and Northern Ireland, but we have removed all checks within the UK internal market system, save for those ordinarily required for dealing with criminality and the prevention of smuggling. We were told that there would be no legal change to the Windsor framework or the EU text, yet—this was part of the process of ensuring trust and commitment—colleagues will have noticed the publication just yesterday of more than 60 pages of legislative changes to text on the European perspective. That will allow rest-of-the-world products and the benefits of UK-wide trade deals to truly be available UK-wide.

We are very grateful to the Secretary of State and to the Prime Minister, who was here earlier, and we are grateful for the offers of support and commitment from His Majesty's loyal Opposition and the Leader of the Opposition. We are grateful for having got to this place today. We have turned the impossible into the possible, and are delivering the undeliverable in this Command Paper. We are hopeful for the future, but the Secretary of State will know that our position is predicated on full and faithful implementation and delivery of what we have achieved. Today's Command Paper and yesterday's legislative changes were published; in the spirit of the trust that we have established, and given the process that needs to flow, I would be very grateful if he could

[Gavin Robinson]

indicate that tomorrow, subject to what the Leader of the House does, we will see the introduction and passage of the legislation that is so crucial to this programme.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. As I mentioned in my statement, he has been integral to what has been happening over the past few weeks and months. I really do enjoy working with him, and am looking forward to doing so in the future. He mentions a host of things. He is right to say that the Command Paper is clear: we will provide clear legal direction to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and other UK Government authorities to eliminate any physical checks when goods move within the UK internal market system, save for those checks required as part of managing the risk of criminality, abuse of the scheme, smuggling and disease.

The hon. Gentleman knows more than anyone that the deal is about safeguarding Northern Ireland's place in the Union. We have set out what that involves. It includes new measures in domestic legislation to affirm unfettered access and Northern Ireland's constitutional position, as well as new structures, and steps to ensure that the full benefits of the Windsor framework are felt by people and businesses. As is shown by the draft tariff text that he mentioned, we can continue to show the joint solutions that the UK and EU can deliver under the Windsor framework. He asked me a very specific question about the timetable. I am committed to the timetable, as are the Government. Everybody in this House should know that. In all transparency, it is unbelievably important that, with the leave of the House, we get the business changed, so that we can debate those two statutory instruments and they can be passed. They are a fundamental part of the timetable that leads to Stormont's return.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the progress made towards the restoration of power sharing, and thank the Secretary of State and the DUP for their dedicated work on that. I am sure there will be much to welcome in the papers published today, which we will need to scrutinise carefully in the 30 or so hours before we are asked to vote on them. However, one thing that we know that they do not contain is a removal of Northern Ireland from single market legislation. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the Government commit to continuing the dialogue with the EU, so that we can amend the Windsor framework, and restore democratic control over law making in every part of our United Kingdom?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend—one of the longest-serving former Secretaries of State in this House—for her comments and questions. She is absolutely right in all she says. The Command Paper, which I do hope people will have the opportunity to read before tomorrow, contains quite an amount of detail on the deal. It is a comprehensive deal. The statutory instruments tomorrow are just two small parts of a much wider package of items in the deal; this is all outlined and detailed in the Command Paper. To answer my right hon. Friend's question, she will also see an important change that we intend to make to section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018; it now has a

powerful democratic safeguard in the Stormont brake, which the new Assembly will have immediately at its fingertips.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As the Members behind me know, I was married in County Armagh at the very height of the troubles, and I heard the explosions and saw the huge bomb damage. Tragically, my wife's family lost a number of friends in the troubles. I served for 12 years in the Scottish Parliament, so I have some knowledge of devolution. May I therefore ask the Secretary of State to make possible the maximum liaison between a restored Stormont—Godspeed to that—and devolved institutions such as the Scottish Parliament, so that the maximum benefit can be drawn from responsible working devolution?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; he is absolutely right. I know of his history and the story about his wife, which he has mentioned to me a number of times. I thank him for his interest in all things Northern Ireland and all things Union. In fact, there is a body, the British-Irish Council, that does exactly what he suggests, at the highest level. Hopefully, at the next meeting of the British-Irish Council, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland will attend with representatives of all the other devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The proposed legislation is of great constitutional significance, yet it is merely a statutory instrument and not an Act of Parliament. What restrictions on its lawmaking has the EU agreed over the single market in Northern Ireland? What democratic improvements are being made to the Stormont brake in Northern Ireland to ensure divergence, and to enable the United Kingdom Government to remove or veto the imposition of EU laws?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He and I have had a number of discussions over the years on these sorts of matters, and his question is a very wise one. As I mentioned, we are amending section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, so there is now a powerful democratic safeguard on the flow of EU law, which a new Assembly will have immediately at its fingertips. I thank my hon. Friend, because I know about the work that he did to ensure that section 38 was included in the Act. I hope he recognises that we are adding Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, which is a strong addition to section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2020. Indeed, his original clause has been a big part of the solution to this conundrum, and I am truly grateful to him for it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the gains made by my party leader and deputy party leader in these negotiations, the fact remains that there are still EU-manned border posts being built in Northern Ireland, which will create a border within our own country. When the Northern Ireland Assembly sits, Ministers and Assembly Members will be expected by law to adhere to and implement laws that are made in Brussels, which they will have no say over, no ability to amend and no ability to stop. That is a result of this spineless, weak-kneed and Brexit-betraying Government refusing to take on the EU and its interference in Northern Ireland.

The Government have admitted that there will be divergence in the future. On page 17 of the Command Paper, there is an indication that there will be a legal requirement to assess whether new legislation impacts on trade between Northern Ireland and GB. If it does, Ministers have to make a statement. We have had the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), saying only this week that that does not mean that the UK Government cannot introduce laws that diverge from the EU laws that apply in Northern Ireland. Which is it? Is Northern Ireland going to find that it has the ability to stay tied to the United Kingdom, or will the Government happily proceed to change laws here in Westminster, regardless of the impact it has on Northern Ireland?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, but some of the points he made were actually incorrect. In the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, we said that there would be checks on goods going into the EU single market. I think that every piece of legislation we have proposed in this place has said that, but it will be UK folk operating the UK internal market scheme. Today, on the fourth anniversary of our leaving the European Union, I can tell him that the agreed package of measures will not change the freedoms and powers we have secured through Brexit or the Windsor framework. It will not reduce our ability to diverge, nor our commitment to do so, should it be in the interests of the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to clause 13C in one of the statutory instruments. A whole swathe of things happen behind the scenes before a Bill is brought before this House. One of them, which the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has complained to me about before, is something we call the parliamentary business and legislation committee, or PBL. We do a Star Chamber of Bills, and the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales attend to state whether there is any adverse effect of the legislation being mooted. What the right hon. Gentleman rightly asked for is transparency and the publication of a written ministerial statement when there is the possibility of a significant adverse effect on GB-NI trade. Publishing a written ministerial statement is not in any way what he says it is.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the DUP? Clearly, this is still a highly emotive issue, and understandably so, because when we left the EU, I, the House and the country were promised that we would leave as a United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom but, as we have heard, it will still be subject to EU laws, so that axe is still grinding away and we must get rid of it. What is unhelpful is Sinn Féin's whispering about unification at this highly emotive time. Can my right hon. Friend tell me, the House and this country that Northern Ireland will always be part of the United Kingdom? We are stronger together.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to tread slightly more carefully on that particular issue, because as Secretary of State I am responsible for making an independent assessment of the conditions that might lead to the border poll to which my hon. Friend alludes. I have to be very careful, but I am comfortable suggesting that,

certainly in my lifetime, Northern Ireland will be a strong and wonderfully prosperous part of the United Kingdom. However, it is very important to outline the parts of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement that allow for all these things to happen, and any change would absolutely depend on the consent of both communities at the time. I certainly do not think anybody judges that to be in place at this point.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): It is important to point out that the people of Ireland, north and south, will decide the constitutional future of Ireland—nobody else. This is a very good day for the people of Northern Ireland, and I am very glad to see it. We are about to see something very significant: we will have the first ever nationalist First Minister and the first ever nationalist leader of the opposition, and I wish them well. In order to properly maintain this progress and make the most of it, will the Secretary of State convene a process with all the political parties and the Irish Government to look at how we can reform the institutions of the Good Friday agreement, to make sure that no one party can ever pull them down again?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the proposal. He mentioned at the very beginning of his question that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement relies on the consent of both communities and then suggested reform, which certainly does not have the consent of one of them. However, I understand the point he makes. When people have asked me about future reform of the institutions, I have always said that this is a conversation that should be started within Stormont and by the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives. The thing I hope for is not that particular conversation; it is for Stormont to be returned so that elected folk from Northern Ireland can govern for the people of Northern Ireland.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is absolutely vital that the democratic institutions and lawmaking powers are returned to the elected politicians in Northern Ireland, and today is clearly very historic and symbolic. At the same time, however, we know that Northern Ireland's economic lifeblood is linked to the rest of GB, and I concur with the rest of my colleagues who have spoken on this issue. It is vital that we ensure not only that there is the ability to diverge and have the freedom to secure Northern Ireland's economic lifeblood, but that the prosperity of Northern Ireland remains. May I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that we have the full ability to do that, and that it will be backed up by this Government in Westminster?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am delighted to give her the assurance she seeks, because this announcement will reduce neither our ability to diverge, nor our commitment to do so should that be in the interests of the United Kingdom.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us welcome this day and hope that the restoration of Stormont is possible. If the Government are capable of removing trade barriers with the European Union for the constituents of Belfast, many of my constituents would like to see them do the same for them. May I press the Secretary of State on what he said about amending section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal)

[*Stella Creasy*]

Act 2018, because he will know that is the foundation of the practical application of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement that many of us hold dear. His Command Paper talks about the “pipeline of EU law”. Can he clarify for the avoidance of doubt that any amendment he makes will not see any regression at all in the rights upheld in that document, and in particular the rights afforded to every single member of the communities in Northern Ireland in the wording of the Good Friday agreement and under the European convention on human rights?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I absolutely can.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for his important endorsement, which is encouraging? May I ask my right hon. Friend about paragraph 145 of the Command Paper? Can he give an example of the circumstances in which a Minister might say that there would be an effect on the internal market and what that might restrict in practice?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Off the top of my head, I cannot give an example, because I have not yet needed to do that in the PBL—parliamentary business and legislation committee—as I have stated. The practical effect is one of transparency. I am aware that there are many Select Committee Chairs in this place. We want to ensure that when a Bill potentially has a substantial adverse effect on GB-NI trade and we are making those decisions, we are transparent about it and we tell people about it. The best way to do that is to inform this House through a written ministerial statement.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I remind him that we have been pressing the Government for action rather than words for more than two years, but we welcome the fact that action has been taken, both on trading and the constitutional position. Does he agree that subsequent to the next few days, we need to continue to work to close the narrow gap that remains? We have made significant and substantial progress towards what we asked the Government to do. Will he also indicate to the wider community in Northern Ireland that even when someone gets a large number of votes, such as Sinn Féin, if they have a mantra that their day will come, it will also go with less fanfare?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. I see all politics as a process, actually. All politics is an evolution. In the Windsor framework, there is provision for when matters are discussed about Northern Ireland in the Joint Committee—the body that looks at the EU-UK relationship, legislation and its effect—that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister can attend. We are not only moving on through Stormont returning, but we are ensuring that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard and that that process can continue.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Given everything that the Secretary of State has said, can he assure the House that article 6 of the Act of Union,

which guarantees that everybody within that Union shall not be disadvantaged in any way, particularly with reference to trade, is still in place and will remain so?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I point my hon. Friend to the very large section and annex in the Command Paper on the Acts of Union. I know my colleague the shadow Secretary of State dug out the Acts of Union to read them in relation to this business. There are many bits of the Acts of Union that we would not really want to have now, because they introduced tariffs of their own, but I ask my hon. Friend to look at the annex in the Command Paper where we go into great detail on exactly the answer he wants.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): We thank the Secretary of State for his very welcome statement, and we take the opportunity to congratulate Michelle O’Neill on becoming the First Minister and all the other parties that have managed to bring this agreement about. Does he think that this agreement will lead to an increase in all-Ireland institutions and their effectiveness—in culture, tourism, transport, health and so on—and does he agree with the point, made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), that ultimately it is for the people of Ireland to decide their long-term future, not anyone else?

Chris Heaton-Harris: On the second point, it is for the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland to decide their futures in that particular matter. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that there is a little way to go in this process before we have the First Minister and Deputy First Minister sitting, and this is an important part of that timetable, but we welcome that happening. He asked about all-Ireland institutions. This agreement means that those institutions set up by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, such as the North South Ministerial Council, can function correctly, and it also sets up new east-west bodies to ensure that Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom is equally recognised and made stronger.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): May I join the shadow Secretary of State in hugely welcoming this great achievement by the Secretary of State, by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and by all the other party leaders with whom he successfully agreed to re-establish devolved Government at Stormont? As the son of a Northern Ireland Unionist family, I believe it will only be good for the stability and prosperity of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Can my right hon. Friend confirm when the internal market levy and the changes to tariffs on goods from countries with which the UK has a free trade agreement will come into place?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. The factually correct answer is probably that those measures will come into place when the legislation is passed through this place.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State knows that 2025 is just too long to wait for veterinary medicine issues to be resolved in Northern Ireland. That grace period is totally unacceptable. He knows it will decimate veterinary practices, affect farm viability and, according to the British Veterinary

Association, have a detrimental impact on public health. In paragraph 141 of this Command Paper, the Secretary of State indicates that he will set up a veterinary medicines working group. I welcome that, but will he confirm that if a speedy solution is not brought forward by the spring, he will table legislation in this House to unilaterally deal with this matter once and for all?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is right; I think it is paragraphs 136 to 141 in the Command Paper that detail the issues he has rightly raised in this place, with me privately and in meetings with my officials. It is probably fair to say that he was the genesis of the veterinary medicines working group idea in paragraph 141. That group will receive expert opinion, and that is a vital part of the solution to this problem. My intention is to listen carefully to the group's recommendations, because it will have the experts in this matter. At that point, he and I can have the next bit of conversation, although I hope that will not need to be the case, because I would like to think we can pursue solutions through technical discussions with the European Union, but let us see.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I echo the comments of many colleagues across the House in welcoming the progress made on this matter. Through the Secretary of State, I thank the many people involved for the effort they have put in. We have two draft statutory instruments before us amending two sets of primary legislation, with the words "constitutional law" in one of them. The questions asked during this statement hint at the breadth and depth of the issues that such instruments raise. It seems slightly incongruous that they are coming to this place last, even though they are the first concerns of this House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that hon. Members should have time to read, digest and debate the instruments? Can he explain why the current proposals are for exactly that to be done in just 24 hours and with a short debate?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; I know that he has talked to my Minister of State on these matters. Actually, our Standing Orders state the debating time for these things. The House is an interesting being, and I would not want to get in the way of its Standing Orders.

Secondly, as I tried to underline in a previous answer, a timetable has been agreed with the Democratic Unionist party, which the Government are committed to, and if we fulfil it, that will lead to the restoration of Stormont. The House is full of agile and able Members of Parliament who are amazingly good at scrutiny, and I know that they can do that very, very well in the time provided.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and I thank my party leader and deputy leader for the many gains in the Command Paper. However, our leader said that there remains work to do. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm whether Northern Ireland still remains under the EU's single market laws for the production of food and agrifood? Does the EU customs code still apply in Northern Ireland? Does he accept that such a situation is not compatible with UK sovereignty and Northern Ireland's place as a full part of the United Kingdom? In accepting that, would he say that more work needs done

on this? Will he further outline what assurances he has had from the EU that the rules governing the new internal market system are acceptable to it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. May I recommend that she re-reads the Windsor framework and indeed the Command Paper?

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I applaud the Secretary of State, the Minister of State and the wider Northern Ireland team. I know—I have seen this up close and personal—how passionate and dedicated they are on this issue. The people of Northern Ireland will ultimately be the winners when it comes to decisions being made locally, closer to them.

As a Member of Parliament from the new intake, I think it is a great shame that we have often felt at loggerheads with Democratic Unionist party Members. Ultimately, I share a huge amount of their values, and I absolutely appreciate their passion and how closely they cling to their identity. I share that passion. Will the Secretary of State ensure that this marks a new chapter when we can work more collaboratively to promote the place of Northern Ireland within our Union, which we all love?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend. I know that he is passionate about Northern Ireland: indeed, I saw his passion when I hosted him and he visited and looked around Northern Ireland. The answer to his question is yes. Yes, we need to move forward. Yes, we need to work with the Democratic Unionists. Yes, we need a positive way forward for Unionism so that Northern Ireland can forever stay part of our United Kingdom.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I am hopeful that Northern Ireland is now in a better place. I have always understood that, in the context of a hard Brexit, Northern Ireland would require some special arrangements. My party has always been open to maximising flexibilities, provided that those are done in a legal way and that we protect our dual market access.

On the financial package, I very much welcome the £3.3 billion for Northern Ireland, which reflects a cross-party effort. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that there is a need for a further discussion to happen—potentially in the next Parliament—on a long-term review of Northern Ireland's fiscal framework and fiscal floor? On reform, will he recognise that, building on precedents, the UK Government must lead that process? If we are talking about safeguarding the Union, we also have to talk about safeguarding the Assembly and the Executive.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, which has been raised with me for months—if not since I became Secretary of State—by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who is rather keen on making sure that we have a long-term agreement and process in this space. I really look forward to working with Ministers in a reformed Executive on exactly that.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In the light of the answer the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart)—or the lack of an answer—I would like to reiterate that

[Paul Girvan]

point as well as ask about implementation and how Northern Ireland is affected by not getting access to duty-free. Every other airport in the United Kingdom has access to duty-free, yet those flying from Northern Ireland to any part of Europe cannot avail themselves of duty-free—it is the only airport on these islands where that cannot be done. That is one area where the single market is affecting us.

We are still part of that single market and, from what I see in the Command Paper, we will continue to be. As a consequence, in our energy market in Northern Ireland—I would like an answer on this—we are paying a carbon tax at an entirely different rate from any other part of Great Britain. For our electricity supply, our carbon offset is twice the level paid in any other part of the United Kingdom. What measures on that are included in the Command Paper? It was handed to us at what I would call the eleventh hour and 59th minute. We would like to be given time to get into the details. We very much feel like we are being bounced through a timetable and that we will not get through the detail that is supposedly in the statutory instruments and the Command Paper.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important points. I think it is fair to say that Northern Ireland was part of a single energy market across the island of Ireland well before we left the European Union and that there have always been interactions on that basis. The answer to his question is contained in the Command Paper.

There are a whole host of things to say, but I will just make the point about the difference for Northern Ireland. It does have access to the EU single market and unfettered access to the UK's internal market, but it is not subjugated to the European Union arrangements. It will not pay into the European Union budget. It is not subject to

European Union freedom of movement, services rules, environmental rules, labour rules or procurement rules; neither is it subject to the European Medicines Agency, the common agricultural policy or the common fisheries policy. Northern Ireland has unique circumstances because of its geographic location. Everybody recognises that. We want it to thrive in our Union, and with the Command Paper that direction of travel is set.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I welcome the statement. If a future UK Government were to diverge substantially from EU product regulations and standards for Great Britain, what would be the impact on what the Secretary of State has announced today?

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, we would be allowed to do that—100%. Secondly, there would be a written ministerial statement stating that exact fact so that Ministers and others in the Northern Ireland Assembly could debate and make provision for it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement and the hard work he has done—I say that sincerely. Government actions until now have undermined some of the trust of Unionist people, so there is a clear need for messaging from the Government that the concerns that Unionists have been expressing for the last two years are being dealt with through secure legislative processes here and with the EU. My Strangford constituents—some of them are in the Gallery today—are proud of their Britishness. I am sure that the Secretary of State can confirm—I hope he can—that we in Northern Ireland are as British as those in London, Cardiff, Manchester and Newcastle, and, indeed, Edinburgh and Scotland as well.

Chris Heaton-Harris: And Daventry. I can confirm that 100%. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am very proud that he is a proud Brit, as I am.

Business of the House

2.10 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): With permission, I will make a short business statement about an addition to tomorrow's business. Following the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the business tomorrow will now be:

THURSDAY 1 FEBRUARY—a debate on motions to approve the draft Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024 and the draft Windsor Framework (Internal Market and Unfettered Access) Regulations 2024, followed by a general debate on miners and mining communities, followed by debate on a motion on freedom and democracy in Iran. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

I will announce further business in the usual way on Thursday.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for the update to the business and for advance sight of her announcement.

As the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, we welcome the decision of the Democratic Unionist party to return to the Northern Ireland Executive following negotiations, subject to commitments by the Government and to legislation being passed. We also thank the other parties of Northern Ireland for their forbearance and co-operation.

This is a very important moment. We warmly welcome the progress so far, especially for the people of Northern Ireland, who have been without their Government for almost two years and for five of the past seven years. I welcome the publication of the Command Paper and the statutory instruments, and the fact that the business has changed tomorrow so that we can speedily consider these matters in the timetable set out, although I am sure other Members will want time to consider them. Could the Leader of the House let us know whether she anticipates that consequential legislation will be needed in due course, such as legislation to establish the internal lane?

Penny Mordaunt: Like the hon. Lady, I thank all parties who have been involved in getting us to what has been described as an historic moment. It is a good thing for the people of Northern Ireland that this is happening. I want to place on record my thanks to everyone who has been involved. I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming, understandably, the change of business tomorrow. With regard to her sole question, the answer is yes, and that is set out in the Command Paper.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for making provision for a debate on the statutory instruments tomorrow. We have before us those two instruments, which address a wide range of issues: movement of goods in the UK, the internal market, and Northern Ireland's place in the UK. Each of those has been subject to multiple lengthy debates in this House. Will she consider making time for two debates—one on each draft statutory instrument—thereby doubling the time that Members have to consider these matters in this House?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right that there has been a tremendous amount of discussion of these issues on the Floor of the House. As the Secretary of State acknowledged earlier, the Standing Orders protect time for debate on statutory instruments to 90 minutes. I am sure that my hon. Friend knows how to apply for a debate on a particular topic, but the Standing Orders will protect the time tomorrow.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): There is little to add to this short statement, as there will be more discussion on this latest legislation tomorrow. I want to state on the record that I welcome the progress that has been made, particularly as a former Northern Ireland spokesperson. Of course, there is much to be done, so I send my sincerest best wishes to all those in the Assembly who, hopefully soon, will step up to their places and their great responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her support in this matter, and I very much welcome her party's support, too.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Just to be clear, we are presented with the United Kingdom's internal market piece of legislation, a Northern Ireland constitutional law piece of legislation, and 80 pages of a Command Paper. With the best will in the world, we will get on to that around midday tomorrow. The maximum time possible is probably three hours for all that. That is insufficient time for the Front Benchers and all the Back Benchers with an interest in this matter to properly debate and scrutinise such legislation. Is there no opportunity to extend the proceedings to allow lengthier consideration of the legislation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He knows what is set out in the Standing Orders. I appreciate where he is coming from, but I point him to the comments the Secretary of State made a moment ago about the external timetable that we need to keep pace with.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), I am conscious that there will be quite a few speakers for the debates after that on miners and Iran and human rights issues. Given the time needed for the Northern Ireland legislation, and being ever mindful of how important it is to get it sorted, with no disrespect to the other two debates, is it humanly possible to have all the time between 12 noon and 5 pm for debates on the legislation that we need in Northern Ireland?

Penny Mordaunt: I say to the hon. Gentleman, "Welcome to my world." We are trying to accommodate all parties. There was an additional Select Committee statement on tomorrow's agenda, which we are talking to officials about to try accommodate tomorrow. I hope to update the House on that later.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Is it not a fact that, now this Government have the Assembly on the fishing hook, they really do not care one iota about

[Sammy Wilson]

scrutiny of the bait being used to get the Assembly back? Having introduced the Command Paper to the House today and having got a commitment to the Assembly, I suggest that this Government do not give two hoots about whether there is sufficient time to see whether the promises made will be fulfilled.

Penny Mordaunt: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I think he is wrong in that assertion. There will be many strong feelings on all sides of the House about various aspects of the position we have got to, but the comments made from all sides of the House during the Secretary of State's statement indicate that this is an important step forward and is to be welcomed. Inevitably, it is a compromise; people have had to compromise to get here, and I applaud them for doing that. There will be future debate on these matters. My colleagues on the Front Bench will be very happy to answer any points that the right hon. Gentleman raises. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, is an example of conviction, passion and determination on the issues that the hon. Gentleman cares deeply about.

Points of order

2.19 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the start of Prime Minister's questions, the Speaker reminded the House about the use of language. The debate on Gaza is getting far more emotive, and the language used has been questionable in one or two cases, as I am sure you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker. One of the SNP Members asked a question about Gaza and, after the question was answered, a member of the SNP—I cannot identify them—accused the Prime Minister of being Pontius Pilate, which we on these Benches heard very clearly. That kind of language is extremely unpleasant because, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, Pontius Pilate washed his hands and handed Jesus over to a murderous death. That is not what the Prime Minister is doing. He has an impeccable record on this topic, and is leading with great courage and conviction in a war in Gaza that is, indeed, highly emotive.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just for the record, I seek your guidance on how to make it very clear that it was not a member of the SNP who said any such thing—I can be absolutely certain about that. I think Members might want to be very clear about which parties are saying things before making such accusations. How can I put that on the record, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman. I will come to the other points of order in a moment. I appreciate the point of order made by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). I can say only this: Mr Speaker strives throughout Prime Minister's questions to keep order in this House, but it has become fashionable to make unnecessary noise during the half hour when the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are on the Front Benches. Generally, this House is well behaved, as it is at the moment, and takes its duties, responsibilities and public image seriously.

It is very sad if somebody did make the comment that the hon. Member for South Dorset has described. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) that if a remark was made about Pontius Pilate, it was not made by an SNP Member, but actually, as far as the Chair is concerned, I do not care who made such a remark. It is wrong to try to whip up bad feeling in this House or anywhere else about the tragedy unfolding in Israel and Palestine. I urge all hon. Members, who have different points of view on this emotive subject, to be very careful about what they say in public and in private, but especially in this Chamber.

Richard Drax: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to think I am an honourable Gentleman, and if indeed I got it wrong, I withdraw the point that the comment was made by an SNP Member. It came from that part of the House, but if it was not an SNP Member, I withdraw that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for withdrawing that accusation, because it lets us at least take that part out of this specific issue. It may be that somebody made that comment, but I really

do not care what they said or how they said it. They should not be saying anything at all while seated when someone else is asking a question or the Prime Minister is answering it. Everyone in this House ought to bear in mind that what is said and done in here has a much wider audience, and we ought to be setting an example of being reasonable and careful in the way that we use words and phrases, and never being inflammatory.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My point of order also relates to Israel and Gaza. ITV News recently broadcast a video showing the killing of an unarmed civilian in Gaza who was waving a white flag—the international symbol of peace. It is not the first time unarmed people have been killed in Gaza while raising white flags; in fact, three Israeli hostages were brutally killed while topless and waving a white flag. This is deeply concerning to me, as I am sure it is to many people in this House. An Israel Defence Forces commander has indicated that the IDF was responsible, saying,

“There are mistakes, it is war.”

This incident could potentially constitute a war crime. How can we ensure that the Government come to this House to assure us that this incident will be properly investigated and that UK-supplied weapons were not used, and to set out the steps being taken to ensure that Israel follows the ruling from the International Court of Justice?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady, and the point she makes is not a point of order for the Chair—not at all. She is making a very serious point about a tragic incident among many thousands of tragic incidents that have occurred over the past few months, but it is not a point of order for the Chair.

The hon. Lady is raising a point that she wants to raise with Ministers. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), was recently at the Dispatch Box making a statement on Gaza, and I anticipate it is very likely that a Foreign Office Minister or a Minister from the Ministry of Defence will be here again within a few days to make a further statement. If not, Opposition Front Benchers and others have been most assiduous in asking urgent questions to ensure that Ministers come to the House to answer these important questions.

The hon. Lady is not asking a question that I can deal with from the Chair; she is asking a question that she wants to ask of a Minister. If she wants to ask a question of a Minister, there are various ways she can do that: she can put down an urgent question; she can ask for an Adjournment debate; she can speak to Members on her own Front Bench about having an extended debate in Opposition time—I will not list them all. There are many, many ways in which the hon. Lady can do that, but I cannot answer her question from the Chair. It is not a point of order.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have on two previous occasions asked the Leader of the House to correct the record after she told this House on 11 January that people in England pay

“lower tax than people in Scotland and we have managed...a balanced budget”.—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 455-456.]

At Prime Minister's questions today, the Prime Minister incorrectly referred to people in Scotland paying higher taxes than people in England. I have notified the Prime Minister that I would be referring to him. The House of Commons Library, via the Office for Budget Responsibility, has confirmed that the statements made by the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister are both untrue. The majority of people in Scotland pay lower taxes—including council tax—than people in England. No UK Government have delivered a balanced budget since 2000-2001, and the current UK Government pay the equivalent of £300 million a day in debt interest, while the Scottish Government must, by law, balance their budget every year.

Given that hon. Members must correct inadvertent errors at the earliest opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, I seek your guidance and advice as to how to ensure that the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister do indeed correct the record, and your advice as to what measures can be taken if hon. Members repeat factually incorrect information in this place and appear to—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I thank the hon. Lady. Once again, I appreciate that Members want to use the opportunity of a point of order to make the point that they want to make, but there is a big difference between—[*Interruption.*] Do not shout while I am speaking. There is a difference between a point of order on procedure in this House and a matter of opinion in the interpretation of statistics. There are also—[*Interruption.*] Will the hon. Lady just be quiet and allow me to answer her question?

There are inevitably differences of opinion on the interpretation of statistics. There are also, as the hon. Lady says, facts, as opposed to opinions. If facts are stated wrongly in this House, they should be corrected. However, it is not for the Chair to make a judgment as to who correctly interprets the facts put before the House. That is why we have debates and questions. We are not meant to come here and all agree with one another. That is why we have this Chamber, where proper debates can take place.

If the hon. Lady is saying that facts were stated wrongly, I am quite sure that a Minister will take the first opportunity to correct those facts. I think, perhaps, the Leader of the House will take that opportunity right now.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would be very happy to. This is obviously a matter of great concern and urgency to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—she would normally raise it at business questions tomorrow. I am quite sure this has nothing to do with the fact that the former First Minister is in front of the covid inquiry today. [Interruption.] There is nothing like a good old—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. What on earth do you think you are doing? The hon. Lady raised a point. The Leader of the House is answering an aspect of that point. It is not a moment when shouting should occur.

Penny Mordaunt: To get to the substance of the point, I understand that the hon. Lady mentions a House of Commons Library paper that she is relying

[Penny Mordaunt]

on to do this. That particular Library paper is using a figure from the Scottish Budget in 2022, which is out of date. As she will know, income tax out turns are not going to be reported for many more months, so she cannot make that assertion. What I have done in my responses at business questions to detailed points on taxation is to give the House direct salary levels and the taxes that people are paying north and south of the border. Whatever our views and political disagreements, I take my responsibilities to this House extremely seriously.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let me make it clear once again that there is a difference between points of order on procedure and matters for debate. That is why we have debates. I am quite sure that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran will raise her points in debate on many occasions over the next few weeks, as indeed will the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who made the previous point of order. That is what debates are for and it is not for the Chair to make those decisions.

Police (Declaration)

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

2.32 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require police officers and certain employees of police forces to declare a membership of or affiliation to certain types of society and organisation; to require such declarations to be accompanied by a statement relating to that membership; and for connected purposes.

Secret, closed or private societies have often been the subject of ridicule. From “Monty Python” to “The Simpsons”, these organisations have been seen as silly, strange and perhaps old fashioned, and even today we hear reference to the funny handshake club. However, look beyond the parodies and we find networks of those with power and authority: clubs of like-minded individuals that look out for their own. We know that these networks exist in areas of public life.

Here in the UK, our policing model relies on public trust and consent. At the heart of the Peelian principles of policing is the idea that public consent is maintained by applying the law fairly and impartially. The College of Policing’s code of ethics states that to demonstrate that they are applying the law fairly, police forces should operate with transparency. The Casey report into culture at the Metropolitan police states:

“The checks and balances provided by robust scrutiny, governance and accountability are vital for public bodies, perhaps especially the police with their duties towards and powers over the public.”

The Independent Office for Police Conduct’s 2023 report into public perceptions of the police identified “increased transparency” as a key measure the police could take to improve confidence in policing.

With those words in mind, I am seeking to bring forward a Bill that, at its heart, provides more transparency to the public. The outcome of the Bill would be to have a public register of associations for all officers and civilians working for the police. That is not a particularly new idea in this House. In 1997, the Home Affairs Committee published its report, “Freemasonry in the Police and the Judiciary”, which concluded:

“We recommend that police officers, magistrates, judges and crown prosecutors should be required to register membership of any secret society and that the record should be publicly available.”

In February 1998, the Home Office accepted that recommendation, stating that all new appointments shall have as a condition of appointment a requirement to declare membership of the Freemasons. The influence of freemasonry on the police has often been discussed over the decades. Suggestions of influence in high profile cases of police corruption and mismanagement have been shot down due to a lack of evidence. I am not here to throw accusations, but the continuous mention of freemasonry raises many eyebrows, even in this House.

I have used freemasonry as an example, but the Bill does not only apply to that particular society. After all, old boys’ clubs have always existed within the police, and they can take many shapes. The Casey report into the culture at the Metropolitan police highlighted the use of WhatsApp groups; closed groups of like-minded individuals looking out for their own—sound familiar? Policing culture has, rightly, been under heavy scrutiny in recent years. Allegations of misogyny, racism and homophobia have stuck in the public conscience, alongside claims of corruption and collusion.

The Government, along with policing bodies, have committed to reform, and a number of inquiries and reviews have taken place. If we are serious about reforming police culture, and I think we should be, then we must leave no stone unturned. The Bill serves to act as one of those many stones in need of turning. I must stress that the Bill is not seeking to prevent membership to societies—not at all—and I am acutely aware of the right to association, and previous precedent that has been set for that in the European convention on human rights.

We in this House work cross-party. The issue is a policing one, not a party political one. I thank my colleagues who have sponsored the Bill, who come from three different parties. I have spoken to so many people about this issue. It is a conversation I enjoy having, because they believe, as I do, that something needs to be done, but many do not dare to speak out. So, I am here, speaking out once again about reforming culture within an organisation. I know the change that can be made when people speak up, having previously set my attention on the Welsh Rugby Union, which has been well documented. I believe we in this House can make that important change happen within the police, too. The Police Regulations 2003 state:

“No restrictions other than those designed to secure the proper exercise of the functions of a constable shall be imposed by the police authority or the chief officer on the private life of members of a police force”.

Schedule 1, paragraph 1 states:

“A member of a police force shall at all times abstain from any activity which is likely to interfere with the impartial discharge of his duties or which is likely to give rise to the impression amongst members of the public that it may so interfere”.

I believe that a balance needs to be struck between those two statements, in a way that is still in line with both of them. In 2016, the police and crime commissioner for South Wales told “Y Byd ar Bedwar”, a Welsh TV news programme, for those who do not know:

“If members of a club or society have to disclose, it takes away any hidden agendas...it would be best to have one common system for local authorities, police force and health boards. Only then can we ensure everybody is being treated equally.”

For 20 years, I was a teacher, subject to a Disclosure and Barring Service check but not a register of interests, as I am now as an MP. I feel very strongly about the significance and role of culture within organisations,

particularly in public services. All organisations have a responsibility to change their culture for the better, by being honest and transparent about matters relating to governance and day-to-day operations.

Of course, some might argue that if such declarations should be made in police forces, they should also be made by Members of Parliament given that we are lawmakers, and to them I say, “Why not?” At its inception, Members of the Welsh Assembly, as it was then, were required to declare if they were Freemasons, and faced criminal charges if they were found to be members and had not declared their membership. When advised that that might conflict with human rights laws, the Assembly looked at its policy again. Now Members of the Senedd are required to make declarations of membership of any society or organisation, which seems an extremely sensible approach.

Being part of a society can be inherently positive in enhancing friendship, fostering new connections and promoting fundraising, but if there is a potential for membership of a group or society to be used in protecting individuals from consequences and in hiding the truth, that must be addressed. Restoring trust in the police is a monumental task, and I am under no illusion that the Bill is a magic wand, but transparency is essential to that task. It is in our power as lawmakers to make changes happen—changes that allow for trust in the police to grow. In its 1998 report “Freemasonry in Public Life”, the Home Affairs Committee concluded:

“The solution is a simple one. It requires no bans or proscriptions, which generally have no place in a democratic society. It merely requires public servants who are members of a secret society—or ‘a society with secrets’ as freemasons used to say—to disclose their membership.”

Now is the time to move beyond secrecy.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered, That Tonia Antoniazzi, Sarah Champion, Neil Coyle, Dame Diana Johnson, Ben Lake, Caroline Nokes, Jess Phillips, Liz Saville Roberts and Mr William Wragg present the Bill.

Tonia Antoniazzi accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time Friday 1 March and to be printed (Bill 156).

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission of 2023, Response to the draft Strategy and Policy Statement for the Electoral Commission, HC 1809; and Third Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission of 2022, Response to the draft Strategy and Policy Statement for the Electoral Commission, HC 967]

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): I beg to move,

That the draft Electoral Commission Strategy and Policy Statement, which was laid before this House on 14 December 2023, be approved.

It is a pleasure to be able to present this important strategy and policy statement for parliamentary consideration this afternoon. We may disagree on many points, but one point on which I hope we can agree is that there are plenty of issues in our political life to raise the blood pressure. Let me say respectfully to the House that this strategy and policy statement is not one of them, for reasons that I shall set out.

The Electoral Commission Strategy and Policy Statement was laid before Parliament on 14 December 2023 for approval by resolution of both Houses within a 40-day period in accordance with section 4C(9)(a) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Let me start by asserting clearly and unequivocally a concern which I know many right hon. and hon. Members have had, and which I wish to nail from the outset. This statement, this strategy, in no way undermines or challenges the robust, legislatively underpinned independence of the Electoral Commission. The commission plays an important part in our national life. It has a key and important role, and the House and, I believe, the country recognise that.

The statement gives the Government no new teeth or power. How, if and when the commission faces into the guidance is up to it and the scrutiny of Mr Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, whose role is exercised on behalf of the House. The commission, as is set out in the 2000 Act, only has a "duty to have regard". We are not saying—not least because we cannot, and do not wish to—that the commission "will" or "must". We create no new duty to report to the Government, only a duty for the Speaker's Committee to maintain its relations with the commission. The commission will continue to report only to Parliament, as it has done since its creation in 2000. The statement—I want to make this very clear, because this is a twin approach of independence—does not politicise Mr Speaker's Committee or the Office of the Speaker in respect of its commission functions.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I have been listening to what the Minister is saying with a bit of disbelief. If the commission will not have to take any notice of the statement or act on it, but need only have regard to it, what is it here for? If "having regard to" means "taking seriously and doing something about", that applies both to the commission and to Mr Speaker's Committee, which has to oversee the commission and

its work. Does that not compromise the neutrality and independence of Mr Speaker as well as the Electoral Commission? This is a very serious matter.

Simon Hoare: If that were true, it would be a serious matter, but I must say to the hon. Gentleman—for whom I have huge respect, and who chairs the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee with much distinction—that I do not see it that way, and neither do the Government. However, he takes me from my explanation of what the statement is not, to explaining why we are approving it. That is the nub of this issue. We see—I see—the role of this Government and of any party that has the honour to be in government in the United Kingdom as that of a pro tem custodian of our democracy. That is why we have election law, and why I am the elections Minister. Democracy is, as we discussed last week in the Holocaust Memorial Day debate, a fragile flower under huge pressure.

We believe that the statement is timely, not least because of the raft of changes that have flown through and been delivered by statutory instrument from the recent Elections Act 2022. We are also hugely cognisant of the threats to the robustness and resilience of our democracy presented by overseas interference, fake news, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence. The solemn role of pro tem custodian, and holding the flame of democracy while we serve in government, are important.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) *rose*—

Simon Hoare: It is important to underpin, rather than undermine, the work of the commission by standing shoulder to shoulder with it in the important work that has been set before it, which I will come to when I have taken the right hon. Gentleman's intervention.

John McDonnell: I am a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and we warned in our report about the threat to the independence of the commission from the Government's legislation regarding the strategy statement. I can understand where the Minister is coming from when he says that we are not using the expression "must" because that would be a direction, but the Government are repeatedly using the expression "should". The question in my mind is: if the commission ignores this "should", what happens? There is an implied threat around the "should".

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman helpfully takes me to the next part of my remarks about "should", "would" and "must". Let us just canter through, with some degree of attention and seriousness, the priorities set out in the statement. In all seriousness—I hope the House knows me well enough to know that when I use that phrase it is not just parroting a line; I am serious in what I am about to say, because it is important—I really would question whether any hon. or right hon. Member of this House, of any party, would take exception to anything in the statement.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister answer my question?

Simon Hoare: If the right hon. Gentleman will be a little patient, he will have his question answered. He asks his question in his way and, in the words of Frank Sinatra, I shall answer it in mine.

The first paragraph rehearses this key point:

“The Electoral Commission is the independent regulatory body responsible for giving guidance and support to Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers in undertaking electoral registration and conducting elections and recall petitions effectively and in accordance with the law.”

Anybody disagree with that? No. Paragraph 2 states:

“The Chair of the Commission has the responsibility in law for acting as the Chief Counting Officer at national referendums in the UK...and the staff of the Commission support the Chair in that role, when it is required, to work through local electoral authorities to deliver such events.”

The delivery of smooth and seamless referenda is not, I would suggest, a revolutionary power grab by His Majesty's Government.

Paragraph 3 states:

“The government believes the Electoral Commission has an important role to play in maintaining the integrity of our elections and public confidence in that integrity.”

I do not think that point will get the Division bells ringing. In answer to the question from the Chair of the Select Committee, paragraph 3 continues:

“The duty to have regard does not require the Commission to give lesser priority to, or to ignore, any of its other statutory duties. The Electoral Commissioners and the Commission's executive leadership will remain responsible for determining the Commission's strategy, priorities, how it should discharge its duties (including day-to-day operations) and the allocation of its resources, as agreed by the relevant parliaments. It will be for the Commission to determine how to factor the Statement into its decision-making processes and corporate documents such as the Five-Year Plan.”

Paragraph 4 states:

“One of the government's policy priorities is ensuring our democracy is secure, fair, modern and transparent.”

One could easily transpose the word “government” for “Parliament” there. Who will argue with ensuring that our democracy is secure? Who will argue that our democracy should not be fair, modern, or transparent? Paragraph 4 goes on to say that it is a priority to ensure “that those who are entitled to vote should always be able to exercise that right freely, securely and in an informed way;...that fraud, intimidation and interference have no place in our democracy;...that we are the stewards of our shared democratic heritage which we keep up to date for our age.”

That is my custodian point again.

Paragraph 5 states:

“One of the leading government objectives is tackling electoral fraud”.

Anyone in this House in favour of electoral fraud? I did not think so—and rightly so. Paragraph 5 goes on to state that the commission should

“support continued effective delivery of voter identification by raising public awareness about the requirement to show an approved form of photographic identification before taking part in UK parliamentary elections, local elections in England and elections in Northern Ireland”.

It has done that in Northern Ireland for the last 20 years or so. This issue was raised in close questioning from the Lords Constitution Committee just the other month. The important role of the Government, the commission and other agencies in raising the profile and public awareness of voter identification was a matter that we discussed at some length.

Mr Betts: I am listening to the Minister reading out a list of the things that the commission is obliged to do by law anyway, so why he has to restate them in this paper,

I do not know. The clear advice to the Committee and to the Speaker's Committee was that if certain items were identified as priorities for the commission, other things would per se be of lesser priority. For example, overseas voter registration is a priority, but the registration of voters in this country, where 8 million people are not on the register, is not listed as a priority. This skews the work of the Electoral Commission, whether the Minister likes it or not.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman was obviously so busy trying to find his rebuttal point that he did not listen to my answer to the first question. I set out clearly that the duty to “have regard” does not require the commission to give lesser priority to, or ignore, any of its other statutory duties. The electoral commissioners and the commission's executive leadership will remain responsible for determining the commission's strategy and priorities, and how it should discharge its duties. The statement in no way undermines, countermands or double-guesses any work of the commission.

The paper goes on to talk about tackling electoral fraud, which I know we would all wish to do. Crucially, it also talks about the role of the commission in working with returning officers and others to ensure the maximum opportunity for those with disabilities to take part in the ballot on the day and in polling stations. Nobody in this place, or the other place, would think that was not a noble aim.

John McDonnell rose—

Simon Hoare: And at the very mention of noble aims, I give way to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington.

John McDonnell: I come back to the fact that this statement in effect sets priorities for the commission, and that has not only operational consequences but budgetary consequences. What are the consequences for the commission if, like me, it thinks the Government's statement is daft and completely ignores it?

Simon Hoare: I just do not see that happening, because the commission understands the importance of the statement. It is not a directional document; it is an augmenting document. It says—because there are difficult things facing our democracy, as the right hon. Gentleman knows—that the Government, not a party Government but Government as an entity, are in lockstep with the commission, in full support of the work that it does to preserve, protect and enhance our democracy. We felt that it was timely for the Secretary of State to provide a statement to augment and clarify matters that flow from the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 Act and subsequent statutory instruments.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) is right to say that the commission is, in any case, doing the things set out in the statement, in whole or in part. It will be entirely up to the commission to set its priorities from the list, and to give greater or lesser attention to matters as needed. For example, it could say, “Well, that has already been done, and this is all in hand, but we really need to augment this matter here.” The voter authority certificate is a prime example. There are things that we would all expect the commission to spend a certain amount of time on, in order to raise awareness of them.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Minister is doing a commendable job, given that he has clearly inherited a piece of legislation from a different era that was part of a different agenda. He said that things might need clarifying, and then mentioned the voter authority certificate. Can he give us examples of other things that need clarifying? What does he think the Electoral Commission is doing that is wrong, and that needs to be righted by this statement?

Simon Hoare: Nothing. If the hon. Gentleman is looking for that, then he has completely misunderstood the purpose of the statement and the operational independence of the Electoral Commission, and apportioned malign intentions to the Government. I know that he wants to say, “Oh, this is mission creep because that is something else, and the Government are trying to take over an independent body”—it is nothing of the sort.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that others wish to speak. They can read the statement for themselves, but I hope that the examples I have given indicate that the strategy and policy statement augment what the Electoral Commission does. My Department and I have good relations with the commission. We never seek to direct. We admire and respect the work that the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission does in discharging its duty. I have the honour of being a member of that Committee, as do the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East; the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins); the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith); and others—so it is not even weighted in His Majesty’s Government’s favour.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) *rose*—

Simon Hoare: This is a benign statement, supporting the commission in its work, addressing the changes introduced post the Elections Act 2022 (Commencement No. 7) Regulations 2023. It is all part of our process to ensure that our electoral system is resilient, open, transparent, secure and has the maximum access to all who have the eligibility to cast a vote on whichever election day it may happen to be. How they vote is entirely up to them; how the commission sets its priorities is entirely up to it. Mr Speaker and his Committee will hold the commission to account, not Parliament. There is no mandate in the statement that the commission has to provide a statement or report, annually or quarterly, to my Department or to the Secretary of State. The usual communication channels between the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Commission remain.

Given the fragility of our democracy and the outside pressures facing most western democracies today, I suggest to right hon. and hon. Members that, in trying to ascribe ill intention, Machiavellian motivation and some sort of surreptitious purpose of undermining democracy to this benign statement of good will, they demean themselves and they demean and weaken democracy.

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

3.2 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his introduction. I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but I struggled to listen to him. Through gritted teeth, he tried but failed desperately to justify why this statement is needed. You cannot flog a dead horse, and if something ain’t broke, it doesn’t need to be fixed.

In 2000, the previous Labour Government set up the Electoral Commission to act as a guardian of our democratic system. At the heart of that decision was the need for a central pillar of independence within our politics: a body that the public could trust that would not suffer interference, not just from the Government of the day but from future Governments of any shade; that would not fear the consequences of taking on major parties when they broke the rules; and that could provide information about our system from a trusted source, free of political interference. Over 20 years later, the commission’s independence has become a cornerstone of public trust in our democracy.

Let me put the strategy and policy statement into context. Sadly, 14 years of Tory failure have left many people feeling powerless at the decline under this Government. People have seen their hard-earned money go to Tory friends and VIP donors. People who followed the rules to protect the NHS saw those who made the rules breaking them. I grew up not far from this place, on a council estate in Brixton, just a bus ride away. What annoyed and angered me was seeing decisions being made about my community by people who did not feel the ramifications. The Government need to reflect on that—I hope the Minister will—and realise why trust in our politics is at a record low after so many scandals from this place. During this time, the independence of the Electoral Commission has acted as a bedrock in our system against declining trust. While we have seen recent drops in confidence and satisfaction in the system, a majority of people remain satisfied with the voting process.

I agree with the Minister that there are always things we can do to improve our democratic process, but this statement is setting a political agenda for an independent watchdog. That is completely wrong, Minister, and you know it, and that is not just me saying that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, but I beg of her, would she please call the Minister “the Minister”, not “you”? I am not blaming the hon. Lady; bad examples have been set by senior Members of the House calling other Members “you” or “Minister”. Phrases such as “and you know it” are exactly why we do not have that way of doing things here, because that refers to the occupant of the Chair. I apologise for pulling her up on this, because she is far from being the first person to get it wrong, but if we do not start to put it right, people will not understand the reason for the rule.

Florence Eshalomi: Thank you for highlighting that, Madam Deputy Speaker. I totally agree with you; I will refer to “the Minister”.

It not only me saying that there are issues with the statement; The Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Committee, and even the Electoral Commission itself, have all highlighted problems with the statement. These are not random bodies. In fact, they are so respected that the Government themselves made it mandatory to consult them prior to bringing the strategy and policy statement to the House. Yet when all three raised the same concerns, the Government simply railroaded the statement through. Madam Deputy Speaker, you would expect a Government who disregard the powerful points made by these respected bodies to have a clear evidence base for their actions. For the Minister to repeat what the Electoral Commission is doing fantastically well is not the basis for the statement.

In announcing the statement, the Government said:

“This guidance addresses the concern raised in Lord Eric Pickles’ independent review into electoral fraud, that the current system of oversight of the Electoral Commission is not fit for purpose.”

Given that, we would expect to find a robust justification for this statement in what the Minister outlined. However, all we get on the system for oversight is three buried lines on page 50 of that seven-year-old report—no detail, justification or evidence. Wow.

When the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee found it was

“not aware that any of those concerns remain current”

from the relevant section of the Pickles report, and when so many respected bodies are saying the statement is unnecessary, surely the Minister must see that the very basis for making the statement is simply not good enough.

Under this Government, trust in our politics and democratic institutions is at an all-time low. We all need to work hard to restore that trust, give people belief that their voice matters and that decisions are made with them, not to them—this is another example of decisions being made to them. Instead, the contents of the statement completely undermine the Electoral Commission, representing a dangerous threat to the independence of a vital watchdog. MPs from all parties have condemned it and respected bodies have rejected it, which is further proof that we need a new approach to a democracy that works for everyone. I urge hon. Members to join us in voting against this dangerous politicisation of our independent elections watchdog.

3.8 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I rise to make a short contribution to the debate. I welcome the work that has been done on the policy statement. Having read the examination undertaken by the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission and the report by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, I am glad the Government have responded to elements of the critique. I also acknowledge the incredibly important role that Mr Speaker and his Committee play in the existing governance of the Electoral Commission—I want to make sure that is on the record, because they do their job well.

For me, and I suspect other colleagues who supported the Elections Act 2022—the source of today’s instrument—there are a couple of additional arguments that should be put alongside what the Minister has said. First, it is reasonable to have a strategy and policy statement. Other regulators, such as Ofcom and Ofgem, have one. Secondly, this debate is an opportunity for the whole

Chamber to engage in the Electoral Commission’s work. I rather wish that the Chamber was even fuller. Be that as it may, this is rightly an opportunity for more right hon. and hon. Members, other than those who sit on the Speaker’s Committee or on the Select Committee, to take part.

Mr Betts *rose*—

Chloe Smith: I am happy to give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: Does the hon. Lady not accept that comparing this with other regulators is profoundly confusing? They are different. Regulating the water industry, with the Government quite rightly having a view about how our water purity, sewerage and so on should be controlled, is completely different from the Government interfering in how an independent Electoral Commission should carry out its operations.

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Member for making that point. Let me say in a respectful tone of voice that I am glad to see the depth of work that he has done on this, but I hope that he recognises that there are many of us on the Conservative Benches who have also spent very many years focusing on this area. My answer to him would be that there are partial similarities and there are partial differences. I think that he is wrong and that some of his colleagues are unwise to throw quite so many accusations in such a tone today. In part, there are good reasons why it is reasonable to set out in one place the Government’s priorities, which, as the statement sets out, are adjacent and relevant to matters to do with the regulators. That is what today’s document does. He is right that that is somewhat different from the more detailed work that is done by the regulators of water and electricity and so on. He is also right, of course, to point to the essential independence of the Electoral Commission. I am glad that he has done so, because it gives me the opportunity to add my emphasis to that as well.

There is nothing to be concerned about from this statement in respect of the independence of the commission. We have heard those assurances from the Minister today. It is extremely important that he has set that out, and I am glad that he has done so, and I add my voice to the essential nature of that. But I want briefly to go back to the need for wider participation in the work of the Electoral Commission. We are able to spend, periodically, a few minutes of question time on the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, and good work is done through that mechanism, but it is perhaps somewhat indirect. It is important for the whole Chamber to be able to look at the important issues that sit behind our constitution and our electoral system.

I wish to move on to the contents of the strategy and policy statement. I am working in particular from the points that we see in paragraph 19, where it is emphasised that this regulator needs to work together with others to discharge its duties. I want to emphasise that in the context of the demands being made on regulators this year with regard to artificial intelligence. Members will be very well aware of that from the White Paper on regulating artificial intelligence, which was set out last year, and on which we are shortly to have an update from a different Department.

[Chloe Smith]

The key point is this: it is the world's biggest election year. Billions of citizens will be going to the ballot box, including here. These elections will be the first to happen since the significant advances in AI. There are legitimate concerns, anxieties and, indeed, evidence from our security services, for us to ask whether this technology will be used for fabrication, for manipulation and to affect the integrity of elections. It goes without saying that the integrity of elections matters, so that people's free choice achieves what they intend.

The Government have asked regulators across their fields to set out how they will work with artificial intelligence. Clearly, the Electoral Commission is one of those regulators—and somewhat in the hotseat in this regard. It is my view that, in respect of the grand concerns and anxieties, the Electoral Commission and connected enforcement agencies could helpfully set out the preparation that they have done and give reassurance publicly about their readiness for elections this year. With reference to the substance of today's statement, I ask the Minister what discussions he has had with the Electoral Commission on its work with other regulators, for example as per paragraphs 19 and 20 of the statement, which talk about keeping up to date with the realities of campaigning activities—I think that is a good tone to take there. I also ask the Minister in what way he expects to keep the statement itself and future iterations of the statements updated in regards to technology and national security considerations where those might be relevant.

I agree with the Minister that we here are stewards of our democracy. I have been in his particular position before. I set out the approach that we ought always to strive for our elections to be secure, fair, modern, accessible and transparent. I also agree that this is some of the most important work that we can do. None the less, I conclude by saying gently that it is a legitimate function of Government to address themselves to these principles. That is what we need the Government and Parliament to do, because we are the custodians of law as well as of those principles. We did that with the Elections Act, and we did it prior to that with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. We have also done it before then and since then, and we will continue to do so.

It is a legitimate function of Government to enact changes and updates to electoral law when they are asked to do so, perhaps through a manifesto commitment in a democratic process. We do that through Parliament, so it is good, as I have said, that we have this wider opportunity for Parliament to be able to engage in the work of the Electoral Commission while crucially respecting its design and independence, and I am glad that we are getting that chance to do so today.

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

3.17 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), not least because she was the Minister who brought in the Elections Act 2022, which has given rise to the motion today. The Minister on the Front Bench today, whom I hold in the highest regard, is

either the fifth or the sixth Minister—I have lost count—from the second Government Department who has had responsibility for manifestations of that legislation, whether it was the Bill proceedings or delegated legislation, since its First Reading in 2021. That does not say much for the continuity of this Government or their commitment to getting right the regulation of elections—that perhaps is hardly a surprise. In fact, as I have alluded to, much of the statement and much of what we are doing today is a hangover from a slightly different era—a more muscular era—of the Conservative Government.

That is a pity because, on the one hand, the Elections Act was a massive missed opportunity to consolidate and update electoral law properly for the next quarter of the 21st century, and on the other, it provided for significant regression in the access to, and potential fairness of, UK-wide elections and certain other elections in England and Wales. It removed proportionality from mayoral elections and it imposed the burden of photo-identification, particularly on poorer and marginalised communities, while at the same time extending the franchise to millions of voters from overseas who have much less in the way of verification. And now, on the Floor of the House today, we have the cherry on top, the crowning glory of this Government's interventions on our election process: the strategy and policy statement for the Electoral Commission.

The commission is supposed to be the independent regulator of elections across these islands. It is a body that already has extremely clear functions, which are set out on a statutory basis in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. My first question to the Minister is this: what is this statement? Is it the law? Is it a statutory instrument? Is it delegated legislation? It is telling that the Government have tabled a debate in the Chamber rather than passing this to a DL Committee, because I have a feeling that that was their original intention and that the Minister would have preferred that given the scrutiny and publicity he is now facing, but here we are in the Chamber—and I am not entirely sure if a motion to approve a strategy and policy statement is delegated legislation.

It seems that the commission is not legally bound to follow the strategy and policy, but only to “have regard” to it. As others have asked, what does that mean? What happens if the commission finds itself conflicted between the statement and the statute? Can it be challenged in the courts, and if so, by whom—by political parties, by non-party campaigners, by the Government themselves? If it is not the law, how is it to be enforced—who decides if the commission is compliant or not?

I know the Minister, and you Madam Deputy Speaker, enjoy some deftly deployed Latin so perhaps this is a good time to ask the classical question, *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who watches the watchers—or, in this case, who commissions the commissioners? The answer to that question is that it is this House: it is Parliament that recommends commissioners for appointment by the monarch by means of a Humble Address. It was Parliament that established the commission in the first place through the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The commission is accountable to the Speaker's Committee of Members of this House and through other mechanisms to the Parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We can therefore look at this statement and the motion before us and ask whether the Government are usurping the sovereignty of this House. The motion is unamendable, much as some of us would have liked to amend it to mandate the Government to abandon the statement and repeal the relevant section of the Elections Act 2022, and the statement is unamendable. The Government ran a limited consultation—limited in time and limited in the number of consultees. Where is the parliamentary sovereignty in that?

The only way in which the Scottish Government were able to express their views was in a letter from my good friend the Minister for Parliamentary Business, George Adam MSP, to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee of this House. That is probably a fair reflection of what this Government think is the place of Scotland's Parliament and Government in the modern United Kingdom—as a subsidiary of the housing Committee of the House of Commons. The statement does not have any effect on the Electoral Commission's functions in the devolved nations, but by definition that increases divergence of practice, which is perhaps a surprise given the UK Government's determination to promote the broad shoulders of the Union.

In his letter, Minister Adam makes clear that, like almost every other stakeholder—and every other voice we have heard with the exception of those on the Government Benches who have taken an interest in this matter—he considers the strategy and policy statement to be

“an unwelcome and unnecessary interference with the independence of the Electoral Commission”.

He makes the extremely valid point that the statement's preamble says that it

“does not suggest that the Commission should cease to carry out any of its other statutory duties”.

He also rightly suggests:

“This appears to raise the alarming prospect that such a suggestion might feature in future versions of the SPS.”

Surely a change in the functions of the commission would require a change in the statute.

It would be helpful to hear the Minister's response to those points in getting to the heart of what this statement is or is not supposed to achieve. If it is largely a restatement of the principles and functions that the commission is already carrying out, as the Minister sought to assure us in his most emollient tones, it seems to be surplus to requirements. Perhaps the Minister could give us some examples of what, as a result of the statement, he thinks the commission will do differently, or better. If the statement is simply changing the emphasis on certain functions, that goes back to the point I raised in my intervention: why is that necessary? What does the Minister think the commission is doing wrong and why do the Government need to direct what is supposed to be an independent regulator?

The Elections Act 2022 was of course just one step in a pernicious series that this Government in their different incarnations have taken to shield themselves from accountability and to reduce the openness and transparency of democracy across the UK. The Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 restored the prerogative of calling an election to the Prime Minister alone—with all the consequences that is having for the Tory Back Benchers, the Press Gallery and the podcast studios of

Westminster. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2020 has restricted the right to protest. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and sundry other pieces of Brexit legislation have ridden roughshod over the Sewel convention and deliberately weakened and undermined the devolution settlement.

Perhaps it should be no surprise, therefore, that the Government have the independent regulator of elections next in their sights. The Conservative party is clearly not going to have an easy time at the next election, and it has clearly decided that therefore neither should anybody else—whether they are a candidate, a political party, a non-party campaigner, an electoral registration officer, a returning officer or some other official, or indeed the Electoral Commission itself.

The time to introduce elections legislation reform is usually at the beginning of a Parliament, so that everyone involved has time to prepare and implement the changes, not at the desperate fag-end of a Session as part of what appears to be a scorched earth policy by the current Government. That does mean that there are some serious questions for the official Opposition as well, and indeed for all of us writing our manifestos. Are the official Opposition prepared to repeal or amend aspects of the Elections Act should they have the opportunity to do so at some point in future? Will they commit to getting rid of this statement and certainly to not publishing any of their own?

In the meantime, the Government need to hear from the House that this statement is at best unnecessary and at worst—which is more likely—an undermining of the independence of the Electoral Commission and indeed its accountability to this House rather than to the Government of the day. Members on the Government Benches—wherever they are; they are clearly not that interested in this motion—who believe far more fervently in parliamentary sovereignty than those of us who believe in popular sovereignty believe in that, should consider whether this is really the road they want to go down. If they do not want to go down this road, they should join those of us who respect the independence of the Electoral Commission, and who want to see fairness and transparency across elections on these islands, in voting against this statement—or whatever it is.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

This debate has to finish at 4.13 pm. I ask colleagues to be aware of that. There are five more speakers and a little brevity might help.

3.26 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am speaking today as Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and a member of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. I also declare my interest as vice-president of the Local Government Association.

When the Minister was given responsibility for local government finance, he no doubt thought that he had got the hospital pass, which some Ministers get from time to time when they have a very challenging brief and a very difficult situation to face. Then he realised that that hospital pass was coming down the road straight away, and that he was going to have to try to justify this statement today. He did a good job of telling

[Mr Clive Betts]

us what the current responsibilities are of the Electoral Commission; what he did not do was give us one example of something that the commission is not doing right at present which they will be made to do right and better by this statement. What are the problems that need addressing, and if the motion passes in this House, what will be different tomorrow from today? He did not give one example of that. That is why in the end both the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Speaker's Committee said that, at worst, this statement process compromises the independence of the Electoral Commission—the commission believes that as well—and at best, it is simply unnecessary and will contribute nothing whatsoever.

I say to the Minister—and he has made this point—that democracy is of course very precious and it is the responsibility of all of us to protect it. The Electoral Commission is a very important part of that process in its oversight of elections and the electoral processes in this country, so it must be seen to be independent—not just independent in practice but perceived to be independent. Despite what the Minister said in the very detailed way he addressed the statement, the perception is that the Government are trying to do something to influence the Electoral Commission. If they are not, what is the point of this? If they have no intention of influencing the Electoral Commission, we should just let it get on with the current situation and be accountable to Mr Speaker's Committee—that is surely where we ought to be.

The Speaker's Committee and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee had very helpful advice from senior and authoritative officers in this House who concluded in reporting to our Committees that the statement would constitute interference with the commission's operational independence. That is what we were advised; we were advised that no cogent explanation had been put forward for why the statement was needed. We have not heard one today either; the Minister did the best job he could, but it was not a coherent and cogent explanation. Further, we were told that it was hard to see how this statement would help the commission in its work.

The statement says that the commission should have regard to the way in which it operates, and gives it certain priorities. If among the commission's many responsibilities some have to be a priority, others must be of a lower priority—that is pretty self-evident as a conclusion.

Those other things are less important. Either that directs the commission to concentrate its resources on the things that the Government think are important, or the commission will just ignore it and walk away; either way, we do not know what we are here for. Either we are here to interfere with the work of the commission, direct it and give it priorities, or we are simply here to say to the commission, "There are some things that the Government think are rather nice, but go away and ignore them because they don't really matter. That's not your statutory responsibility."

Ultimately, the commission has statutory responsibilities. We were advised on the Committee that some of the wording in the statement differs from the wording in law, so the commission could be caught between following the law and following the guidance. It would end up in

court, with lawyers making a lot of money from the conflicts—lawyers always make money where there is confusion in wording. The Government ought to be careful about what they are asking us to do.

Reference was made to other regulators. Other regulators are essentially agents of Government: for example, Ofwat exists to carry out Government policy about how our water should be kept clean. The Electoral Commission is not an agent of Government. It is therefore very different from the other regulators—the agents—that the right hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and Ministers have referred to.

John McDonnell: It goes back to the question that I put to the Minister. If other regulators fail to abide by the direction given by Government, they are removed. We have not heard what the consequences will be from the Government of not abiding by the range of "shoulds" within the statement.

Mr Betts: Absolutely. No consequences are laid out for what will happen if the statement is not followed by the Electoral Commission.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I wonder whether it is worse than that. Regulators should be removed if they are found to be incompetent. Given the state of the water industry with Ofwat and the Environment Agency, the Government probably ought to be stepping in and removing those regulators, but they are not.

Mr Betts: Yes, perhaps the Government ought to pay more attention to those problems rather than to one that seems not to exist. The Minister has not told us what problems the statement is intended to address.

Simon Hoare *rose—*

Mr Betts: I think the Minister is going to help us with that.

Simon Hoare: I politely ask the Chair of the Select Committee where in my remarks opening the debate I talked about other regulatory bodies and tried to rank them *pari passu* with the Electoral Commission. I will tell him where I did it: I did not.

Mr Betts: The Minister's right hon. friend the Member for Norwich North raised it, and she was the Minister who took the Bill through Parliament, so it is worth taking seriously what she had to say.

The Minister did not tell us what problems the statement is meant to address. It would be helpful if he did so.
[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Mr Betts: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am just trying to encourage the Minister to be helpful to us. Obviously I am struggling in that regard.

Simon Hoare *rose—*

Mr Betts: Is the Minister now going to be helpful?

Simon Hoare: I am trying to be helpful. Read *Hansard*. I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question three times. If he neither understands nor can hear the answer, that is not my fault.

Mr Betts: The Minister is clearly trying to be helpful but not succeeding.

In the end, it comes back to the point that the Electoral Commission's priorities do not have to be the Government's priorities, and the Government have no right to direct the commission in its work. Again I ask: what problem is the motion designed to address? If the Minister cannot articulate what the problem is and how the statement will change the behaviour of the Electoral Commission, frankly every Member of this House is busy and has lots of things to do. Have we just wasted 90 minutes of our time, because in two years we will come back and find that today's motion had no impact? I rather hope that that is the case, because the other scenario would be that the Government are interfering in the Electoral Commission's work, which is the worse of the two ways of looking at this.

3.34 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I associate myself with everything he said, which allows me to cut short my speech; I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

When preparing for the debate, I took a little time to learn what the public think of the Electoral Commission. Some research was carried out, and the words most frequently used by voters to describe the commission were "independent", "important" and "professional". At a time in our politics when fake news, misinformation and artificial intelligence are seen as threats, and frankly are threats, to the security of our democracy—indeed, during Prime Minister's questions earlier we had Members spreading fake news about vaccines and things—should it not be a source of great pride for our country that the Electoral Commission is held in such high regard by voters, who rely on it to safeguard the independence of elections and of democracy itself?

Fairness and accountability in electoral regulation depend on a strong and independent regulator, which is what the Electoral Commission is. It fulfils the vital role of overseeing our elections and regulating political finance in the UK. The commission's independence is established in statute as a public body, independent of Government, and accountable to Parliament through the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, for which I am a spokesperson. I regularly attend the Chamber and answer questions from colleagues on both sides of the House about the commission's work. In a healthy modern democracy, we should seek compromise on matters of democracy and the regulation of elections, and not allow one party to set all the rules.

One party is in Government today, but there will have to be an election, and should another party form the next Government, they could author the next statement. We need to ensure that the structures that we agree as a House can withstand changes of political party in government. Political parties that are not represented in the House today might one day be elected to this House, and they might not value democracy as much as I know

all right hon. and hon. Members here today do. The structure that we are being asked to approve today comes straight out of a Republican party playbook of politicising the Electoral Commission. Those of us who see that as a threat do so because we look at what is going on in other countries and other democracies. We also look at what has been going on here through the various iterations of Conservative Governments over the past 14 years.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) set out some of this already, but it is worth reiterating that this is not a first offence. This is a Government who repealed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 to allow a Prime Minister to decide when the starting whistle can be blown on a general election. This is a Government who changed the way that electoral registration worked, moving from household registration to individual electoral registration, which meant that millions of people fell off the electoral roll—at which point, the Government decided to draw the new electoral boundaries using the numbers in that snapshot. By the way, those electoral boundaries were for 600 MPs, because at that point that number looked advantageous to the Conservative party. Then we had the 2019 general election and the picture looked a little different. It was then more electorally advantageous for the Conservative party to have 650 Members, so guess what happened? Yes, with absolutely no explanation, we went back to 650 Members.

The freedom to protest peacefully is important in a democracy, but it has been curtailed under this Government. The Elections Act 2022 contains a plethora of things that are damaging to the security and safety of our democracy. Voter ID has been widely discussed in this House, and it is true that it is easier for some voters to vote with photo ID than it is for others. A now ex-Minister slipped up and accidentally said what was actually happening, which is that an attempt to gerrymander in the Government's favour had suddenly been found not to be in their favour. Voter ID was an attempt to make voting harder for those who were not planning to vote Conservative and easier for those who were planning to vote Conservative, although it arguably backfired somewhat.

The Government are also changing the rules on who can vote, which is important, and this week we have seen changes that remove the 15-year limit on overseas voters. We now have a situation in which a person who has lived outside this country for 16 years can vote in UK general elections, but a 16-year-old who has lived in the UK all their life cannot vote in a UK general election. Who gets to vote is political.

This is the politicisation of the Electoral Commission. The Elections Act changed the electoral system for police and crime commissioners and Mayors to the party political advantage of the Conservative party. The general election spending threshold for political parties has been raised way above inflation, with absolutely no explanation other than that the Conservative party feels confident that it has the money to spend. Now we have a strategy and policy statement to direct the work of our independent commission. I will call it what it is. This is the politicisation of the independent Electoral Commission. All Members of this House who believe in the independence of our Electoral Commission would do well to cast their vote against this motion today, because the consequences will be far-ranging.

[Cat Smith]

The point of the Minister's statement, which he has now read out several times, is that any future Government may set the direction and policy priorities of the independent Electoral Commission. Let us keep politics out of the Electoral Commission by opposing this motion today.

3.40 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who made some excellent points. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as I too am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I rise to make a very short speech opposing the Government's motion and the Conservative party's efforts to undermine the elections watchdog. The last Labour Government set up the Electoral Commission to protect Britain's democracy through the independent regulation of free and fair elections. The commission's independence from Government of any shade must be crystal clear for voters and campaigners to see.

As a member of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission and, for the Minister's benefit, the Member of Parliament for Luton South, I have already shared my opposition to the Government's draft strategy and policy statement on the Electoral Commission. At a time when trust in our politics is low, Ministers using this statement to set a political agenda for the Electoral Commission is a dangerous act that undermines its independence. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) put that well, too.

Even on its own merits, the statement fails to explain why it is required in the first place, and it provides no further support for scrutiny of the commission's work. This begs the question: what is the point? As we know, there is cross-party agreement that the commission's independence is vital to the health of our democracy, and both the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Speaker's Committee have concluded that no statement is necessary.

The Electoral Commission has rightly pointed out that the repeal of the Government's power to designate a statement would improve confidence and trust in our electoral system. That begs another question: why did the Government introduce the strategy and policy statement power in the Elections Act? Perhaps if we put it in the context of a very unpopular, declining Conservative party that is out of ideas, it could be suggested that it is trying to assert an unfair influence on the rules of engagement at the next general election.

Alongside the strategy and policy statement power, the Elections Act also introduced repressive voter ID requirements—a solution to a non-existent problem—yet we are still waiting to see any action on, or prioritisation of, the real issues facing our democracy, such as disinformation and AI. There is no concerted plan to get under-represented groups and people turning 18 on to the electoral register. Will the Minister explain why?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood put it so well, we are seeing the alarming trend emerging of a Government tightening their grip on the delicate functioning of democracy. It seems that, with this statement, the Conservative party is purposefully

seeking to undermine public trust in order to serve its own interests. Perhaps the Minister can try again to convince us otherwise. Is it arrogance or weakness that is informing these decisions? In any event, the public are under no illusions and can see this for what it is.

Labour will continue to oppose all reckless acts that threaten to undermine our democracy, and Labour will fight for every vote in every part of the country. The only people who will be deciding Britain's future are the British public.

3.44 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I should say from the off that I would not allege that the Government want to achieve something untoward by the statement. I am not for a moment suggesting that they are seeking somehow to introduce this guidance for the Electoral Commission to gain a political advantage for the Conservative party.

However, perception matters. The Minister says that the statement is about resilient, open, transparent, secure, modern and fair democracy, but many of our constituents will ask, "What is wrong with the current system?" The fact is that nothing is wrong with the current system of the Electoral Commission reporting to the House, not to the Government.

I am surprised to have received considerable correspondence from constituents on this subject, which I had thought would be of little interest to people in Devon. Let me give the House an example of that correspondence:

"As your constituent, I am urging you to please consider voting against the draft Electoral Commission and Policy statement on Wednesday. No Government or political party should be able to have any say in the commission's strategy or policy."

The Electoral Commission exists to run elections. It seems obvious to me and my Liberal Democrat colleagues that the Electoral Commission needs not only to be impartial, but to be seen to be impartial. The concerns expressed by my constituents, and felt by my party, have also been highlighted by two Committees of this House: the cross-party Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, which is so ably chaired, and the Speaker's Committee, which has published its third report on the Electoral Commission of 2023. Those Committees have made it plain that we do not need this additional Government guidance to the Electoral Commission.

If that were not enough, the commission itself says that the Government having a strategy and policy statement is inconsistent with the independent role of the Electoral Commission. That is why I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues will vote against the statement.

3.46 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The Minister is better than this motion—let us all agree on that. Like the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), I think it is a hangover from the Boris Johnson days, when the Electoral Commission upset him and he wanted to influence it. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong.

The Government claim that this strategy will enhance the parliamentary accountability of the Electoral Commission and increase public confidence in its work, but as everybody has stated today, it will do the complete opposite. This strategy and policy statement is little

more than an attempt by the Government to undermine the independence of the Electoral Commission and to stamp their own agenda on the regulation of our democracy. This is a fight for our democracy.

We in this House need to take back control—that is important. Avoiding transparency and accountability seems to be the hallmark of the Government. Do not just take my word for it; the Electoral Commission itself wrote to MPs this week stressing that the principle of independence is crucial to maintaining confidence in our electoral system. It warned Members:

“The introduction of a mechanism such as a strategy and policy statement—by which a government can guide an electoral commission’s work—is inconsistent with this independent role.”

If the commission is saying that, and the Speaker’s Committee is saying it, why is the Minister trying to convince us otherwise? It really does not make any sense.

As we have heard many times, this is not the first time that the Government have attempted to rig our democracy. They forced through their voter ID system, which threatened to disenfranchise the most vulnerable in society. Remember that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) mentioned, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) let it slip that that was a deliberate attempt to manipulate electoral outcomes in favour of the Conservative party, and then went, “Whoops!” because he had made a mistake and said the quiet bit out loud. It is not a shock that the Government are once again attempting to influence an independent body that oversees our elections, but it should shock us all.

This draft strategy and policy statement sets out the Government’s strategic and policy priorities for the Electoral Commission. It also contains

“guidance to which the Commission must have regard in the discharge of its functions.”

That places on the commission a concerning legal duty to consider first and foremost the Government’s priorities when fulfilling its duties. If it does that, it cannot be independent, and the whole point is that it is supposed to be independent. It is simply unacceptable for the Government to direct the commission on how it should carry out its functions. If a foreign Government were wielding that much power over their elections, there would be calls to send in independent advisers to ensure that their elections were being held democratically—that is how bad this is. When people ask, “Do we have corruption in our Government?”, I say, “Yes, we do, and this is an example of that.”

The Government keep focusing on the prevention and detection of voter fraud, yet there is little evidence that voter fraud is widespread. In fact, it is so rare that there were only nine convictions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady talked about corruption in Government. I want her to withdraw that; she needs to rephrase what she said. She does know that—she is very experienced—so I ask her to say at this point that she withdraws any allegations of corruption within Government.

Dawn Butler: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I withdraw the statement that the Government are corrupt, or that there is corruption in the Government—I do not know for sure, but I withdraw that statement.

There are, however, issues that need tackling, and the motion does not achieve that. There are rising considerations, such as the threat of generative AI, the use of deepfakes, the spread of disinformation and the scraping of people’s data. None of that has been tackled today—I wonder why, although according to the fact checking organisation First Draft, 88% of the Conservative party’s most shared online adverts in the final days of the 2019 general election campaign were found to have contained misleading information.

When the Minister gets to his feet, I hope that he will change his mind, because he is respected across the House and this motion is going to damage his reputation. As I have said, I urge the House to take back control and reject the motion.

3.52 pm

Simon Hoare: First, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon. To address the last part of the speech made by the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), I have been very grateful to colleagues on the Opposition Benches who have said some rather nice and kind words about me personally. I will not press to a Division the question of whether I deserve those nice and kind words—I am not sure how my side of the House would vote.

I say this in all seriousness: I hope the House knows me well enough to know that if I thought the intentions that sit behind this statement, the Elections Act, or any of the statutory instruments that have flowed from that Act were what hon. Members have asserted they were, I would have tendered my resignation to the Prime Minister. As a democrat—as somebody who has stood in elections, who has lost and won elections, and who has served in this place, if only for eight and a half years—I can say that there is nothing malign or mission-creep in anything that we are discussing today. I am not expecting that sentiment to change the votes of Opposition Members, but I say it sincerely. A number of Members have asked where the statement came from. Its genesis is, of course, to be found in sections 4A to 4E of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, inserted by the Elections Act 2022—that is where it comes from.

I will try to address some of the comments that have been made. My shadow, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), said that there was a political agenda; there is not. We paid full regard to the submissions of consultees, and we took a different view from them. That is perfectly fine. It does not undermine the system, nor is it a dangerous politicisation of the commission.

I believe my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), a distinguished former elections Minister, was right when she referred to this as a reasonable vehicle. She asked about my discussions with the commission. I have had a very useful meeting with its senior team, at which we discussed a range of issues and how we can work together to support and buttress our democracy. Those conversations will continue. The statement is iterative and organic, and it can of course be refreshed to reflect issues and challenges as they arise in the field of AI, overseas involvement and so on. The House will notice that I use the word “as”—as they arise—not “if”.

[Simon Hoare]

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady)—I call him an hon. Friend because he is a friend—asked: where is the parliamentary sovereignty? When the Division bell rings, that is the exercise of Parliament's sovereignty, and he will vote accordingly.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), in an rather confusing way, said he thought the statement was wrong because it did not mandate the commission or tell it what to do, and then went on in almost the same breath to say how frightful it would be if the statement could do that. I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is proving to be, on this issue and on this issue alone, a little bit of a pushmi-pullyu, because the independence of the commission is absolutely safe and sacrosanct.

Let me read back into the record from the statement that the

“duty to have regard does not require the Commission to give lesser priority to, or to ignore, any of its other statutory duties. The Electoral Commissioners and the Commission's executive leadership will remain responsible for determining the Commission's strategy, priorities, how it should discharge its duties”,

and so on and so forth, within its five-year plan. The commission will not be reporting to me, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, No. 10 or the Cabinet Office. It will continue to report to Parliament through Mr Speaker's Committee, using the functions it has.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Hoare: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I will not, because the House has a lot of business today. Let me address the points that have been raised by others, because I want to give due attention to the points they have made.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) really should have a word with her own Front Benchers about overseas voters. Let me quote from her hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall on the statutory instrument we took upstairs on Wednesday 6 December 2023, when, from the Labour Front Bench, she told the Committee:

“We do not oppose the principle of overseas voting and giving citizens who still have a strong connection to the UK a voice in our elections, and that includes people who still have a strong connection to our local services and communities”.—[*Official Report, Eighth Delegated Legislation Committee*, 6 December 2023; c. 6.]

So the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood is entirely out of step with her hon. Friend on the Front Bench.

Cat Smith: I thank the Minister for giving way this time. I wish to object in that the Minister is very much misportraying the point I made in my remarks. The point I made is that it is a political decision to decide who gets to vote, and I was comparing 16-year-olds in the UK with someone who had lived outside the UK for 16 years. That was the point I raised, and I do not think it is at all inconsistent with those on my own party's Front Bench.

Simon Hoare: I heard the hon. Lady very clearly say that in principle she was opposed to overseas voters. If I misheard her, then I apologise, but that was certainly the thrust of the remarks she made.

The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) describes the statement as a political agenda. Is improving disabled access having a political agenda? If so, or if that is the charge, I am going to plead guilty. Is cracking down on electoral fraud? If that is the charge, clap me in irons. Is ensuring that the rules of registration and the importance of voter ID are promoted? If so, take me off to the Tower. I plead guilty as charged.

Mr Betts: The Minister rather misportrayed what I just said. I said that this statement either seeks to change how the Electoral Commission operates, in which case it is interference with an independent body, or does not seek to do that, in which case, what is the point of it?

Simon Hoare: The point, as I have consistently said, is to augment and buttress the work of the commission, and to give some reference tools in Parliament's assessment. I also want to take issue with the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood—again, I hope I heard her correctly—who prayed in aid the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, as if it was an ancient symbol of our democratic function that we have repealed. It sat for five years as a way of giving confidence to the markets that a coalition of two parties could deliver the clean-up strategy for what her party had left behind in 2010. So its repeal was not a dismantling of some great, permanent piece of our democratic architecture.

The hon. Member for Brent Central seemed to refer to this as a vendetta against the commission. Let me just invite her—[*Interruption.*] She referred to it as a vendetta—I wrote the word down. The record will say that she thought that Mr Johnson, as Prime Minister, was waging a vendetta against the commission because the commission had said something with which he disagreed; that was the word the hon. Lady used and I will play it back to her advisedly. I took a contemporaneous note of the word as she used it. Let me just invite her to consider that if we wished to wage a war against the commission, we could neuter it, fetter it, force it to report to us and we could abolish it, but we haven't and we won't. Why won't we, why aren't we? It is because we know that the commission is important, we respect its work, and we honour, cherish and guard its independence. We believe that this statement and the previous legislation that this House has put through will augment the accountability of the commission to Parliament and, in so doing, serve this as its sole and only purpose: to build on Parliament's and the public's confidence in its work. The commission was and is independent, and it will continue to be independent. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 273, Noes 190.

Division No. 69]

[4.2 pm]

AYES

Afriyie, Adam	Ansell, Caroline
Aiken, Nickie	Argar, rh Edward
Aldous, Peter	Atherton, Sarah
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Atkins, rh Victoria
Anderson, Lee	Bacon, Gareth
Anderson, Stuart	Bacon, Mr Richard (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Andrew, rh Stuart	

Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evnnett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Ruth Edwards and
Dame Amanda Milling

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary

Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen

Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid

Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy (*Proxy vote
cast by Ian Mearns*)
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, rh Rachel

Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
vote cast by Marion
Fellows*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Kim Leadbeater and
 Gerald Jones

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Electoral Commission Strategy and Policy Statement, which was laid before this House on 14 December 2023, be approved.

Social Security

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

The draft order will increase relevant state pension rates by 8.5%, in line with the growth in average earnings in the year to July 2023. It will also increase most other benefit rates by 6.7%, in line with the rise in the consumer prices index in the year to September 2023. Subject to parliamentary approval, the changes will take effect from 8 April and will apply for the tax year 2024-25. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. May I ask those not participating in the debate to leave quietly? It is difficult to hear the Minister.

Paul Maynard: The Government's commitment—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, I have just been asked to clarify that you are moving motion 3 on social security.

Paul Maynard: Yes, that is the one I am talking about.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you for clarifying that.

Paul Maynard: For the information of the House, this order covers state pensions. Motion 4 covers the guaranteed minimum pension, which is a sub-element of the pensions issue. As I will explain, the different elements—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can I clarify whether we are taking motion 3 on social security and motion 4 in one debate, or will we scrutinise the orders separately? It would be helpful for the House to have clarity on exactly what is happening.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We are debating motion 3 on social security. We will then debate motion 4 on pensions.

David Linden: Two debates or one debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Two separate debates.

Paul Maynard: Indeed, a few days ago I was asking those questions about whether to take the motions separately or together. They are being taken separately.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very relieved that we are getting a proper uprating this year, but the current headline rate of benefits is the lowest it has been in real terms for 40 years. Why have Ministers set benefits at a level so much lower in real terms than was chosen by Margaret Thatcher, Peter Lilley, John Major or Norman Fowler? Why is it so much lower?

Paul Maynard: There is always a lively debate about the adequacy of the overall benefits system. I think Beveridge had the debate under the Labour Government in 1945 on how to understand the concept of adequacy within the benefit system. What we are doing is ensuring that the purchasing power of benefits is maintained and that we are adhering to the triple lock. The right hon. Gentleman's intervention allows me to restate, I think for the fifth time, the Government's commitment to the triple lock, meaning that the basic and state pension will be uprated by the highest of growth in earnings or in prices, or by 2.5%.

This year that will mean an 8.5% rise from 2024-25, taking the basic state pension from £156.20 to £169.50 a week, and the full rate of the new state pension from £203.85 to £221.20 a week. Additional state pensions, such as the state earnings-related pension schemes and protected payments of the new state pension, will rise by 6.7%. The Government are committed to supporting pensioners on the lowest incomes, and accordingly the safety net provided by the pension credit standard minimum guarantee will increase by 8.5%. For single pensioners it will increase by £201.05 to £218.15, and for couples it will increase from £306.85 to £332.95 per week.

When it comes to support for those in the labour market, such as universal credit and the means-tested benefits it replaces, there is always a need to take into account work incentives as well as financial support for those in low-paid work, who are looking for work or who are unable to work. The Government announced a range of employment and conditionality measures at the autumn statement to maintain and improve work incentives. However, in striking a balance it is also right to increase the rate of those benefits by 6.7%, in line with the increase in CPI in the year to September 2023. That 6.7% increase means that universal credit will retain its purchasing power in the broader context of the Prime Minister's delivered commitment to halving the rate of inflation.

The Government remain mindful of work incentives in the benefit system, and accordingly this order also increases the universal credit work allowance by 6.7%. They will increase from £379 to £404 per month for those also receiving support with housing costs, and from £631 to £673 per month for those not receiving support with housing costs. That 6.7% increase will also apply to the rates for contributory jobseeker's allowance, contributory employment and support allowance, additional needs disability benefits such as the personal independence payment, carer's allowance and statutory payments such as statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay and statutory sick pay.

The draft order, if Parliament approves it, commits the Government to increased expenditure of £19 billion in 2024-25. We believe it is right to make such a commitment because it maintains the triple lock, which benefits both pensioners already in receipt of the basic and new state pensions and younger people who are building up future entitlements as a foundation for private saving. It raises the level of the safety net in pension credit beyond the increase in prices and is part of a package of support for those in the labour market, which protects the value of benefits at a time of high, if falling, inflation while maintaining and increasing work incentives.

[Paul Maynard]

The draft order maintains the purchasing power of benefits to help with additional costs arising from disability. It also provides protection against inflation for people who are currently unable to participate in the labour market, such as full-time carers, who provide such an essential service to those they care for. On that basis, I commend this order to the House.

4.23 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for clarifying the way we are taking these orders today. We welcome the social security uprating, because we want to see social security keep pace with prices, particularly at a time of spiking inflation and economic instability. However, it is worth pointing out that before 2010, uprating in the manner we are doing it today was the norm for both Labour and Conservative Governments, but the past decade and a half has seen a change, and a variable approach to uprating from this Government. The debate about uprating has become almost farcical. Year by year there is speculation—I presume from some part of Government—that the uprating that was standard year in, year out under previous Governments may or may not happen.

That speculation does not come out of thin air. It causes immense amounts of distress and worry for people. It is almost as though there has to be a campaign for the status quo, which is not acceptable. I wonder why we are in what seems to be a policy roundabout where every time we have this debate about uprating, only for the Government to do it. That is a problematic way to do what is a normal function of social security: to keep pace with the cost of living.

We have to be honest about the reality of the situation we face. We have had universal credit for a decade or more, and I have been in this House long enough to have heard promise after promise that it would radically improve people's work incentives, and that people's position in life would be made much better by universal credit reforms. The DWP has many talented civil servants, who I am sure have worked hard to try to make the customer service elements function better, but we have to look at reality: 400,000 more children are now in poverty than when Labour left office in 2010. That is not acceptable to me.

Most people in poverty today are in work, so the idea that we hear again and again in this Chamber, that the best route out of poverty is work, is simply not true. Two thirds of children in poverty live in a house where someone goes out to work. I would like the Government to recognise that fact. We have had a decade and a half of so-called reform, and all we have done is get back to the situation where children are growing up dealing with the stress of not having enough money in the family home to give them a proper childhood. That is not acceptable. We see the consequences of a decade and a half of Tory rule all around us, whether the food bank parcels in the school office, the nurses who do a 12-hour shift but cannot make ends meet or, in the worst case, the man curled up in a sleeping bag in Westminster tube station as we leave this House. We see the consequences of Conservative Government all around us.

Labour has a plan to get people a better life, able to make ends meet and with a good start for their children. We will ensure that there is a breakfast club in every

primary school. We will help people have access to cheaper energy and an insulated home, to deal with the spike in costs that people have faced in recent years. We will reform universal credit, jobcentres and employment support to ensure that people get a better job with better pay, to help them live their life properly and save money for the Treasury. We will have a child poverty strategy that will overhaul universal credit.

On social security, I simply say this: we need an end to the uprating roundabout. We are simply asking for consistency of approach so that, as in previous decades under Governments of all kinds, we have the proper uprating of social security without the constant speculation from wherever it is in the Conservative Government that, somehow, ordinary working people must pay the price of the Government's economic chaos. That is not fair. Let us end the chaos and have proper, normal uprating in the usual way.

4.29 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the rises in benefits and the state pension. It would have been unthinkable not to raise benefits by inflation and equally unthinkable not to increase the state pension in line with the triple lock. The Government have done the right thing—these are the right decisions—and I will happily support these orders in the unlikely event of a Division.

I agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), that this is not the most exciting piece of parliamentary theatre, even though we are spending tens of billions through these orders. The House is empty, these instruments go through on the nod, we cannot amend them, and the whole process creates a load of uncertainty for people who have to live on these benefits. I agree that, if we are going to find the money to put these benefits up—quite rightly by the two highest amounts in my 14 years in this place and probably going back a lot further—let us just change the process and have a default increase by CPI and in line with the triple lock so that we do not have to go through all this uncertainty. In what scenario now are we not going to increase benefits and the state pension by CPI or the triple lock?

If any future Government want to do something different, they could just bring in a Bill, as George Osborne did in the early years of the coalition. The House would be required to give its assent to that change, but we would not have to go through the uncertainty and the annual campaign to get to where we all think we are going to get to anyway, which does not help anybody. It would spare the Minister this afternoon's excitement and the confusion of what is in which of these orders, which he might appreciate. I will leave that one for the Minister and see whether he is remotely tempted by it.

With the crazy process we currently have, we have come to the right answer, but I still do not really believe that we are in a sensible position. We have to use September's inflation for an April increase in benefits, and we have to have an uprating order quite a while after the Chancellor has announced it in the Budget. The Work and Pensions Committee recommended that the Government bring these orders before the House earlier than February, so I commend the Government—we are still in January. I suppose that is positive progress, although I do not quite know why we could not have done this in November, to get that certainty.

I hope, as the years go by, one year we will get some good news, and the Minister will say, “We have so many people on universal credit who we know we can uprate far more quickly, but actually we can use a much later inflation number because the amount of manual processing we have to do for the old benefits is much less of a work demand than it used to be.” We could then move to using December’s inflation figure to bring the benefit increase much nearer the actual cost of living and avoid the horrible situation we have currently where we are effectively six months behind, and, in the meantime, there has been a huge spike and people cannot afford to pay their bills. Perhaps the Minister could update the House on whether we are any nearer the prospect of a slightly more sensible process where we are not using out-of-date information to give people a rise in benefits that is already six months old, which exposes a load of risk in that situation.

There is also a lot of noise about the triple lock being unsustainable and suggestions that we will have to get rid of it because we cannot afford to give pensioners that level of increase. I cannot think of any justification for ever giving people who are reliant on a state pension and who have no possibility of going back to work an increase of less than inflation; it would be an intolerable situation to put people in. I think we have established over many long and painful years that giving pensioners less than earnings is not a very attractive position. We had that for a while, before the coalition Government quite rightly reversed it as one of the first things we did when we came to power 14 years ago.

I do not know why we have to have speculation around the idea of taking away the link to inflation or earnings—it is utterly impossible. I suppose we all wish that the 2.5% was a relevant consideration for us, but it looks like it might be a few years before we have to worry about that part of the triple lock kicking in. The problem is that the rise in earnings and the rise of inflation have got out of step and are in two different financial years. We are therefore effectively giving that increase twice, because we give it on inflation in year one, and then, when pay rises catch up in year two, we end up giving it again, and we have accidentally given a much higher amount over a period than either inflation or earnings. If that is what risks the long-term future of the triple lock, does the Minister think that a rolling two-year or three-year average would fix that? If that is the price of making the triple lock safe in the long term, I would pay it. I would not choose it, but if that stops the uncertainty over the whole thing being affordable, it would be better. Perhaps the Minister could help us with a better process for future years.

I fully support these orders and I will happily vote for them in the unlikely event that we get to a vote.

4.34 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), a fellow member of the Work and Pensions Committee.

I stand here with a somewhat renewed sense of frustration following the release of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s “UK Poverty 2024” report, which I will refer to throughout the course of my contribution. I find myself again speaking in this Parliament against a backdrop of a truly dire situation characterised by destitution. I wonder

what more can be said or done to make the British Government realise the true extent of the hardship they have inflicted on people across these islands. The SNP will not oppose the orders for 2024-25, but to keep it plain and simple: the damage has already been done. No amount of uprating will address the long-term consequences of entrenched destitution inflicted on households as a result of the British Government, who, I would argue, have been asleep at the wheel now for 14 years.

Although the Government’s announcement to uprate social security benefits means that shortfalls should not increase any further this year, the orders still fail to undo any of the cumulative impact of years of cuts to social security that households across these islands have endured. While the British Government have been asleep at the wheel, people across the country have been kept awake at night due to the sheer amount of stress and anxiety, wondering how they will feed themselves and their families, and how they can afford—they often cannot afford them—the essentials. We are faced with an horrendous picture, but that is the stark reality of living with this Westminster Government. Young children, school children, pensioners, young adults, those in and out of work—no one is left unscathed when they have the misfortune of interacting with the UK’s social security system.

As the Minister comes back to the Dispatch Box, I am sure full of civil service-inspired lines that do not meet the reality outside Whitehall, we are faced with a cold hard truth from which we cannot escape: people are suffering, and will only continue to suffer as long as this Government refuse to fix the known policy issues, on which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) will elaborate.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We are debating what is supposed to be an adequate payment for social security. The Government’s case is completely weakened, is it not, by the ridiculous system of loans and reductions? My hon. Friend’s constituents in Glasgow East and mine in Glasgow South West are, on average, having their universal credit payments deducted by £60 a month because of this ridiculous system.

David Linden: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is an assiduous questioner of the Government through Work and Pensions questions on the issue of debt and deductions. He is right to cite the figures in Glasgow, which are well known—local citizens advice bureaux all over our constituencies refer to them—but of course, we are not the only Members whose constituents are impacted by the debt and deductions policy of this Government, which is often found wanting. If the Minister could touch on debt and deductions when he sums up, that would be helpful.

In a Westminster Hall debate I held three weeks ago on the cost of living crisis, I compared the UK’s social security system, which used to be hailed as a safety net for those who needed it, to something that now resembles nothing more than a frayed rope, unable to bear the weight of the individuals who rely on it as a lifeline. After reading the new report and statistics produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, I have never been more assured in my assessment of the state of the social security policies enforced by this Westminster Government.

[David Linden]

The JRF report outlines that more than one in five people in the UK were in poverty in 2021-22. That is 14.4 million people, 4.2 million of whom were children and 2.1 million were pensioners. Just as the statistics from Save the Children and Age Scotland show—I will outline them shortly—the JRF report has to be a wake-up call for this Government, and indeed the Government who may follow, if we are to make any tangible change to the broken system that lies before us. In its report, the graph that illustrates the percentage of people in poverty is broken down into the following categories: in poverty, but not in deep poverty; in deep poverty, but not in very deep poverty; and, in very deep poverty. I must be honest: I find it completely surreal that we have reached a point at which statistical analysis has to be broken down into such categories to illustrate the situation that people are having to endure. It is utterly shameful that such categories even have to exist in one of the richest countries on the planet.

I understand that to Members who are present today I seem frustrated, but that is because I am. The statistics in this report are not just numbers; they are the very reality of people in the communities that I represent, such as Parkhead and Shettleston, and those, such as Mosspark or Cardonald, that are represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West. They are truly harrowing findings.

I want to say something about universal credit, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). This policy is failing the very people whom it is, in theory, supposed to support: rather than supporting them, it drives destitution and food bank usage. It has been reported that 68% of people referred to a Trussell Trust food bank in Scotland who are in receipt of universal credit have money automatically deducted from their payments to repay debts, such as a DWP advance—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West. Moreover, food banks in the Trussell Trust network distributed about 3 million emergency food parcels across the UK in 2022-23, more than 1 million of which were for children.

The Government also refuse to scrap abhorrent policies such as the two-child cap and the associated rape clause. The DWP's own figures show that in April last year, 1.5 million children were affected by the two-child limit—and I say that in the context of those 1 million children who were in receipt of food parcels. This is in addition to data from Save the Children, which found that 60% of households affected by the two-child cap included at least one adult in paid employment. No doubt the Minister will stand up and say that the two-child cap is about making sure that people get into work, but the fact is that it has an impact on people who are already in work. Punitive sanctions, deductions, the two-child limit and the five-week wait are all defining characteristics that are inherent in this British Government's social security system—policies that have caused, and continue to cause, hardship to so many.

Although I could stand here and generate endless amounts of research and statistics for the Minister, my plea is simple. Social security does not have to be done this way: we do not have to continue down this road of sanctions, deductions, rape clauses and five-week waits.

It is an undeniable fact that the Scottish Government cannot make any tangible change to these policies while 85% of welfare expenditure and income-related benefits remains reserved to the Government here in Westminster. For every step forward that the Scottish Government try to make, Westminster drags us back two.

The Scottish Government desperately need the opportunity to create a system, one designed to tackle poverty actively and empower those who interact with the system, without one hand being tied behind their back. When we have had the power to do so, we have introduced game-changing policies, such as the Scottish child payment. Analysis shows that the Scottish child payment could lift up to 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2023-24, which is because the Scottish Government choose to prioritise that. Child poverty rates in Scotland sit at 24%, which is still far too high, but they should be seen in the context of the 31% rate in England and the 28% rate in Wales. That is likely to be due, at least in part, to the Scottish child payment.

Fundamentally, it is a political choice to lift children out of poverty. If this Westminster Government are unwilling to make that choice, I simply ask them to hand over the reins of power to the Scottish Government, who are more than willing, and certainly ready, to implement a system that will allow people to thrive rather than being punished for their circumstances. Until that happens, the Scottish Government are left fighting an uphill battle against a Westminster social security system that is broken beyond repair. Again, I am left wondering how different things might be if Scotland were able to take all the legislative and fiscal responsibility for these issues through the normal powers of independence.

Whether it is the British Government's cruel sanctions regime or their refusal to fix known policy failures that only push people further into hardship, we are seeing what will sadly be one of the defining legacies of this Tory Government. As a result, poverty no longer just exists within our society. It is deepening, it is ingrained, and it is causing insurmountable pain to people right across these islands. As we are faced with the reality of more food parcels than ever being delivered through the Trussell Trust networks and shockingly high levels of child poverty, the only conclusion I can draw is that these are all signs of a Government, and indeed a Union, that the people in Scotland must escape if they are to have any hope of a fair and prosperous future.

4.45 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I start by welcoming the uprating order, including the uprating of the local housing allowance, which has been frozen for over 10 years now. That is a significant move forward, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said, we need to recognise the context in which this apparently positive uprating is being brought in. We need to look at what has happened since 2010, particularly the various cuts and freezes to working-age support over the past 14 years.

I was going through some figures just before the debate started, and I noted that between 2010 and 2012, the uprating was about 1.5%; between 2012 and 2016, it was 1% a year, and between 2016 and 2020 it was zero. Of course, the average annual CPI increase for each of

those years was about 3%. That is the context. There has been a steady and consistent erosion in the value of social security, and this has affected universal credit, jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit, child tax credits, working tax credits and child benefits.

The Resolution Foundation estimated at the time that this was the equivalent of a cut of over £20 billion a year. That is £20 billion a year taken out of the support for working-age people. What is not well understood is that these are predominantly people in low-paid work; yes, a small proportion of people are on unemployment support or in long-term unemployment, but they are a tiny fraction of the population. This is predominantly support for people in low-paid work.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), a fellow member of the Select Committee, mentioned the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2024" report. I invite people to read it, and if they cannot read the whole document, they should read the summary. It is absolutely shocking. The headlines are that levels of relative poverty now are equivalent to those we had before the pandemic. The Government prefer to talk about absolute poverty because that is to their advantage, but in terms of relative poverty, we are back to where we were before the pandemic. So that everyone understands, what happened during the pandemic—who was affected, where was affected—reflected that poverty; those inequalities drove who was going to get ill. They drove what happened during the pandemic, and now we are back there, not having learned very much.

There are 14.5 million people living in relative poverty, of whom 6 million are in deep poverty. Deep poverty describes people who are living on less than 40% of median income. My fellow Select Committee member mentioned another level below that: very deep poverty. That is even worse poverty. The average income of somebody in very deep poverty is 59% below what we recognise as the relative poverty level. How on earth can we think that is acceptable in this country? We heard last year about the increase in destitution, which is another category altogether. There is deep poverty, very deep poverty and—the worst of the worst—destitution. The number of people in destitution has doubled, meaning there are 3.8 million people who cannot afford to meet their basic physical needs to stay warm, dry and clean, and to feed themselves.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South talked about the children in the families who are affected. For every 1% increase in child poverty, 5.8 extra children out of 100,000 live births—I apologise for the fractions—will not reach their first birthday. That is the consequence of poverty. For those who survive, poverty affects every aspect of their development, including how their brains are wired, how they will develop and their attainment at school. It is a disgrace that we have such levels of poverty in this country.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): We have this debate every year and it becomes increasingly distressing. For me, one of the most distressing statistics this year is the European comparison of growth rates: the height of children in this country is now falling behind the height of children in Europe. What does that mean? That is not a cosmetic issue, but one that concerns the health of the child and their ability to flourish.

Debbie Abrahams: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point, which I will come on to.

We have talked about children, but disabled people are another cohort who have been punished over the last 14 years. Again, that is disgraceful—I apologise for repeating the same phrases, but I cannot think of adequate vocabulary to express my rage about what is happening in different terms. Ethnic minority communities are also disproportionately affected.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a deeply important speech. Does she agree that it is also important to consider the effect poor-quality housing has on all the groups she mentions, in particular the combination of poverty and poor-quality housing, which leads to actions such as parents turning heating down?

Debbie Abrahams: That is a very good point. The Department for Work and Pensions has the largest spending across Government. The state pension accounts for the largest part of the Department's spending, followed by universal credit, but third on the list is housing benefit and the support provided through the housing element of universal credit. Given that the Government are investing a large amount of taxpayers' money in housing, one would think there was some way to safeguard its quality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South made important points about the escalation in the use of food banks. As I have said before, we did not have a food bank in Oldham before 2010; we now have several to meet the need. We are aware of the impact of poverty on the labour market, which I know is of interest to the Minister. We need a healthy labour market to be able to provide the growth we all want to see across the country, but, again, all the evidence suggests that will not happen for the reasons set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

This is becoming an increasingly unhealthy country. Our healthy life expectancy is declining and our life expectancy is declining, and that has been happening since 2017. At the time, Professor Sir Michael Marmot warned what the consequences would be, and he was right. In the report that he produced at the beginning of the year—I asked the Prime Minister a question about this just last week—he said that

"if everyone had the good health of the least deprived 10% of the population there would have been 1 million fewer deaths in England in the period 2012 to 2019. Of these, 148,000 can be linked to austerity"—

directly linked to austerity.

"In 2020, the first year of the covid pandemic, there were a further 28,000 deaths"

that could have been prevented. Those are the consequences of the poverty and inequality that we have in this country.

The Select Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the adequacy of social security support. With that in mind, I once more commend the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust, which have put together some interesting recommendations on the essentials guarantee. They suggest that what we provide should be based on need rather than on some quite subjective view of what the level of support should be. I hope the Work and Pensions Committee can support some aspect of that. Finally, I will just mention that £120 per week

[Debbie Abrahams]

for a single person, instead of the £70 currently, would be a good step in the right direction. Thank you for your latitude, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.56 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Given the number of us in the Chamber, I do not think that this will be an afternoon of high drama. I, like others, do not intend to divide the House on the motion before us.

The Government made their decision on uprating last year. Pensioners around the country let out a collective sigh of relief that the triple lock had been kept. No one here today will vote down either this or the next statutory instrument. Clearly, we on the Opposition Benches would like the measures to go further, but we know that the harm from torpedoing them would be catastrophic, because it would prevent the proposed increases from taking place. None the less, as the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) said, there are different ways of doing this, and given that we have this opportunity to speak today, I will do so to allow the Minister to get a feel for the mood of the House—how we feel the Government are performing in this area, and, more importantly in an election year, how our constituents feel that they are performing.

It is quite clear that the outcomes of Government policy are hard to swallow. What we are seeing is women dying as they fight for compensation because of the Government's maladministration of their state pensions, and that is clearly not acceptable. We see pensioners going hungry and risking illness because they cannot afford to either eat or stay warm, and that is not acceptable. I raised a number of these issues relating to pensioner poverty in my recent Adjournment debate, and I look forward to meeting the Minister, as was promised, to discuss some of them. As Members have already said, we know that one in three children are living in poverty, and that is not acceptable.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the report card is in, and it is a fail. Record numbers of families are relying on emergency food parcels. In April to September last year, 320,000 people turned to a food bank for the first time. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's essentials guarantee. I find it interesting that we are here debating how much the uprating to benefits is, but we never seem to debate what is the correct amount in the first place that can allow people to live in dignity and obtain their essentials. Perhaps if people had that certainty, they would be better placed to improve their health and often their employment opportunities.

Incidentally, the Trussell Trust is on the estate today—indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think I saw you at the meeting—and I hope the Minister has had the time to visit its staff in the Churchill Room to hear directly from them. The Minister and I have worked together on the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks and our inquiry report into cash or food. There today I learned my own statistics for North East Fife. I have one main Trussell Trust food bank, in Cupar, which until recently was ably run by Joe Preece—he

has just stepped down after a number of years in charge. Those statistics showed me that there has been a 25% increase in the use of the Cupar food bank since 2018. That is before covid; the Government give lots of reasons about people experiencing pressures due to the cost of living but we all know in this place that food bank use was increasing long before covid came along.

Child poverty costs the Government £39 billion each year through immediate additional public services and the delayed costs associated with the higher risk of unemployment in adults who grew up in poverty. That £39 billion per year is a huge amount of what is to some extent avoidable spending, and I find it hard to believe that we could find a voter who thought that letting a child live in poverty was acceptable if we could avoid it. Even if we could find that voter, I am pretty sure they would be horrified by the amount it is costing them, the taxpayer, to effectively do nothing. So I put it to the Minister and the Government that they are shooting themselves in the foot by uprating benefits with inflation while keeping the two-child limit and freezing the benefit cap. The Minister might say in his closing remarks that the cap was increased last year but that is disingenuous because it had been frozen since 2016, when it was actually lowered. Last year's uprating was vital but totally insufficient in ending poverty.

When I was elected in December 2019 some 41,000 families across the UK were subject to the benefit cap and now there are over 75,000. The drop in numbers from the uprating last April will quickly vanish if the cap is frozen for another seven years. Indeed, these are the two policies which, if changed, would be the most effective and efficient means of lifting hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty. I do not know for how long the Minister will be in his current position—we do not know when the general election will be this year and the change that might bring—but what a legacy it would be to take hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty. I hope he agrees with me on that.

It would not be a DWP debate for me without raising the issue of unpaid carers and in particular carer's allowance. Following this uprating, carer's allowance will be £81.90 each week, claimable by the 1.3 million carers who do 35 hours of unpaid care each week—full-time work. That is just £15.75 per week more than when I was elected four years ago—for each hour of cooking, cleaning, bathing, appointments, admin and worrying, an extra 45p. So yes I am bringing it up again.

I am looking forward to meeting the Chief Treasury to the Secretary next month to discuss carer's allowance, particularly the much-needed reforms of it, because I believe that carer's allowance creates barriers to work. Almost half of carers receiving carer's allowance report that they are struggling to make ends meet, and if they are struggling, the people they are caring for are struggling too.

I am going to end with a local gripe. Yesterday I received a letter from the DWP north-east Scotland service leader. This followed from the Department's written statement six days ago about starting the next phase of the transition to universal credit. The letter was dated seven days ago and it told me that the move to universal credit expansion into North East Fife had been moved forward, to nine days ago—two days before the letter was written, three before the announcement was made by the Government, and over a week before

I was actually told. MPs rely on timely communications to be able to do our job, to scrutinise Government activity and to support our constituents. I very much hope that that was a one-off error but I raise it here in the hope that future errors can be prevented.

These orders are a technical necessity, but when we look past that—when we look past the different ways of calculating inflation and the actuarial arguments—what we are talking about is what kind of society we want to live in. During covid many found out for the first time about the inadequacies of our social security system and for those remaining on it, it remains deeply inadequate.

5.3 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I cannot better what the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said about poverty in this country and we should reflect on that if we are passing social security uprating orders because the levels of poverty are an utter disgrace. One has only to spend a short time in a food bank anywhere across the country to realise the desperation of many people who are prepared to queue, often for a very long time, just to get a few packets of pasta to keep their family together for another week. The numbers accessing food banks are going up all the time. People are increasingly going to community centres to try to get food that has been donated by others. The level of poverty is huge.

I will bring two specific areas to the House's attention. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) just talked about the first: the two-child benefit policy, which limits universal credit to claimants' first two children. Like all Members, I have many constituents who are part of large families. The Somali community, the Haredi Jewish community, the Congolese community, the Bengali community and a number of others often have quite large families. Is there anything morally right in saying that the third, fourth, fifth or sixth child in a family is less valuable than the first or second? Can anyone justify that? I do not believe that they can, yet the policy persists.

The cost of changing the policy would be £1.3 billion. That might sound like a lot. It does not sound very much compared with overall Government expenditure, nor compared with the benefits that it would bring in lifting a lot of children and families out of poverty. At the moment, around 1.3 million children are affected. They come from around 400,000 households. *[Interruption.]* Is the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) trying to intervene?

David Linden: No, I was just enjoying the right hon. Member's speech.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member was looking with interest. I am grateful to him for that, and for what he said.

I hope that as a result of this debate the Minister will seriously examine the poverty created by the two-child policy, and that all parties in this House will recognise that we ill serve the community if we deliberately discriminate against children in large families. Children living in poverty are less likely to achieve their full potential in school, and the jobs and careers that they want. As a result, we all lose. We all lose out on their talents

because we disregarded their needs when they were at their most desperate. I hope that the Minister will recognise that.

Secondly, the uprating order includes an increase in housing benefit in line with the rate of inflation that is applicable. The problem is that in constituencies such as mine, where a third of the population live in the private rented sector, housing benefit never quite catches up with the increase in rents imposed by private sector landlords. It is not just a London problem; it exists in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle—all over the country. Yes, local housing allowance is being increased in line with a perception of what the affordable rent level is within the community, but it never quite catches up.

A friend of mine was helping somebody to find a flat locally. They spent days trawling through agents, and all the other places one goes to try to find a flat. They found fewer than half a dozen flats available to rent within the local housing allowance. In lots of inner urban areas, having neither rent controls nor a sufficient level of housing benefit or local housing allowance effectively leads to an expulsion of the poorest from those communities. We need to come back to that and introduce private sector rent controls, and we need a local housing allowance that is realistic and meets people's housing costs. Otherwise, it is often the poorest and largest families who get shifted from one private rented sector flat to another, thus damaging those children's education and life chances.

If we are to live in a society where we are proud of our welfare state, the welfare state has to work for the poorest in our community. At the moment, frankly, it does not.

5.9 pm

Paul Maynard: I thank everyone who has participated in this debate. I am very disappointed in the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who seems to think that I do not write my own material. He should know that my private office staff are sitting in trepidation, as I write across every speech they give me in blue and red ink. They never know what will emerge from my mouth. I can assure him that it is all my own work, and he can criticise it all the more for that reason.

I am also disappointed that people think this order is just a technical necessity. I do not call £19 billion of Government spending a technical necessity. It is one of the largest amounts of extra spending in which the Government engage in any particular year, and it will make a considerable difference to the lives of people across the country.

Alison McGovern: Do you want a round of applause?

Paul Maynard: No, I certainly do not, but I would want to think that those of us in this Chamber did not dismiss the order as a technical measure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) repeated a point that I think he made this time last year—I also made this point when I was sitting in the far corner of the Chamber as a Back Bencher—on the timely application of these measures and whether we ought to make them more promptly after inflation is measured. As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, he will know that this issue is often discussed,

[Paul Maynard]

with the discussion often revolving around the robustness of universal credit's IT system compared with the IT systems for legacy benefits. I am told the hopefully promising news that state pension benefits, in particular, will be moving to a more modern IT platform by 2025, followed by disability benefits, contributory benefits and carer's allowance, so there is a pathway towards getting all our benefits on to modern IT systems that are more agile in responding to economic situations. I hear his point, and work is under way.

The hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) both talked about the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and I am a great admirer of its work. As a Back Bencher, I sat on many Zoom meetings and Teams meetings to listen to its briefings. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and I have discussed the essentials guarantee many times, so I take a personal interest in what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says. Since the period covered by its report, the Government have provided over £104 billion of extra support to help households with the high cost of living. Although I understand that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation will stick to the broad themes of its argument, we need to recognise that Government support has moved on.

I do not want to pre-empt the meeting of the hon. Member for North East Fife with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, which I hope will bring better news than I am able to deliver from the Dispatch Box. I have heard about her letter. My favourite episode of "Fawlty Towers" is "Communication Problems", which is a comic classic, and the tale she tells is such an example. I am sure my officials have made a note, and we will hopefully follow up with a clarifying letter.

Finally, I turn to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). Not being the Minister in charge of local housing allowance, I am a little cautious about giving him a more definitive answer at this stage—*[Interruption.]* Nothing annoys me more than when other Ministers intrude on my brief without telling me, so it is a courtesy to them, nothing more.

The draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order will increase the state pension by 8.5%, in line with the rise in average earnings, and it will increase most other benefit rates by 6.7%, in line with the rise in consumer prices. These changes commit the Government to increased expenditure of £19 billion in 2024-25. They maintain the triple lock, protect pensioners on the lowest incomes and support those in the labour market, while maintaining work incentives and protecting the value of benefits for those who cannot work and who have additional disability needs.

I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Pensions

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): I beg to move,

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

I feel almost like a Netflix series, in that people can now binge-watch two episodes of me in a row. I hope none the less that this matter is worth equal consideration.

The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order sets out the yearly amount by which a guaranteed minimum pension part of an individual's contracted-out occupational pension earned between April 1988 and April 1997 must be increased. Occupational pension schemes are required to increase GMPs that were earned during that period and are in payment by 3% for the 2024-25 financial year.

As this is quite a technical matter, I will provide a little background information on GMPs, and what they are and are not. GMPs were created to help make occupational pension provision more affordable and more secure. As many Members present will be aware, the state pension used to be made up of two parts: the flat-rate basic state pension and the earnings-related additional state pension. The flat-rate state pension was funded through the national insurance scheme, and paid the full rate to those with sufficient qualifying years of NI contributions, or pro rata to those with a partial record. The second part of the state pension, the earnings-related additional state pension, was linked to a person's earnings. The national insurance contributions paid by both the employee and their employer gave the employee the right to an additional earnings-related state pension. That was designed to ensure that as many workers as possible were able to save for their retirement through a work-based pension.

However, many employers already offered their workers a company pension through their own scheme, so many people were already building up an occupational pension, and an earnings-related additional state pension in effect replicated that provision. That was considered onerous and potentially unaffordable for both employers and employees. It was seen as double provision and over-complicated. In order to simplify the situation, the Government of the day introduced in 1978 the system of contracting out, and the provision of guaranteed minimum pensions, which are the subject of this order.

Between April 1978 and April 1997, employers sponsoring a salary-related occupational pensions scheme could "contract out" their occupational pension schemes from the earnings-related additional state pension. People who were members of a contracted-out scheme were taken out of the additional state pension, so as a result both the employer and the pension scheme member paid lower-rate national insurance contributions. In return, salary-related contracted-out occupational pension schemes were required to take on the responsibility for paying their members a guaranteed minimum pension as a part of their occupational pension from the scheme.

The guaranteed minimum pension that the member built up in the scheme would be broadly equivalent in value to the additional state pension that they would have received had they stayed in the state system. The majority of employees would also have built up an

occupational pension over and above the guaranteed minimum pension amount, but the scheme pension could never be lower than that guaranteed minimum. The crux of the idea was that, rather than paying additional national insurance to the state in order to build up an additional state pension, people could build up a similar amount of occupational pension through a workplace pension scheme. The system ran in that way from 1978 to 1997. Having set out the detail, which I accept is complicated, let me turn to the order before us.

The order provides a measure of inflation protection for the guaranteed minimum pension part of an occasional pension built up between April 1988 and April 1997. Legislation stipulates that, when there has been an increase in the annual level of prices as measured the previous September, the order must increase the guaranteed minimum pension part of the occupational pension by that percentage or 3%, whichever is lower. As the September 2023 figure was 6.7%, the increase for the financial year 2024-25 will be 3%. The cap of 3% aims to achieve a balance between providing some measure of protection against inflation for members and, crucially, not increasing schemes' costs beyond what they can generally afford, in order to avoid undermining the viability of some schemes and seeing them go into the Pension Protection Fund.

An obvious question comes to mind: what happens when inflation is above 3%, as it is currently? Most members who reached the state pension age before 2016 will still get the same inflation protection for their post-1988 guaranteed minimum pensions as if they had never been contracted out. That is achieved through an uplift that they receive in their additional state pension. For those reaching state pension age after April 2016, who are therefore receiving the new state pension, there are transitional arrangements in place, which are particularly beneficial for people who are contracted out. These members will therefore still get the 3% increase from their occupational pension schemes.

I recognise that this is perhaps a very complex and technical area, but I am satisfied that the order ensures that the burden placed upon schemes is an appropriate one, but also one that ensures that recipients get an increase in their pensions that gives them some measure of protection against inflation. I therefore commend it to the House.

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

5.20 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Hopefully, the House will be relieved to know that I do not intend to repeat the explanation of this order that the Minister has just given. As he said, the statutory instrument addresses the needs of a specific group of pensioners. We support the measure and will therefore obviously support the order. I will just take a very short amount of time to raise a few other related issues.

Further to the debate that we had on the previous order, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will remember that under Labour we saw an historic fall in pensioner poverty. Unfortunately, that has been rising recently, which is alarming after nearly two decades of decline: one in six pensioners are now living in poverty, with the figure rising to one in four among those who are single.

I hope the Minister agrees that Britain should be one of the best countries in the world in which to be a pensioner, so the fact that many are still spending their later years in poverty does not reflect well on us.

Labour in power introduced pension credit, ensuring that pensioners' weekly income reaches a minimum guaranteed level while offering a whole host of benefits, such as free dental and optical treatment. However, as we have discussed many times across the Dispatch Box, despite highly publicised campaigns, statistics released in October show that 40% of those eligible to claim pension credit are still not doing so. Given that I am sure the Minister shares my concern about this matter, will he confirm what more the Government are doing within their powers to make people aware of their potential pension credit entitlements?

Since we have just rehearsed all of the arguments about the cost of living, I thought the Minister might like to take a moment to reflect on what more the Government can do. As we know, social security systems cannot perform their most basic function if entitlements are eroded by inflation or, worse, not taken up at all. Further to the debate that we have just had, we also need to end the speculation about uprating. Pensioners should not be put through that, any more than anyone else should.

As we all know, the key to a good retirement starts in the workplace, when retirement can often seem like a distant concept. We need people to consider their future early on, which was the logic behind automatic enrolment—a massive policy success started under the last Labour Government, which has driven up the number of people saving. However, too many people are still falling through the net.

In September, the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Act 2023 received Royal Assent with cross-party support, giving Ministers the power to abolish the lower earnings limit for contributions, and reducing the age for being automatically enrolled from 22 to 18. At the time, the pensions Minister, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), said:

“We will consult on the detailed implementation at the earliest opportunity”.

We have not had further information about that implementation, and I wanted to give the Minister the opportunity to share any information about what is happening with those powers. I hope that all Members across this House will agree that the extension of auto-enrolment is a good thing, and that we should crack on with it.

I will make one final point: the roll-out of collective defined-contribution schemes, which provide an income for later life while giving members greater certainty about retirement outcomes that they could achieve, is certainly to be welcomed. However, more needs to be done to ensure that the proper framework is in place for companies that express an interest in CDCs, while ensuring that those who can still join a defined-benefit scheme do so. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Very briefly, the Pensions Minister will know, because there was a Westminster Hall debate on this a couple of weeks ago, about some of the issues experienced with

[Wendy Chamberlain]

defined-benefit pension schemes with companies such as BP not applying the limits that have been recommended by the trustees. Does the shadow Minister agree that we need to ensure that companies that have made promises to pensioners actually pay out?

Alison McGovern: I am not entirely sure whether that intervention was for me, so I will let the Minister respond when he winds up. However, on companies keeping their promises, that seems like one of the basics to me.

As I said before, we support these measures and will not oppose the Government's proposals, but I would very much welcome the Minister's comments on the questions I have raised.

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

5.26 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When the Minister was making reference to a Netflix series earlier, I did think that the pensions uprating debate would be an unusual backdrop for Netflix and chill. I do not know whether that is the first time "Netflix and chill" has been referred to in *Hansard*—I am at risk of getting myself into trouble now, so I will move on quickly.

As with the previous order, my party will not oppose this order. In the previous debate I focused my remarks on poverty more broadly. Now I want to speak about the number of pensioners in poverty, which rose between 2020-21 and 2021-22, with pensioners on low incomes among some of the hardest hit by the cost of living crisis. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report, which I cited earlier, revealed that 2.1 million pensioners were living in poverty in the UK in 2021-22, with the poverty rate for single pensioners almost double that of couple pensioners and about one in six pensioners overall living in poverty. I know this is felt acutely in communities such as Carmyle and Sandyhills in Glasgow's east end.

The reality, according to Age Scotland, is that 9% of over-50s are skipping meals due to financial pressure, and 65% of people aged between 60 and 64 are having to dip into savings to meet unexpected rising costs. I met the Trussell Trust just this morning, and it is certainly seeing a larger number of pensioners using its service than before. This is of course the case for many WASPI women, given that the ombudsman found that there was indeed maladministration in the communication from the Department for Work and Pensions, with the cost of living crisis certainly making matters much worse for women born in the 1950s.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning 1950s-born women such as my constituent Kathy McDonald. Does he not agree that there could have been plenty of time today for us to discuss the plight of those 1950s-born women, and to see what justice and compensation we should be delivering for them?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is right. I know Kathy McDonald, one of the 1950s women, who is a force of nature and does an incredible service for women

born in the 1950s. It is frustrating that we can have these debates about 1950s women, but I am clear that what 1950s women want is not necessarily words from this place, but action from this place. I think that challenge will be put to the two main parties at Westminster as we come towards the election, and I encourage all those 1950s women to press their candidates on the need for fair and fast compensation, as well as for wider action to tackle the unacceptable gender pension gap that is so pervasive.

As Age UK highlights, the state pension is the largest single source of income for most pensioners, so retaining the triple lock is the very bare minimum. I was glad to hear the comments in the previous debate from the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on that. The British Government must urgently address the shockingly low state pension levels, as they are already providing a lower state pension than, frankly, most other advanced economies relative to average earnings.

As with the issues we face with the social security system, the only way I can see our bring truly able to protect pensioners and treat older people with the basic dignity and respect they deserve is through the powers of a normal independent nation, where we can both improve state and occupational pensions, and set the state pension at an appropriate level within a Scottish context. That is the most crucial point I want to finish on, because constituents in communities I represent, such as Sandyhills and Carmyle, know one thing: for as long as Scotland remains within this Union, the state pension age will continue to climb and the state pension itself will remain pitifully low, leading to more pensioners being placed in the invidious position of choosing between heating or eating. That says everything people need to know about this Westminster Government, who the people of Scotland did not vote for.

5.30 pm

Paul Maynard: With the leave of the House, let me thank those who have responded to this debate. There has been a bit of speculation about uprating, but does that start from those on the Government Benches and come from nowhere else? It does not; it starts on the Opposition Benches and it is sheer political opportunism, nothing more. It will happen year after year, just as the sun shines and the rain falls.

The shadow Minister made some interesting points that I want to try to respond to, particularly on pension credit, where I know there is a shared desire to make sure that we always maximise take-up. Through the things we have been trying to do lately, besides the television campaign we have been running involving footballers such as Harry Redknapp and so on, every time we write to people about state pension uprating—we are still legally obliged to do so, to 11 million pensioners—they get a piece of paper about pension credit as well. We are trialling writing to pensioners on housing benefit to ask them to apply, to see whether they also are eligible. We have not seen the outcome of that work yet. I am really interested to see it, because it will be a good indicator of whether we can use other datasets to get more people involved. We are seeing much higher claims levels—80% higher than a year ago—so a lot of what we are doing is generating more interest. That does not always feed through to a successful claim, but it is showing that there is more interest.

David Linden: There is no disagreement on this point about pension credit. I just gently ask the Minister to go back to his officials and re-examine the paper form for pension credit, which runs to some 232 questions. Given the nature of the demographic dealing with pension credit forms, there must be a way of trying to simplify them. Does he agree that it might be possible to slim down 232 questions, so as to get more people their pension credit?

Paul Maynard: I very much take the point. I was sitting down today with people from a range of charities to discuss that very point: how do we get access to those who are least inclined to apply at the moment and what groups in society are we missing? The discussion was very much about how an overreliance on IT can often be a barrier and so this is very much part of our thinking.

The shadow Minister also asked about the 2017 reforms, and the extension of auto-enrolment, investing from the first £1 of income and so on. Those things are a personal priority to me. I would love to give her a date for when she will see that; “in due course” is never a good answer to give at the Dispatch Box, but I am afraid that it is the answer at this stage. However, I am pursuing this within the Department, so she has my personal pledge that I am pushing it as hard as I can. I am also enthusiastic about CDCs, as I know she is. She will be aware that Royal Mail already has a scheme “ready cooked”, and I am keen to see how it progresses, but I want to make sure that other businesses that are also showing an interest can input into the formulation of the more sustainable regulations.

Finally, I come to the point about BP made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). Unfortunately, commitments given in the Chamber do not always align with ministerial diaries as to when I am due to meet people, so on all the things I promised I would raise, I have yet to have a chance to meet the pensions regulator to have that fuller discussion. This is still a case of “watch this space”, but I stand by everything I said in Westminster Hall and it is still on the agenda. On that note, I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

MEDICINES

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Coronavirus and Influenza) (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.—(*Robert Largan.*)

Question agreed to.

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

EMPLOYMENT

Motion made, and Question put,

That the draft Trade Union (Deduction of Union Subscriptions from Wages in the Public Sector) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 9 November 2023, be approved.—(*Robert Largan.*)

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 185.

Division No. 70]

[5.34 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Double, Steve
Afriyie, Adam	Drax, Richard
Aiken, Nickie	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Aldous, Peter	Duguid, David
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Dunne, rh Philip
Anderson, Lee	Eastwood, Mark
Anderson, Stuart	Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Andrew, rh Stuart	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Ansell, Caroline	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Argar, rh Edward	Eustice, rh George
Atherton, Sarah	Evans, Dr Luke
Atkins, rh Victoria	Everitt, Ben
Bacon, Gareth	Fabricant, Michael
Bacon, Mr Richard (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Farris, Laura
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Fell, Simon
Bailey, Shaun	Firth, Anna
Baillie, Siobhan	Fletcher, Katherine
Baker, Duncan	Fletcher, Mark
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Fletcher, Nick
Baldwin, Harriett	Ford, rh Vicky
Baynes, Simon	Foster, Kevin
Bell, Aaron	Frazer, rh Lucy
Benton, Scott	Freeman, George
Beresford, Sir Paul	French, Mr Louie
Bhatti, Saqib	Fuller, Richard
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Garnier, Mark
Bowie, Andrew	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Gibb, rh Nick
Brady, rh Sir Graham	Gibson, Peter
Brereton, Jack	Gideon, Jo
Bristow, Paul	Glen, rh John
Britcliffe, Sara	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Browne, Anthony	Gove, rh Michael
Buchan, Felicity	Graham, Richard
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Grant, Mrs Helen (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Burghart, Alex	Gray, James
Burns, rh Sir Conor	Grayling, rh Chris
Butler, Rob	Green, Chris
Cairns, rh Alun	Green, rh Damian
Carter, Andy	Grundy, James
Cash, Sir William	Gullis, Jonathan
Cates, Miriam	Halfon, rh Robert
Caulfield, Maria	Hammond, Stephen
Chishti, Rehman	Hands, rh Greg
Chope, Sir Christopher	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Churchill, Jo	Harris, Rebecca
Clark, rh Greg	Harrison, Trudy
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Hart, Sally-Ann
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Hart, rh Simon
Clarkson, Chris	Hayes, rh Sir John
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Costa, Alberto	Higginbotham, Antony
Courts, Robert	Hinds, rh Damian
Coutinho, rh Claire	Hoare, Simon
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hollinrake, Kevin
Crosbie, Virginia	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Crouch, Tracey	Holloway, Adam
Daly, James	Holmes, Paul
Davies, rh David T. C.	Howell, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Davies, Gareth	Howell, Paul
Davies, Dr James	Huddleston, Nigel
Davies, Philip	Hudson, Dr Neil
Davis, rh Sir David	Hughes, Eddie
Davison, Dehenna	Hunt, Jane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)

Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew

Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Ayes:
Ruth Edwards and
Dame Amanda Milling

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Mearns*)
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte

Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Phillips, Jess
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh John

Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Kim Leadbeater and
Gerald Jones

Question accordingly agreed to.

PETITIONS

Labour's Clean Air Act

5.49 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I rise to present a petition about the need for the Government to tackle the UK's biggest environmental health threat: air pollution. Clean air should be a fundamental human right, and has the potential to save millions of lives. Currently, air pollution contributes to 40,000 early deaths a year in the UK; in Manchester, more than 100 people a year die as a direct result of toxic air, with babies, pregnant women and the elderly most at risk. Labour's clean air Act would establish a legal right for citizens to breathe clean air and abide by World Health Organisation clean air guidelines, creating a healthier and safer Britain for all our constituents. The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to formally enact Labour's Clean Air Act and take further steps to address the air pollution national health emergency in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that clean air should be a fundamental human right and has the potential to save millions of lives; notes that Labour's Clean Air Act would establish a legal right for citizens to breathe clean air and abide by World

Health Organisation clean air guidelines; further declares that Labour's Clean Air Act would place tough new duties on Ministers to ensure air quality guidelines are met to bring in accountability for the Government; and further declares that Labour's Clean Air Act would grant new powers to local authorities to allow them to take urgent action on air quality.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to formally enact Labour's Clean Air Act and take further steps to address the air pollution national health emergency in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002903]

Sale of Arms to Israel

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk relating to the sale of arms to Israel. It is fair to say that my correspondence has never included as many representations from constituents on the issue of Gaza and Palestine and expressing their outrage as it has over the past few months. I share their outrage and concern about the humanitarian crisis that we seeing unfold. Many believe that we should stop exporting arms to Israel, and I agree with them. It is worth noting that the petition was prepared prior to the International Court of Justice's ruling suggesting that there may be plausible evidence of genocidal acts committed by Israel in Palestine. The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to suspend all arms transfers to Israel including weapons, arms, munition and ammunition, parts and components and other equipment that pose a substantial risk that they could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law in this conflict.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the Government's sale of arms to Israel is unacceptable, as there is substantial evidence that these arms are being used to kill innocent civilians in Gaza; further declares that this is in direct breach of the UK arms export policy, which states that the licenses cannot be granted if there is a "clear risk" the arms might be used in a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to suspend all arms transfers to Israel including weapons, arms, munition and ammunition, parts and components and other equipment that pose a substantial risk that they could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law in this conflict.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002909]

Protecting and Restoring Wetlands

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Robert Langan.*)

5.51 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con) [R]: I am glad to have secured this debate on the pressing issue of protecting and restoring wetlands in the UK. As the Minister knows, I never duck an opportunity to talk about Slimbridge, wetlands and flamingos. I understand that I have until 7.30 tonight to talk about them—and that I probably would never be allowed to speak in the House again if I did so, but I could fill that time.

I am blessed to have Slimbridge, the headquarters of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, in my constituency and to live just down the road from it. I told a *Gloucestershire Live* reporter this week that it seems to me complete madness that previous Stroud MPs have never used their expertise to highlight the WWT on the national stage. We are really grateful for everyone's involvement. We now have an all-party parliamentary group for wetlands, and wetlands are a constant feature of discussions in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—mainly because I pester everyone all the time, which is a great pleasure.

Slimbridge is a place that creates calm, allowing people to walk among the most beautiful birds and wildlife, learning about conservation successes and challenges on the way. My daughters love “welly boot land”. Years ago, I got no phone reception at Slimbridge so I used to go to hide there, and it was beautiful. World Wetlands Day, on 2 February, celebrates the creation in 1975 of an international treaty, the convention on wetlands. I thank the Minister for taking the time to visit the Slimbridge experts last week and for her advocacy on this issue. I also thank previous Ministers, some of whom are in the Chamber.

Wetlands are some of the most threatened habitats in the world, yet they are also the most vital for wildlife and people. In the UK we have so many types of wetlands, from coastal habitats such as saltmarshes, seagrass and estuaries, to inland features such as ponds, lakes, rivers, streams, bogs, fens, swamps, marshes and peatland. The Severn estuary is a true gem in my constituency, and is key for supporting internationally important numbers of dunlin, redshank, ringed plover, black-tailed godwit, shelduck, teal, pintail, and another that I will not even try to pronounce. It is incredibly important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. I have noticed in the time she has been in this House that one of her greatest interests is the Slimbridge wetlands. Castle Espie, just outside Comber in my constituency, is part of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust as well. The work carried out by the trust there is essential, given that almost the entire global population of brent geese reside in and around Strangford lough during the winter months. That work takes time and money, and it needs to be better supported by Government. I fully support what the hon. Lady is trying to achieve, because I know that the benefits she gets for Stroud, we will get for Comber.

Siobhan Baillie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I would very much like to visit to see his brent geese at some stage. Because it is so important for conservation and awareness, I encourage all Members to go and get their social media clips with their wetlands and wildfowl.

The convention on wetlands, also known as the Ramsar convention, is a crucial international treaty aimed at conserving and promoting the sustainable use of wetlands. The oldest global intergovernmental environmental agreement in the world, it set the standards for international co-operation on environmental action that other, more high-profile international agreements have followed. I am proud to say that the UK Government were an early signatory to the convention back in the '70s, underlining our commitment to the preservation of these valuable ecosystems. The WWT plays a significant role as one of the six international organisational partners involved in the convention's implementation. Various stakeholders, including environmental non-governmental organisations, contribute to this collaborative effort, showing the importance of partnerships in safeguarding our wetlands.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, both for initiating this debate and for kindly letting me say a word about the Freshwater Habitats Trust, whose New Forest representative, Thea Margetts, I met at the volunteer fair put on by the national park authority last weekend. It is amazing what these volunteers contribute, not least the New Forest water code and other great pointers and advice as to how we can keep these precious but delicate environments safe.

Siobhan Baillie: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important intervention, which brings alive the number of freshwater volunteers and shows just how many people are gripped by this environmental work, really taking it into their hearts and running with it. I would say that the wetlands squad is true squad goals! They really do work together and with a range of different people across this country and around the world.

Ramsar sites—protected wetlands of international importance—are some of the UK's most precious natural treasures. With 175 Ramsar sites, the UK has more than anywhere else in the world. These sites are the equivalent of the white cliffs of Dover or Stonehenge in their significance to the cultural identity of our nation—a country renowned for its wet weather.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate in the same week as World Wetlands Day. I wanted to contribute some information about Seaton wetlands and, in particular, the Black Hole marsh. Before 2008, the Black Hole marsh was just a drained agricultural field, but the Environment Agency worked with a local engineering company to devise a tidal exchange gate that allows in salt water to ensure the lagoon has just the right level of salinity. Since that was done, we have seen the return of the dunlin, the ringed plover and the black-tailed godwit. Does the hon. Lady think that the tidal exchange gate innovation might be replicated elsewhere?

Siobhan Baillie: The opportunities for wetlands and this kind of work are absolutely endless, and I would be interested to hear from the Minister about that. There has been an extraordinary amount of investment in this

work in the hon. Gentleman's neck of the woods and elsewhere in the country. It would be helpful to hear more about these opportunities and the innovation of which he speaks.

With all my colleagues in the Chamber bringing alive their own experiences of wetlands, I believe the UK can really celebrate World Wetlands Day and hold our head high because of our history and status as an early signatory to the convention. If we choose to lead on this, with the multifaceted environmental masterclass that our wetlands represent, we will be able to command immediate respect because of our history and our work so far.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. Without wanting to sound competitive, Somerset has some amazing wetlands and Ramsar sites, and Somerset Wetlands, which includes the west of Sedgemoor in my constituency, is England's largest super national nature reserve. Does she agree that such declarations are crucial to reversing nature's decline and to the fight against climate change?

Siobhan Baillie: I do. I will come on to the fight against climate change, because the hon. Lady is absolutely right. She speaks about Somerset. Investment of £20 million, I think, went in for flood resilience work, and there is work going on with farmers. The expertise she speaks to can be sold around this country and exported around the world, so I am excited that she is able to speak so fondly of that.

With volunteers in mind, I want to speak to the current situation with our wetlands. I send love, respect and absolute hugs to all the Slimbridge volunteers; we could not do the conservation work without them. It is a sad fact that for centuries we have not been looking after our wetlands; there has not been that love and care that everyone in the Chamber wants for them. A staggering 75% of our UK wetlands have been lost over the past 300 years—this is not just a recent thing—and while the rate of decline is now slowing thanks to a lot of the work that is going on, the precious few wetlands that remain are under considerable pressure. They are in a poorer condition than we would like, and we think we could do much more work. I will speak briefly about what we should be focusing on now and in the coming months.

I would welcome a renewed push on four transformative steps that would speed up the progress on creating and restoring 100,000 additional hectares. I invite everyone in the Chamber to join the all-party parliamentary group for wetlands and join the fight, because it is crucial to achieving the net zero target. I would like action, but I will also take manifesto commitments.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Before my hon. Friend comes on to her priorities, may I just set out how impressive she has been in persuading me, as a former Minister, and colleagues across the House of the wonderful benefits of wetlands? We are all more knowledgeable thanks to her and the work of WWT in her constituency. As well as the benefits for climate change and biodiversity, does she recognise the benefits to our health? Our mind, body and soul can really appreciate the value of spending time in green and blue spaces. As there seems to be some competition, let me say that I have 32 miles of

coastline and many lakes—a wetland in the English Lake district. The benefits to our mental and physical health must not be underestimated. A wetland can be just a pond, and the 30 million gardeners across this great land can also play a significant part.

Siobhan Baillie: Absolutely right. My hon. Friend is a keen walker and gets out into the environment as much as possible. To be beside water is a particularly tranquil experience for most people and that is certainly something WWT campaigns on, because we know the benefits.

I ask the Government to commit to a national strategy for UK wetlands. Most of the work has been done, so let us label it as a national strategy and pull it all together, because the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is doing some great work. I would like to see a dedicated domestic wetlands team at DEFRA, to ape the success of the peat team, who are brilliant experts. If I cannot have a whole team, I will take a named civil servant we can go to who really owns all the different moving parts, because I know it is in lots of different parts of the DEFRA family.

I would like to create a nutrient offsetting code to rebuild investor confidence in that market, and to provide guidance and training for national flood management to ensure that land managers, councils and practitioners can take advantage of those options. I would like the creation of a saltmarsh restoration grant scheme, as has been done for peatland, and to scale up saltmarsh creation through the nature for climate fund. I would like a requirement for new developments to include sustainable urban drainage systems. We believe schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Act 2010 should be enacted—I have spoken to that in this place on a number of occasions. As I have said, however, plenty of very good work has been done, and I think we should talk about it more and perhaps pull it all together, because wetlands are nature's secret weapon.

I recall that when my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) came to Slimbridge, we had a mic-drop moment when the experts explained that wetlands can store 18 times more carbon than trees. While a tree takes 10 years to reach its full "pace", with wetlands the process is instant. I think that the slogan for wetlands should be #justaddwater—for environmental clout, for wellbeing, for flood defence, for carbon storage and for water quality. I understand that the Minister will speak about some of the work that the Government are doing, because there is an awful lot of it, but I think that if there had been more awareness of what is going on, we would not have seen the nutrient neutrality drama and some of the firefighting that Ministers were having to do. So much work was actually there, but no one had mentioned it. I think that home-builders are already getting there; we just need to light the touch paper and let everyone run.

There is a great deal more that I could say, but you have a life to get back to at some stage, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I know what long hours you work. Let me just mention the powerful benefits to British wildlife. I think that there is too much talk of targets and carbon in this place, but people "get" species and wildlife. In the UK, wetlands cover only 3% of the land, but they support 10% of its species. It is clear that we can scale up biodiversity and other support if we invest, think it through and protect our wetlands.

[Siobhan Baillie]

Let me say a little about flood resilience. The Government's green recovery challenge fund helps projects such as the WWT's Two Valleys: Slow the Flow, which demonstrates the effectiveness of using natural flood management to stop flood pressure on properties downstream. That is happening in Somerset, but I know that work of this kind is taking place in local authority areas all over the country. Let us bring it to life and end the devastating impacts of events such as Storm Henk, which we saw recently. Let me also say something about water pollutant filters. I know that in her previous brief the Minister worked extraordinarily hard on the problem of sewage and the Victorian networks that we are trying to repair, but we now know that specially engineered wetlands called treatment wetlands have the potential to remove up to 60% of metals, trap and retain up to 90% of sediment run-off, and eliminate 90% of nitrogen; so we can use wetlands to remove pollutants from water.

As for the point that has been made about physical wellbeing, spending just 10 minutes in urban wetlands has been shown to yield extensive improvements. I urge everyone to go down to Bridgwater and observe the juxtaposition of the big high rises and the wetlands that have been created, which people have been using throughout covid and beyond.

The Climate Change Committee has stressed the importance of protecting and restoring saltmarsh and seagrass because they are so efficient at carbon removal. In the long term, saltmarshes bury carbon 40 times faster than woodland. I know that the Government are obsessed with trees because we can count them, and we like things to be measurable, but there are other options. Let us do the trees, but let us do the wetlands as well.

The WWT has a superb Blue Recovery Leaders Group of businesses which have backed this initiative because they can see the economic benefits and want to invest in the environmental power of the country. Companies such as Aviva have invested a massive amount because they can see that this stuff works for their customers, for their employees, and for the country and beyond. In short, wetlands have nature-boosting, flood-busting, carbon-sinking, mood-lifting, water-cleaning superpowers, so why are we not making more of them—or, rather, even more of them, because I know exactly how much work the Minister and others are doing in this regard?

6.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): What a wonderful wetland-busting speech that was. But I expected no less of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), who is not only a wonderful advocate for her constituency but a particular advocate for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and—as has been pointed out by some of our colleagues—for all things wetland, helping to embed this subject in our parliamentary agenda. She is fortunate to have in her constituency the wonderful wildfowl and wetland centre at Slimbridge. I am a bit envious, but actually I have the Somerset levels in my constituency, which is itself an internationally recognised wetland, so we have a great deal in common.

I thank my hon. Friend for what she has laid out today and for making the case for more attention for wetlands. I will pick up many of her points but I also

want to convey that we are already doing a great deal for wetlands. As we have heard, the term covers a multitude of areas, from the huge internationally protected sites right down to the garden pond. That point was well made by the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). I want to talk about what we are doing, while obviously recognising that there is almost always more to do. The importance of wetlands is recognised by the very fact that people have stayed for the Adjournment debate, which is not always the case, so thank you to them.

These ecosystems are not just landscapes of natural beauty and biodiversity; they are also critical to our mission to restore nature and to hit our climate change targets. I am going to lay out the things that we are already doing and the things that we are working on. A year ago, we published our environmental improvement plan, which set out the Government's ambitions to improve the environment for the whole nation. Those commitments are underpinned by our legally binding Environment Act 2021 targets, including our apex target to halt the decline of species by 2030. This should not be taken lightly; it is a globally leading target. It is pretty phenomenal to have committed to setting such a target in law. We have also committed to creating or restoring over 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats by 2042.

Internationally, at the most recent convention on biological diversity, COP15, the UK was at the forefront of efforts to secure another ambitious agreement, to protect 30% of the world's land and oceans by 2030, including through the conservation and restoration of freshwater habitats. We have heard today about the freshwater volunteers working in the Forest of Dean—[*Interruption.*] Apologies, the New Forest. Those volunteers recognise the importance of the habitat in their area in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). In December we furthered our commitment to freshwater wetland habitats at the United Nations framework convention on climate change, COP28, by signing up to the international freshwater challenge. We are also a proud member of the international Ramsar convention on wetlands. Across the UK, including the Crown dependencies and overseas territories, we protect 175 internationally important Ramsar sites. That is more than any other country in the world.

I want to add something that we have done through the environmental improvement plan and the national adaptation plan. We will be establishing a UK wetland inventory in support of the Ramsar convention. This involves mapping where these varied wetlands are, which will inform our actions to restore them, improve them or add to them. That will be very beneficial, and it is something that many people have been calling for. These wetland sites have received enhanced protections that reflect their importance. We have given them the same protections as our country's most precious sites—our protected habitat sites—to prevent damage by applying rigorous environmental assessments. Our commitment in England is to get 75% of our protected sites into favourable condition by 2042. That will benefit large swathes of these wetlands, and much restoration work will be included in that.

The UK's wetlands represent some of our nation's most precious and sensitive habitats, providing a wonderful place for wintering and breeding habitats for wetland

birds. We have had a big list, and I am going to add to it. I saw many birds at Slimbridge last week: the black-tailed godwits; the curlews; the beautiful Bewick's swans; the golden plovers, although I took issue with the wonderful guides who work there because the plovers looked more brown than gold, but the guides said that the sun had to be shining to see the gold; and the wonderful lapwings, which I love—we used to call them peewits at home, on the farm where I grew up.

Those birds are all there at the Slimbridge Wetland Centre, which must be commended for its work and the fantastic advice it gives visitors, regardless of their level of knowledge. I do not know if you are a keen birder, Mr Deputy Speaker, but even if you are not, you would be inspired because the guides point out the most amazing birds flying in and out, and flying in flocks. It is captivating, as my hon. Friends have laid out—a natural treasure.

Wetland habitats are incredibly diverse, from blanket bog to aquatic marginal areas, reedbeds to riverine habitats. They make a huge contribution and restoring them is critical to hitting our targets. We have launched 12 landscape-scale nature recovery projects over the past two years, half of which include wetland habitats within wilding mosaics. As has been said, quite a lot of that money has come to Somerset, including some significant grants for Shapwick Moor and sites in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke). Those grants will help to restore worked-out peatlands, which have dried out and are haemorrhaging carbon, by rewetting them, and also enable work with farmers to raise the water table to have wetter feet. Basically, we are getting back to the original state of the peatland—the wetland.

Those projects are supporting species recovery and building resilience against the impacts of climate change. In total, such projects cover something like 200,000 hectares, so a significant amount is already going to restoring those wonderful sites. We are about to announce the successful bids to our £25 million species survival fund grants, which we launched last year. A range of those projects will restore more habitats, including wetlands. Half of the projects funded by our £14.5 million species recovery programme capital grant scheme will support the recovery of wetland habitats and species such as the wonderful lapwing and black-tailed godwit, as well as mammals such as the water vole and white-faced darter. I know that has sparked the interest of Mr Deputy Speaker. As has been said, 10% of our species live in wetlands, so it is important that we look after them and help those that are in decline.

Our countryside stewardship schemes pay for actions to create and manage reedbed and fens. At the recent Oxford farming conference in January, as part of the new environmental land management schemes, we are updating these actions to better reflect the costs and income forgone for all farm types to create and maintain those important habitats. That has resulted in increased payment rates. For example, the previous rate of £35 a hectare for management of a fen has rocketed to £920 a hectare, which has been extremely well received. In addition, we are making these offers less prescriptive and more flexible about how they achieve the intended outcomes. That will help to incentivise the creation of new wetlands, contributing to our outcomes for biodiversity, water quality and net zero.

Beyond their crucial role as a home for our wildlife, we recognise the invaluable ecosystem services that wetlands provide, including water quality and management, carbon sequestration and public wellbeing. All of those have been ably referred to during the debate.

Siobhan Baillie: There is even more going on than I had understood. Returning to my point about a UK strategy, over 50 other countries have a strategy for wetlands. As I said, I will take a manifesto commitment, but will the Government be willing to look at what those other countries have done? A lot of the work has already been done, so could we make a commitment to ensure that we bring together all that focus down the line? That would make a lot of people very happy.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. We work widely on the international stage. Indeed, some of our Blue Planet fund and our Darwin fund go to working on wetland areas internationally, particularly restoring mangroves and work on climate change. We are already doing a great deal, but we can always learn from other countries. It should be a reciprocal learning process, and we will continue to work like that.

Through our plan for water, which was launched last year to tackle pollution, water pollution, storm overflows, agricultural pollution, plastics pollution, road run-off, chemicals and pesticides, work is going on to create wetlands to help solve those problems. Work is also under way in a number of catchments on wastewater treatment works to take out the phosphates, which are affecting some of the wetlands. Therefore, we are taking out the nutrients, but we are enabling the creation of nature-based solutions, including wetlands, to help clean the water as well, and that was also well referred to.

Wetlands can also play an important role in reducing flood risk through natural management. I am talking about the creation of wetlands to reduce and slow the flow of water. Back in September 2023, the Environment Agency and DEFRA announced £25 million of funding for improving flood resilience through these nature-based solutions.

I just want to touch on sustainable drainage systems, which, oddly, are a subject very dear to my heart—I have banged on about them since I was on the Back Benches. We are making big progress on the SuDS, as my hon. Friend will know, working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Getting SuDS into all our developments can make such a big difference. Basically, SuDS are like mini wetlands within our urban habitats that can take the water and the run-off. They have myriad advantages in slowing the flow and reducing flooding, which is so nature diverse. I had a wonderful visit this week to the Bentley housing development in Finsbury Park, not very far away. All around the tower blocks were these SuDS, but they just looked like beautiful wetlands, which in fact is what they are. Many companies are already using them, and we are moving as a Government to get to that stage where SuDS have to be an integral part of our developments.

Wetlands can play an important role in addressing both the causes and the effect of climate change. That is why DEFRA is funding £300,000-worth of projects this financial year, to measure and verify the carbon storage potential of saltmarsh habitats, which, again, was raised by my hon. Friend. That will allow private investment

[Rebecca Pow]

to be leveraged through the saltmarsh carbon code. Basically, that means that a standard will be verified for carbon credits and for saltmarsh, which will then trigger a market and private finance can then be leveraged, much as we do with the peatland code. That is on the way, and I believe that is also one of my hon. Friend's asks.

The Nature for Climate Fund is aiming to deliver the restoration of approximately 35,000 hectares of peatland by 2025. That is an area the size of Staffordshire. Somerset and many other areas are getting some of that money. This represents a tripling of historical average annual restoration funds for these areas. A great deal of that funding is going to the great north bog, a huge area that is currently being restored.

The England peat action plan sets out a strategic framework to improve management and protection of upland and lowland peatlands. We must not forget that all of those areas are basically wetlands. They are only effective wetlands when they are in a healthy state—basically wet—which is why we have to do this restoration work.

In the net zero strategy, we have committed to the aim of restoring approximately 280,000 hectares of peatland in England by 2050. That is building on that 35,000 hectares, which is well under way. And the £80 million green recovery challenge fund has also been a cornerstone in our efforts and has contributed to funding a range of nature-based solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation, including riverine, coastal, floodplain and grazing and marsh habitats. That fund, as many in this Chamber will know, was set up during covid to help with lots of the effects and to get people out into nature and the countryside, but also to create skills and jobs, and it is extremely successful.

We also recognise, as has been mentioned, the huge importance of improving access to both our green space and our blue space—blue space obviously being nature areas or space where there is water. Just what that means to us has been very eloquently outlined—my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and others touched on this. That point was very well made, and it is why this Government are investing a great deal in access to nature, which includes both blue

and green space. Through our projects and committing in our environmental improvement plan to a world where everyone should not be further than a 15-minute walk from nature, including wetlands, we are embedding all this into what we do. Today is a great day because we are one year on from the start of our environmental improvement plan and we are celebrating all the great things that we rolled out over this year for the environment, although with more to do, because we have a framework, we have a plan and we have the targets.

This is not only about Government money; we are driving to attract money from the private sector into all this investment in nature and nature recovery. That is a latent and expanding market and there is significant opportunity for wetlands in that space. We have already stimulated investment in wetland protection and through creating programmes such as our natural environment investment readiness fund, whose third round was launched in December. That offers grants of up to £100,000 to help farmers start some of these projects—re-wetting, re-establishing wetlands, and finding out what crops they can grow in these re-wetted wetlands, and what viable markets they might be able to tap into.

I want to thank everybody who contributed to this debate—there is genuine and huge interest in wetlands in Parliament in every party. I recognise the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud has done; she is a tremendous advocate, and I have listened closely to the points she has made. I think she admitted that we are doing a great deal more than she realised; that is because we recognise the importance of our wetlands. It is World Wetlands Day on Friday, and I hope everyone will be celebrating. People can watch my Instagram, with all those wonderful pictures from Slimbridge. I thank her very much again for her contribution on wetlands.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): What a lovely and fascinating debate to end the day on. Thank you and congratulations.

Question put and agreed to.

6.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 31 January 2024

[HANNAH BARDELL *in the Chair*]

Hospitality Sector: Fiscal Support

9.30 am

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fiscal support for the hospitality sector.

We always say that it is a pleasure to see you in your place, Ms Bardell, and it is this morning; thank you for looking after us. I thank colleagues from all points of the compass for their support on a subject that is close to my heart: fiscal and other support for the hospitality sector—by which I mean on-trade pubs, restaurants, cafés, hotels, and bed and breakfasts. I am grateful to the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, the Scottish Beer and Pub Association, the Scottish and UK hospitality organisations, Castle Leisure Group, Greene King, and several dozen businesses in rural and urban Stirlingshire for helping me to prepare for the debate. I also thank Paul Anderson and Matt Gower from my office, as well as the House of Commons Library, which has produced a number of useful briefings that I commend to colleagues.

This issue is not easy, but I will be up front with colleagues. Am I looking for special treatment for the hospitality sector? Yes, I am: these businesses need and deserve it. They need it because of the unprecedented economic times that we are living through, and they deserve it because they are a part of not just our economy, but our society; they are community hubs at a time when we face an epidemic of post-covid loneliness, and they contribute to our sense of place and keep our high streets busy. As well as urban Stirling, I represent a number of rural communities, which turn into dormitories once the pub goes. That is not a sustainable future for those communities. Hospitality businesses promote social mobility. How many of us—myself included—had a first job waiting tables, pulling pints or doing dishes? Hospitality provides flexible employment that keeps a lot of people engaged in the workplace who might otherwise not find jobs that suit them. These are good, sustainable jobs, and great careers.

Hospitality businesses are also significant for the economy. The stats are vital: the beer and pub sector accounts for 936,000 jobs and contributes £26 billion to the UK economy; in Scotland, it accounts for 62,000 jobs and £1.8 billion in tax receipts. According to UKHospitality, the wider hospitality sector employs 3.5 million people in one form or another, and generates £54 billion in tax receipts. These businesses are at the sharp end of an economic crisis that is not of their making. They are at the sharp end of the post-covid slump, an energy cost spike and insurance cost rises. They face labour shortages and costs due to Brexit. Now, I do not blame Brexit for everything, but it has made everything worse, and we need to deal with its consequences, which hospitality businesses are living with right now. They also have lower footfall, because in the cost of living crisis everybody is cutting back on discretionary spend. They are dealing with a perfect storm, and they need more help.

During covid, we proved that we can act fast, as we did with the VAT cut and eat out to help out, with all its issues; we demonstrated that we could move fast when a demonstrated emergency was under way. For our hospitality businesses, there is still an emergency under way. I am supportive of the Scottish Government, although I am not part of it; I am clearly in opposition here, though I hope I am a constructive Opposition Member. I am bringing some ideas to the Minister, and look forward to his response. I am also not a part of Stirling Council. I am aware that budgets in all places are under real pressure, but I am calling for support because I am dread afraid that, unless we act, a number of these good, sustainable businesses will not make it through to the better times, when they do come, and that all those revenues and social benefits will be lost. Across my constituency, there are a number of great businesses, but they need help to make it through. It is up to all of us, in all our places, to put the badges to one side and work together to support these crucial organisations.

What am I calling for? I will be brief to allow colleagues to speak. First, if hon. Members remember only two words from me today, they should be “cut VAT.” I would cut VAT on food, soft drinks and alcohol to 5%. Of course, that is a big ask. I know the fiscal situation for the UK, Scotland and local government, but cutting VAT would be a clean and immediately effective way of supporting those businesses’ bottom line. It would be directly linked to turnover, so if a business is not doing much business, it will not get that much benefit, and if it is, it will. It would not require any complex architecture or bureaucracy and would not need much to administer. It would be an effective way to boost growth and help these businesses survive.

In other countries, a VAT cut would not be unusual. VAT on accommodation is 10% in Austria, 6% in Belgium and 9% in Cyprus. VAT on restaurants is 13% in Croatia, 5% in Hungary and 10% in Italy. Of course, it is not quite like for like, but the UK is taxing this sector far more than other European countries do, and I think we need to boost and celebrate it, not tax the bejesus out of it from all parts of Government.

Speaking of which, we need business rates reform. To be clear, I was glad that the UK Government temporarily cut business rates in England. I called for the Scottish Government to pass that on, and I regret that they did not, but let us remember that it was just a one-year suspension and the actual problem is that business rates are not fit for purpose in any of our countries. That outdated system is creating perverse incentives for a lot of good businesses. Of course, local government needs to be supported, but we need to find a better way to do that. Tom Arthur, the Scottish Minister, has been proactive in engaging with business across Stirling and elsewhere. He acknowledges the problem—but business rates are crippling a lot of businesses, and we need urgent reform in all our countries.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point about business rates reform. I have just pulled up the *Midweek Herald*, in which a pub that closed fairly recently, the Honiton Inn, is advertised at £395,000, but before the advert says anything about the pub, it says, “Business rates may apply”. Does he agree that business rates on pubs are deterring new tenants from taking over?

Alyn Smith: I do agree, and they are also deterring growth in existing businesses. A number of business owners in Stirling have told me that once they invested in refurbishing their pub or doing it up after covid, they got hit with a higher rates bill—so that was a disincentive to investment. The system is broken, and I commend to colleagues the House of Commons Library research that compares how other countries do this stuff. I am conscious that there is not an easy answer. It is easy for me to call for reform, which is pressing, but I do not necessarily have a preferred way to do that.

Hospitality businesses have been hit by energy costs. They are big energy users, in terms of heating and cooling, and have been hit by eye-watering uncapped price rises from the energy companies, many of which are making substantial profits. I do not begrudge companies making profits—I celebrate that—but if they are doing it in a way that shuts down big chunks of another industry, we need stronger regulation. The UK energy market is deeply broken and is not working for an awful lot of business consumers. In the meantime, I think we could look seriously at business rate rebates for energy users.

It will not surprise colleagues that a number of stakeholders are keen on a cut to duty for cider, beer and spirits. That is a way of supporting brewers and distillers. I am not hostile to that, but I think the best way to support the hospitality sector is a VAT cut. That would be a tide that raises everybody's boat, although there is some evidence that previous cuts have not been passed on to the wider sector.

We also need to do things to rebalance the playing field between the on and off-trade sales. The Scottish Government have tried to do that with minimum unit pricing. I do not want us to turn into a nation—however “nation” is defined—of people who drink alone in front of the TV. Pubs, restaurants and cafés provide a social environment for the consumption of alcohol; they are socially inclusive, open to all and regulated constructively—whereas the other market is tending in the other direction.

There are a number of things we can do to help this sector, which is vital not just because of the social and economic aspects, but because it helps define who we are as a community. We all need to work together to make that happen. I think a VAT cut for the hospitality sector would be deeply popular. I appreciate that the Chancellor and the Minister do not have an easy task in the Budget ahead of us, but that would be a constructive way to boost growth and help these businesses through the tough times, because the emergency is not over. If the Chancellor introduces any of those measures, I will be the first to applaud, because these businesses are too important to all our communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they want to be called. The hon. Gentleman was good enough to be brief to let colleagues in, but seven Back Benchers are looking to catch my eye. I will not impose a time limit, but I ask colleagues to try to keep to about five or six minutes.

9.39 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I am delighted to take part in this debate, and I very

much congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing it. I am delighted to see the Minister in his place to respond; along with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), there have never been two greater champions in Government for the tourism and hospitality sector. I am delighted that the Minister is now in the Treasury, because I am sure that he can be a champion there for this very important sector—not putting any pressure on him at all!

I represent a constituency that is one of the most dependent on the tourism and hospitality sector in the whole country. For example, it is estimated that around 60% of all jobs in the town of Newquay rely on it, and that one in three households across Cornwall derive at least some of their income from hospitality throughout the year. The subject is therefore so very important to us in St Austell and Newquay. We have some amazing hospitality businesses, from St Austell Brewery—which was established in 1851 and is, I believe, the biggest family-owned brewery in the country; it produces amazing beers, like Tribute and Proper Job, has been around for nearly 170 years, and employs hundreds of people in my constituency and well over 1,500 people in the wider region—right through to an American diner in St Austell called Rocky's, which opened last week. I was delighted to be there on the opening night, and I wish the people there well in starting up a hospitality business in these very challenging times.

We have amazing hotels like The Headland in Newquay, with which the Minister is familiar, the Watergate Bay Hotel in Watergate Bay, and Scarlet in Mawgan Porth. On the south coast, we have the Carlyon Bay Hotel, which Mr Speaker very much enjoys, and Fowey Hall in Fowey, in which I know many hon. Members have stayed. They all play a vital part in the economy and the communities that I have the pleasure of representing.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way as he extends his conducted tour around his constituency; I congratulate him on so doing. Does he agree that we all, Government especially, need to ensure that the magnificence of areas like his, and like mine on the north coast of Northern Ireland, are promoted nationally and internationally, in order to maximise the benefits for all our constituents?

Steve Double: I absolutely agree. We need to get international tourists who come to this country out of London. Too many never venture past London. I know that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has worked on that, and we have certainly seen some benefits of more international visitors coming to Cornwall and enjoying all that we have to offer.

I will never forget the moment, shortly after the lockdown was announced, that I read a report that said that my constituency of Newquay was predicted to be the hardest hit by the lockdown. Those days were deeply worrying for me. I had business owner after business owner on the phone asking, “What am I going to do? This will literally devastate my business.”

There was a sense of relief a few days later when the then Chancellor—the now Prime Minister—announced the package of support that would be put in place, particularly the furlough scheme but also the targeted support for the hospitality sector. My phone lit up with

the people who had rung me in the preceding days; they were so relieved that the Government were stepping in. That demonstrates that this Government understand the importance of the hospitality sector. They provided more support to the hospitality sector than to any other part of our economy during the pandemic, and I know hundreds of businesses in my constituency who are so grateful for it. It is sometimes very easy to forget that support, but it shows the importance that the Government place on the sector.

However, as we have heard, many of those businesses are finding times equally challenging right now. The challenges are different; they are mainly to do with rising costs rather than with demand being taken away. Those could be energy costs, costs in the supply chain or rising wages. I absolutely support the increase in the national living wage, but we need to appreciate that there is pressure on businesses to meet that increased wage. There is therefore a need for the Government to look at what further support they can provide to this sector, not just to get it through the current challenges, but for the long term.

I would ask two things in closing—both of which have already been said, but I will add my voice. There is a case to be made for cutting VAT. I would go for a 10% cut in the VAT rate for hospitality. We have shown that that works. I know there were concerns about how much the cut that was put in place during the pandemic was passed on; I think about 70% of businesses passed on at least some of that cut, but we need to work with the sector to ensure that if VAT is cut, all of the cut is passed on to the customer.

Business rates also need to be looked at. The rise of 6.7% is out of step. I urge the Government to look to the October rate for inflation when increasing business rates. We need more fundamental reform of business rates for the hospitality sector in order to reduce the burden of that tax.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I recognise much of what my hon. Friend says about his constituency in the description of my constituency as the largest resort area of Wales. The difference in Wales, of course, is that the Welsh Government have not passed on the full business rates cut that has been enjoyed in England. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be the first and most sensible measure that could be put in place to help tourism and hospitality businesses in Wales?

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a sensible and important point; I agree.

I hope the Minister senses the cross-party support for this important sector and takes away a clear message to the Treasury to look at what more can be done to support the sector in the upcoming Budget.

9.47 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. The hospitality sector is at the sharp end of all market sensitivities and feels every economic challenge acutely. Although it is used to seasonal highs and lows, when covid hit, the sector's resilience became dependent on intervention. Whether businesses were supplying food, drink or accommodation or operating as a wider part of

the tourism sector, the covid and post-covid shocks served their blows on hospitality. There are also the issues of the cost of living—whether that is seen through reduced customer disposable income or increased energy costs—and diversion of shipping in the middle east; each part has a story to tell about the sector.

Indeed, Brexit produced serious challenges in labour supply, and the new visa rules are also creating pressure. Last year, 8,500 visas were provided for the sector, and that is not to mention the dependants who come with health workers and so on, and the students; that also takes its toll. I ask the Government to think again. Although I welcome higher income and a rise in the minimum wage to address the wage disparity in this sector, we must recognise that it needs cushioning and that the sector needs support.

In York, we face the additional challenge of flooding. The floods have an impact. There is usually poor reporting describing York as being like Venice, but I can assure everyone that York is open and functioning. Today, because of the resilience measures that have been put in place, only a small cluster of hospitality outlets are impacted by flooding. However, they have received no business rate suspension—they must receive that, and I ask the Minister to look at that issue—and the Bellwin scheme cannot be triggered for a small area. Those businesses have costs associated with flooding, so that needs to be addressed.

Turning to other fiscal challenges and solutions, we would welcome a reform of business rates. I have long debated in this place how disadvantage and disincentives impact on the sector. Frankly, the Government have demonstrated a sticking-plaster approach during my time here. I am glad that Labour is listening and that it will bring in reform of business rates, but I plead that it puts those reforms in its manifesto so that everyone can be clear about that.

The hospitality sector and other businesses in York have talked about a profit-related tax to make it a fairer system in the long term; I urge the Minister to look at that.

The sector's turnover in York is worth £1.16 billion annually and is ranked 16th highest in the country. For a relatively small, concentrated area it employs 16,500 people across 1,283 venues to date. However, there is a 5.4% vacancy rate—484 jobs—so we need to consider the impact that is having on the sector's ability to stay open full time and welcome people into their establishments. I recognise how York has weathered this stormy time and I recognise its resilience. People enjoy coming to the incredible city of York and taking advantage of the offer that we have, but that should not be taken for granted. Ensuring that resilience measures and fiscal reforms are put in place is important for the long term for the hospitality sector in York.

I note that the overseas sponsorship programme has offset some of the vacancy issues, not least for chefs, and we need to ensure that the labour shortages are tackled. I ask the Government to look again at the impact that withdrawing from such schemes will have.

A focus of my work looks at how we can increase the family offer in York. We really need to broaden the base of people wanting to come and use our city for a broader interest. I certainly welcome those interested in talking about the family coming to York because that will also build greater resilience for the longer term.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

I know that the Minister understands the sector well, given his previous roles. Indeed, he could come on a whistlestop tour round the city with me. I urge him, as we come up to the next fiscal event, to allow an extension, a quick win, on the covid loans. Businesses could make further investment to grow their businesses if they could pay their loans back over a longer period. That would be a quick and easy win for the Government.

On VAT, I concur with the remarks made earlier. Hospitality Association York has also made the case to me that a drop in VAT would very much assist the sector and provide an economic stimulus. We all want to see that benefit passed on to consumers and customers who use the sector. I want the work that Hospitality Association York is doing in growing the skills and talents in the sector and building for the long term to be recognised and supported.

Finally, as York becomes a world heritage site and York Central is developed for the future, we have great opportunities for investment beyond the walls as well. Up in Acomb we see many independent businesses now providing great opportunities. Right now we are in the heart of the most challenging season for our sector. Despite the ice trail coming up this weekend, the Viking festival over the half-term period and the residents' festival that we have just had, we need action from the Treasury to ensure that the hospitality sector is sustainable now and in future.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I ask Members to stick to five-minute speeches because I want to try to call everybody and give equality to all.

9.53 am

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell.

UK hospitality is an integral part of our national economy and this debate would be incomplete if we did not consider the impact of tourism. It is worth £127 billion to our economy—9% of GDP—and hospitality alone is worth £56 billion, with 2.5 million people working in it and 233,000 businesses directly related to it. I started my career waitering in Royal Hospital and in the Queen's Gallery. I also served in a cocktail bar in rural Dorset—one can imagine how successful that was. It is a perfect way of entering the working environment, placing service at the centre of its values and making sure that people across this country can enjoy the fine local produce that we produce in this country.

However, hospitality has been deeply impacted by the pandemic, lockdowns, the tightening of belts, and of course the strikes. Those attending the UK Hospitality event yesterday will have heard time and again how many such businesses throughout the country have been impacted by rail strikes, costing them hundreds of millions of pounds each year. There needs to be an answer to that; perhaps the Minister will remark on it.

In the course of the past four years, an industry, a sector, that has been routinely hit by lockdowns, pandemics and strikes has had a great deal of help from the Government, whether it was the eat out to help out scheme or the campaign that I led by getting Conservative

colleagues from across Parliament to support a reduction in VAT—temporary though it may have been—to 5%, in parity with what our European friends and neighbours had done. The results of that cut to 5% were enormously successful. Businesses across the country are still calling out for the reinstatement of that reduction, which is why I think that the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), who has done so well to call this debate, will find that there is very little opposition when it comes to reducing VAT. That 5% rate proved that it was possible to create a sustainable business model for the tourism and hospitality sector to thrive, to give it the resilience to weather certain shocks and to maintain confidence in the sector overall. We also looked at how we could change licensing rules. We have taken a far more European approach in allowing businesses to operate outside, on pavements, which has been enormously successful in places like mine and across south Devon.

However, the challenges remain. The challenges for the whole sector are that there are labour shortages, VAT is still high, energy costs are still hitting those operating in the sector and business rates need to be reviewed; I have already mentioned strikes. I would like to make one point about labour. Each of our constituencies will have hotels, pubs, bars and restaurants that are absolutely suffering over the idea of labour shortages, so I would like to make this point to any colleague here and anyone watching this debate at home. Within the terms of the UK-Australia free trade agreement there is something called the working holiday visa, for anyone between the ages of 18 and 35. People will be able to come over here for three years without any visa requirement, starting in July. No businesses seem to be talking about that, and it is our job as Members of Parliament to go back to our local businesses and tell them about it, because it will make a real and significant difference to their labour shortages, if they are able to prepare for it and capitalise on it when it comes in, this July.

In that difficult moment during the pandemic, it worked to reduce VAT to 5%, to give businesses that headroom—to continue not to have high tax bills, and to be able to supply their customers and pass on some of those savings. Where we are different from Europe is that although Europe has lower VAT rates it also has quite high tourism taxes. We must have a discrepancy for that, and my proposal to the Government is, I hope, a little simpler. It is that we reduce VAT by 10%. I know it is easy for Back Benchers to say, “We need a 10% reduction in VAT—you figure out the cost,” but let us do it on a sliding scale over the next five years, during which we reduce VAT by two percentage points each year, so that we get down to a level that is fair and acceptable to a sector that has gone through so much.

As has been said about business rates, we do need to ensure that things are passed on. It is disappointing, when we have been generous in government, that we have not seen the devolved Administrations passing that generosity on. The hon. Member for Stirling said that he was disappointed by his own Government's actions in this area.

We must also end the train strikes. They are having an impact, whether people are in London or any other city, or even in rural areas such as south Devon. We must get to a point at which we are looking to deal with the strikes and stop that unbelievably catastrophic stranglehold on our tourism and hospitality sectors.

Finally, Ms Bardell, whether you are staying at the Berry Head Hotel and drinking Salcombe beer or Hunts cider, or still on dry January and enjoying Luscombe's drinks at the Pigs Nose, the Barrel House, the Durant Arms, the George, the Queens Arms, the Kings Arms or the New Inn Morleigh, or just visiting Gara Rock and eating at the Crab Shell, the Seahorse or Rockfish, it is important to remember that they are all a great deal closer than any of those fine establishments in Cornwall and you can reach them far more easily.

9.58 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I will see whether I can follow that! I am grateful to serve under your guidance, Ms Bardell. The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) has done this place a great service by introducing this hugely significant issue.

One of the privileges of living among the lakes and dales of Westmorland is that we get to share our breathtaking landscapes with the world. We are a world heritage site and are Britain's biggest visitor destination after London. We are the place where 20 million people each year come to spend their leisure time, actively or passively absorbing creation in the raw. Those 20 million visitors create a tourism and hospitality economy with a value getting on for £4 billion a year. With 60,000 people working in it, the sector is Cumbria's biggest employer—across the UK it is the fourth biggest—yet it is so often overlooked. Because its interests are never closely tied to a single Department, it tends to fall between the gaps, and so do its interests.

This is a time when we cannot afford to overlook our tourism and hospitality sector or ignore its voice. Although domestic visitor numbers have not been bad over the past year or so, those visitors are not spending as much as they used to, on the whole, because of the obvious impact of the cost of living crisis. To put it bluntly, as people are now paying £400 a month more on mortgage payments thanks to the 2022 Budget, they do not have spare money to spend in the pubs and restaurants of the Lake district. There is a real need to support our hospitality and tourism economy in Cumbria through prudent and effective measures.

VAT rates for hospitality are significantly higher in this country than in the rest of Europe. The nature of tourism and hospitality is that our competitors are overseas, so this unfair playing field is a self-imposed penalty on our economy. Even a small reduction in VAT to 12.5% for tourism and hospitality would give the Treasury a net fiscal gain of £4.6 billion over 10 years. The Government are desperately thrashing around for even the merest whiff of a Brexit benefit, and here is one staring us in the face. The question is: will the Government do it? How about looking at a tax-free shopping scheme for international visitors? According to UKinbound, launching a new VAT reclaim scheme would generate £4.4 billion over two years for the UK economy, with a net benefit to the Treasury of £1.3 billion.

To support our visitors, to continue to be an attractive destination and to ensure we are fair to our local communities, we also need funding for our local infrastructure. The fact is that our councils, our health service and our police service are not fairly funded to take account of the impact of our huge visitor numbers. Some 85% of our visitors come by car, adding to the wear and tear on our roads, yet it is local people who

have to bear the brunt through council tax. The Government should amend their funding formula to end that unfairness. There would be no need for any talk of tourism taxes if the Government funded us properly.

One thing the Government did that we are very grateful for, as we campaigned for it for many years, was allowing our councils to double the council tax on second homes. Indeed, I think I mentioned it in my maiden speech. Yet the Government's lack of urgency and failure to get their act together has meant that councils are not allowed to do so until 2025, even though it was expected to happen this April. That will cost Westmorland and Furness Council £10 million and will hit our spending power and our local communities. I add my voice to those that say that business rates, temporary cuts and short-term reductions are all welcome, but they do not help our businesses to plan in the long term. There needs to be radical, long-term action, and it needs to happen now.

We have talked about several parts of the hospitality industry, including our pubs, which are so important. For many lakes and dales villages, the pub is the only community asset left. It has been a pleasure to work alongside the community in Orton recently to try to ensure a long-term future for the George hotel. We want our communities to have more power to retain their pubs, and we need to support publicans by reducing their costs and their taxes, so that their pubs can continue to be the hub and the centre of our local communities.

I mentioned that 85% of our visitors come by car. It does not need to be that way. If we introduced the possibility of a passing loop at Burneside to the Lakes line to Windermere, we would effectively double the capacity of that line and could bring so many more people to the lakes by rail.

The No. 1 issue that businesses throughout Cumbria face in hospitality and tourism is that our workforce is far too small. I am told by 63% of hospitality businesses in Cumbria that they are operating below capacity because they do not have a big enough workforce to meet demand. There are two fundamental reasons for that.

First, the Government have failed to act to counter the collapse of the long-term rented market into Airbnb properties. We have seen an eviction—a Lakeland clearance—of local people who could work not just in hospitality and tourism but in care, education, health and other sectors. The Government promised to bring in a separate category of planning use for short-term lets, but they have failed to do so and have let my community down in the process.

Secondly, our visa rules are ludicrous, short-sighted and impractical. We need to put chefs on the long-term shortage occupation list. Some 80% of the workforce living in the Lake district are already working in hospitality and tourism. We have lakes, yes, but no overwhelming reservoir of untapped talent. What we need is homes for local people, a local workforce and a visa scheme that allows us to bring in the people we need to serve our 20 million visitors.

I really hope that the Minister will listen and bring in the action we need. All we ask is that he back a sector that will boost our economy to the tune of billions, if we only have the ambition to listen to and back our local businesses.

10.5 am

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye, Ms Bardell, and am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I am passionate about tourism, not just because I represent the best seaside resort in the country, but because my first job when my party was in opposition was as shadow tourism Minister. I am pleased that we are having this debate today.

Bournemouth is a vibrant, family-friendly seaside resort. We have three pillars to our economy: financial services, thanks to J.P. Morgan; creative industries, thanks to our fantastic Bournemouth universities; and tourism. Since the arrival of the railway in the 1870s, our part of the world has developed into one of the UK's leading destinations for domestic and international tourists.

From the Bournemouth International Centre, with which parliamentarians will be familiar from conferences, to the Russell-Cotes museum, the Bournemouth symphony orchestra and AFC Bournemouth, who are doing so well in the premier league and are still in the FA cup, there are so many reasons to visit. Bournemouth is proud to host the National Coastal Tourism Academy, which I hope the Minister will visit. It also has miles of spacious, sandy beaches, from Studland to Hengistbury Head, which is ranked among the 25 best in the world and the fifth best in Europe. All those things have helped Bournemouth to become one of the most popular, family-friendly resorts in the country, and they are complemented by the vibrant night-time economy, with pubs, restaurants, bars and clubs attracting thousands in the evening.

There is no doubt that hospitality plays a vital part in the local economy. A quarter of all visitors to Dorset come to Bournemouth. Tourism is a critical component of Bournemouth's prosperity: it represents 15% of the local economy, with a contribution of more than £500 million. It supports more than 15,000 jobs, both directly and through the supply chain.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, the impact of covid was colossal, and the hospitality sector's economic output dropped by 90%. The furlough scheme was welcome; nevertheless, 10% of the hospitality industry closed, never to recover. What saved many businesses in the hospitality sector was reducing VAT to 5% for food, drink, accommodation and attractions. The Government made it clear that that was always going to be temporary, with a planned gradual increase to 12.5% and then back to 20%. The hospitality industry, particularly in Bournemouth, is starting to recover—no thanks to the local council, which wants to ditch the local air festival, our flagship tourism event, and to abandon the blue flag schemes and build on car parks.

Numbers are returning to pre-pandemic levels, but solid, permanent recovery will not be achieved if VAT stays at 20%. Today, licensed premises continue to shut at an alarming rate; indeed, more are closing than opening. VAT has gone up and down over the past few decades. In the years leading up to the 2008 financial crash, the UK maintained a VAT rate lower than in many other European states, at around 17.5%. After the crash, when VAT was slashed across Europe to encourage spending and stimulate economies, it was raised to 20% here.

My simple but critical call to action today is “Please listen to the hospitality sector, which is screaming out that VAT is too high, as more and more businesses are seriously impacted and unable to handle the increased costs of food, fuel and pay. Minister, please, please reconsider the decision to raise VAT back to 20%. Otherwise, you will face ever more business closures and you will subsequently raise less tax for the Exchequer.” The maths is very simple. Cutting VAT will mean more hospitality businesses staying open and thriving. That will lead to an increase in corporation tax income, because if their profits are higher, they will pay more tax.

I end by simply saying that Bournemouth illustrates the importance of hospitality: it gives a place a sense of identity and personality and helps bind a community together. Let's support our hospitality sector. Let's reduce VAT to 10%.

10.10 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Bardell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing the debate, and I welcome the Minister to his place. I remember his visit to Bath; in Bath, we consider him a friend.

My Bath constituency has a thriving hospitality sector that caters to local people and to visitors from all over the world. However, our businesses have had to deal with Brexit, covid and now high and rising costs. Bath's visitor numbers are recovering from the pandemic, yet many of our cultural attractions and hospitality venues are still struggling, with fewer visitors and increasing costs.

The difficulties that the sector faces are widespread. A survey by the Night Time Industries Association revealed a staggering 40% increase in total operating costs last year because of rent increases, energy costs, inflation and business rates. Businesses are trying to manage increasing costs while keeping prices affordable for customers, and it is smaller, independent hospitality venues that bear the brunt. Our high street is kept vibrant by the variety of pubs, restaurants and other businesses to choose from, but without financial assistance from the Government, only large chain companies are insulated from the cost rises.

The hospitality industry employs 3.5 million people nationally and contributes more than £50 billion in tax receipts to the Treasury. By employment, it is the UK's fourth largest sector. Many owners fear that they may have to close permanently in the coming year; many others have already shut their doors. In Bath we are still reeling from the closure of Moles, a small music venue that was loved and known across the UK for nurturing young and up and coming musical talent. Last year, 3,000 hospitality businesses closed. Among UK businesses that filed for administration in 2023, the third-highest sector was the hospitality industry, which accounted for more than 10%. The figures have nearly doubled in two years and owners are afraid that they could continue to rise, so it is important that the Government take note. Every single closure means the loss of people's livelihoods and of valuable community institutions.

Many businesses in my constituency have expressed disappointment that the Government decided to remove energy bill support. One pub's energy bill went up by

£35,000. If the energy bill support scheme that was in place until April last year had continued, that bill would have been reduced to £5,000. The Chancellor's decision to replace the scheme has meant that the pub now receives only £3,000. Under Liberal Democrat proposals, small and medium-sized businesses would have been offered Government grants covering 80% of the increase in their energy bills for one year, giving small hospitality businesses the stability that they need to get through these difficult times.

It is impossible to talk about energy without discussing the role of the green transition. The Government must accelerate the review of electricity market arrangements so that households and businesses alike can benefit from lower-cost renewables. That should involve decoupling electricity from wholesale gas prices. Renewables are now the cheapest source of energy, but their price is artificially linked to expensive natural gas. The Federation of Small Businesses has suggested a help-to-green scheme, which would provide direct financial support and advice to companies. That would include a grant to allow small businesses to invest in energy efficiency or microgeneration. The independent review of net zero also championed that idea. Have the Government looked at that?

The Government must provide the temporary help that small businesses need now, as well as long-term solutions to stabilise rising costs. We must act now to protect all the well-loved businesses in our constituencies from difficult times in future.

10.14 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing a very important debate.

The tourism and hospitality sector in Essex is valued at just over £3.5 billion, and supports over 60,000 jobs. In the debate thus far, we have heard about the enormous contribution made by the sector across the United Kingdom. With the spring Budget approaching, it would be remiss of me not to make my representations to the Minister and His Majesty's Treasury; I want to press the Treasury, and outline why further fiscal measures are needed in support of the hospitality sector and wider areas.

Across Essex, but specifically in my constituency, there is a strong case for lowering the tax burden on hospitality. We have already heard that is also the case for other parts of the country. We all have fantastic businesses in our constituencies; mine specifically has Colchester Zoo, the Langford Museum of Power, the Tiptree Tea Rooms—which most colleagues will know about—and many other venues, including a lot of hospitality and wedding venues, which did receive support from the Government throughout the pandemic. I pay tribute to those businesses because they have not only been resilient during the pandemic, but learned to adapt so that they can continue to grow and diversify.

Leisure businesses and attractions clearly suffer from volatility in the economy, and it is important that we do everything possible to support them, hence my modest call—and the collective modest call—for changes to the tax regime that we know would make the difference between businesses closing and surviving.

But although this is about surviving, it is also about thriving and growing; we already know about the impact on retail in our town centres and we have seen pressures in our local communities, but we need the sector to be vibrant and thriving. Central to that—and I make no apology to the Minister for saying that this is what we need—is a better labour market strategy. We have heard about labour shortages throughout this debate. I have been consistent, in my time not just in Parliament but in Government, in saying that I do not think it is right to associate or link our trade deals with automatic visas and some of the schemes proposed; I think we should have a better labour market strategy. We have to invest in the sector, grow the talent and pay people properly. We have a real epidemic of low wages in hospitality, and that is simply not good enough.

I would welcome the Government considering the whole issue of business rates, and I have also made representations on this previously. The freeze in the small business rates multiplier has been welcome, and I think it is vital, but we need a strategic, longer-term approach so that businesses can plan ahead, invest in the bricks and mortar of the properties they buy or lease, and look at how they can grow. With that, the 75% rates relief is welcome, but when reliefs of that size are removed, it clearly places seismic pressures on cashflows. We have to look at the sector from a basic day-to-day perspective and think about what this means for cash flows. Hospitality businesses operate with very tight margins, and they are having to absorb so many costs that they automatically pass on to their customers. I know that the Minister and the Treasury have heard me speak about this issue before, but we really need to look at it.

The case for reducing VAT has been made very clearly and I support it; we have seen so many issues around VAT levels, and their impact on hospitality and tourism. I absolutely support the case made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for reducing VAT on shopping and tourism; there is really big argument for that. VAT is complex and we need to do much more to simplify our tax system, as the Minister has heard me say many times. We need a tax system that supports tourism and hospitality.

I am a great believer in encouraging overseas visitors to our amazing country—more so than perhaps other countries in the world. In Essex, we are always open for business, and one of our prized assets is of course Stansted airport. I praise its 24% growth in passenger numbers last year to nearly 28 million. It has massive and exciting expansion plans—I have also always supported expansion at Heathrow airport—and should be commended for supporting employment and apprenticeships. We need our airports to attract more tourism not just to Essex but to Britain; this is about the health and wellbeing of our country. I am therefore making the case to the Minister and pressing the Government yet again to re-examine their approach to tax-free shopping for overseas visitors, and to duty free at arrivals and air passenger duty—there is a long-standing argument in that regard. The case for tax-free shopping has been made many times in this Chamber and the main Chamber, and it will bring in huge dividends.

It is important to reflect, with the spring Budget coming up—that is why we are having this debate and everyone is making representations. I genuinely believe

[Priti Patel]

in making changes, as they could result in another £4 billion into our economy on the shopping side of things, but the principle of cutting tax and reducing the tax burden is also one of the most effective ways in which we can grow and support the hospitality sector, and that means more growth and more sustainability.

I urge the Minister and the Chancellor to take the maximalist approach—using the fiscal levers at their disposal to really support these businesses across all constituencies of the United Kingdom. They are the backbone of our economy and many of our communities, so of course we want them to thrive and grow.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): We now come to Front-Bench speakers, who have around 10 minutes each, which should allow the sponsoring Member to sum up at the end.

10.20 am

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is an honour and a privilege to see you up there in the Chair, Ms Bardell. Like so many colleagues, I started working in the food and hospitality industry. I was a shelf-stacker in Tesco, a caddie on the Old Course in St Andrews, and I worked in a cocktail bar. I have to say, cocktail bars do rather better in Glasgow than it sounds like they do in other parts of these islands.

Like many of my colleagues, I spend a lot of time visiting local businesses. Indeed, I was delighted recently to host the First Minister Humza Yousaf at the excellent Unorthodox Roasters in Kinross, where I chaired a roundtable discussion with business owners in the hospitality trade from across Ochil and South Perthshire. It was a listening exercise for the First Minister, with regional entrepreneurs updating him on their successes and their struggles. We were joined by an award-winning ice creamer, Stephen Sloper, from Penny Licks in Tillicoultry; those from Unorthodox Roasters themselves; Alex from the Glenturret distillery; and my friends from Café Rhubarb in Dollar.

Everyone, from the owners of a wee Syrian café in Alloa called Syriaana—who arrived as asylum seekers and are now embedded in their community—to Scotland's oldest distillery, kept telling us variations of the same story: times are beyond tough; and costs are so high that they are simply unsustainable in the long term. One business owner said

“the big issue which is strangling us is gas and electricity costs.”

That is a common refrain. The Westminster Government and the Prime Minister set out their solution: drill for more oil and gas in the North sea. Remember, that was the oil and gas that, during the independence referendum 10 years ago, they told us was worthless and about to run out. Due to disastrous decision making by successive Labour and Tory Governments, North sea energy is sold back to us at world market prices. This will not make energy cheaper for people in Scotland. Clean renewables are the future. To the glaikit Tory MSP who demanded to know what we would do when renewables ran out, the key is in the name—they are renewable.

The hospitality sector needs help now. Westminster has the levers to control VAT, and as we have heard from Members all around this room, it is important to get VAT down. The UK Government refuse to take

measures to limit energy prices, so let them instead give the businesses in our communities a break by lowering VAT. We have been out and about talking to businesses in Alloa this past week to get a sense of the difference that a VAT reduction would make. Alison Turner, from the Ladybird Tea Room, said that this reduction would be “an enormous help”. Craig, the owner of the Royal Oak in Alloa, said,

“When the previous VAT reduction happened, it was amazing. It made such a difference.”

The owners we spoke to had little faith that Westminster would act to help.

In his latest toe-curling party political broadcast, I noticed that the Prime Minister briefly stopped attacking asylum seekers in order to pose in front of a massive sign reading, “TAX CUTS”. We might think, “Oh, good! A chance to relieve the burden on those hardest pressed in these difficult times.” No, of course not. He wants to cut taxes for the wealthy so that their families can benefit from inheritance tax cuts. Earlier this morning, we discovered that the Labour leadership now wants bankers—[*Interruption.*]

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. If Members at the back would like to make an intervention and have it on the record, I am sure we would all be very interested. If they do not, perhaps they could keep their comments quiet so that the rest of us can hear Mr Nicolson deliver his speech.

Mr Ellwood: On a point of order, Ms Bardell. This is Westminster Hall; this is not “Just a Minute”, but if it was “Just a Minute”, that contribution would probably have been a deviation.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): I say kindly to the right hon. Gentleman that whether in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, that is not a matter for the Chair; that is a matter of opinion. The right hon. Gentleman is entitled to his opinion, but it is not a matter for the Chair.

John Nicolson: And that would certainly have been repetition; we all know the rules of “Just a Minute”—in fact, some of us have even been invited to be on it. If I may continue, I was about to highlight the new Labour policy of allowing bankers to keep tens of millions in bonuses.

The one subject that everybody in the hospitality sector wants to talk about is Brexit, and what a disaster it has been. The Gleneagles Hotel in my constituency is world famous, but it cannot get enough staff post-Brexit and so cannot operate at full capacity. Harvesters cannot get enough people to pick fruit and other crops. A cheese manufacturer in my constituency fears that they will have to lay off staff because one of their ingredient suppliers in France does not want to do the mountains of post-Brexit paperwork; it is simply not cost-effective.

The Glenturret distillery has stopped exporting to several European Union countries because the post-Brexit labelling rules are too cumbersome and expensive. It has told me that it sometimes now takes longer to get whisky to Paris than to Japan. This is the Tories' Brexit dividend. And what of Labour? Well, it is now up to its oxters in Brexit Kool-Aid, too. The Labour leader tells

us there is “no case” for rejoining the EU. Try telling that to young Scottish voters or to businesses in my constituency.

I am glad that this debate has been brought forward by my SNP friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith). I am glad that Humza Yousaf spent so much time with entrepreneurs in my constituency. I thank all the businesses in Alloa and elsewhere for giving me their thoughts so that I could bring them here to the Westminster Parliament. The Minister, a friend of mine from our days on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is an expert in this field. He cares deeply about it, is knowledgeable about it and was passionately anti-Brexit; he warned wisely and accurately of its dangers, and I know that he will be listening carefully.

Tim Farron: It will be no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I kind of agree with him on the whole Brexit situation but, being practical in consideration of where we are now, would he press the Minister to consider the UK reaching out to other European countries for youth mobility visa schemes? We have arrangements with a number of countries around the world, but to badly paraphrase “Father Ted”, their populations are small and far away. The only European country we have such a scheme with is Andorra. We could have arrangements with Poland, Spain and France, which could open up a source of labour for both his community and mine.

John Nicolson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I lament the days when the Lib Dems were with us as an anti-Brexit party. That ship has sailed, and we are the only party now that is anti-Brexit and wants Scotland to rejoin as an independent country.

I fear that negotiations with the European Union are going to be tough on any accommodation whatsoever—I mean, Westminster has few friends in Brussels these days. I have great faith in the Minister on this particular issue, though I doubt his pro-Brexit Labour and Tory colleagues—trembling before the power of Mr Murdoch and his press baron Brexit chums—are much in a mood to listen with such an open mind.

10.28 am

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in Chair, Ms Bardell. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing this debate on fiscal support for the hospitality sector. I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Opposition. We have heard Members from across the House speaking passionately about the importance of the hospitality sector, in the jobs it brings to local economies, the vitality it brings to our high streets and the enjoyment it brings to all our lives. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) in particular spoke about the importance of Government policy to the many hospitality venues in her constituency. Not only does the sector provide 3% of the UK’s economic output and billions in tax revenues for the Treasury; it is a central part of our social lives. That is why our constituents value the hospitality sector so greatly and are so keen to support it.

This debate has been an opportunity not only to speak about the policy but to recognise the sector’s central role in British life, including the way that it

underpins high streets as places that communities take pride in. Because of time constraints, I will resist the temptation to mention all the cafés, pubs and other venues in my constituency, although I congratulate other Members on their valiant efforts to do so—I particularly commend the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for getting so many references into his speech.

In my constituency of Ealing North, it is hard to imagine Pitshanger Lane without Cinnamon café, where I first went with my grandparents many years ago. I thank the café for its excellent coffee and sandwiches, which keep me sustained and happy whenever I pop in as a customer. A few hundred yards away is the Duke of Kent, which is a gem of a pub that I am glad to be able to enjoy, but a couple of miles away is one of my favourite pubs, the Black Horse, which sadly closed just over a year ago. It is such a deep shame to see it boarded up whenever I walk or drive past. It is a sad reminder of the struggle that many hospitality venues face and of the real loss that local communities can feel when they close.

Our analysis shows that we have lost over 6,000 pubs from our high streets since 2010. Many hospitality venues are finding it harder and harder to succeed, because of high inflation, staff shortages, rising rents and the burden of business rates. At the same time, their customers have less money to spend on enjoying what pubs, cafés and restaurants have to offer, because their wages have flatlined, while taxes and the cost of living climb relentlessly.

Many hospitality businesses may have been hopeful when they heard about the Government’s 2019 manifesto promise of a fundamental review of the business rates system. However, the fundamental review never materialised, and trade groups representing businesses on the high street have expressed their disappointment. In March last year, the Federation of Small Businesses stated that

“the 2019 Manifesto commitment to hold a fundamental downward review of business rates has not happened...these changes do not amount to the fundamental overhaul the system needs”.

Meanwhile, the British Retail Consortium said that the Government’s rates review report

“falls far short of the truly fundamental reform that is needed and was promised in the government’s 2019 manifesto.”

In the absence of fundamental action from this Government, Labour is committed to scrapping the current system of business rates and replacing it with a new approach that is fit for the current economy. As the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), has set out, if Labour were in government, we would scrap and replace business rates, and shift the burden away from hospitality and retail businesses on the high street, which continue to shoulder a heavy burden compared with those that operate primarily in the digital economy. Our new system would incentivise investment, promote entrepreneurship and reward businesses that move into empty premises. It would help the hospitality sector to thrive once again. Our plans for business rates form just one part of our five-point plan to reverse years of decline and revitalise local high streets, alongside our commitments to stem rampant energy bills, stamp out late payments, revamp empty shops and tackle antisocial behaviour.

[James Murray]

Before the next general election, we expect another Budget, so I would be grateful if the Minister explained what representations he has had from the hospitality sector ahead of the Budget in March and what proposals he is considering to support hospitality this year. I am sure that many businesses will be interested in the Minister's response. In this year's general election, the Opposition will offer the change that businesses need: a Government that are ready to work hand in hand with businesses, get the economy growing and do everything we can to support the hospitality sector to thrive.

10.34 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Bardell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing the debate, and thank everybody who has contributed. Everyone contributed in a very constructive manner—until a few minutes ago. Many hon. Members graciously commented on my previous role. As tourism Minister, I had the real pleasure of visiting the vast majority of their constituencies, and it has been fantastic to have a tour of the UK today. We have heard about the fantastic hospitality, tourism and leisure offerings in everybody's constituencies, including some absolute gems that make us very proud of this industry.

The hospitality and leisure sector is formidable. Definitions can sometimes be difficult; sometimes when people use the term “hospitality”, they are just talking about pubs, bars and restaurant, but we are thinking more broadly about the tourism, hospitality and leisure offering. To respond to the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), I can say that we engage with the sector all the time. Just yesterday, many of us attended the UKHospitality reception, at which the formidable Kate Nicolls articulated the sector's asks very well. We hear them all the time, and we are always listening to ideas.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister mentioned a range of hospitality businesses. Will the Government please look at ensuring the survival of struggling businesses such as small music venues, which will close if they do not get the support they need?

Nigel Huddleston: In this debate we have heard an ongoing request for simplification in recognition of these challenging times—we did, of course, spend £350 billion on the pandemic—and a series of requests for additional relief here, there and everywhere. Everybody recognises—the Welsh and Scottish Governments are also struggling with this—that financial times are tight and that every single one of those requests comes at a cost: either other people would pay more tax or spending would be reduced somewhere else.

We absolutely hear the requests, but as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) pointed out, over the past few years—certainly during the pandemic—the Government have recognised how vital the sector is and have been absolutely committed to it. It rightly received the immense support that it needed during the pandemic, including through the culture recovery fund to help music and heritage. So many sectors contribute to our tourism and hospitality

offering. If we had not made those interventions during the pandemic, many businesses that are here today would otherwise not be. Ongoing asks during the period of recovery, when we need to start paying back that £350 billion, are very difficult because there would be massive consequences for taxpayers and the whole of the economy. I understand the challenges, but I think everybody recognises that every one of those asks comes at a cost.

Tim Farron: We obviously have to be careful with the nation's finances and act within the envelope available to us, but what does the Minister make of the fact that UKinbound, Cumbria Tourism and others say that a variation of VAT levels would be of net benefit to the Treasury? Has he analysed those assessments? I am sure he has met those outfits personally.

Nigel Huddleston: I suspect I could spend the whole of this debate answering Members' questions rather than going through my speech, much to the chagrin of my officials. Again, I understand the request. Many hon. Members pointed out that I was the one making these requests to the Treasury not so very long ago, for all the reasons they outlined, but we all recognise that we have to find the balance.

The point about dynamic modelling is really important. I will come on to VAT in a moment, but we must recognise that one of the biggest challenges of all requests for VAT relief is whether it will be passed on. There is not a 100% fantastic record of that happening in the hospitality and tourism sector or across the board, for understandable reasons. Cash flow was key during the pandemic, so not everybody was able to pass on the VAT reductions. When it comes to future requests for VAT reductions, we must be absolutely confident that they will be passed on, and that applies to multiple sectors.

Mr Ellwood: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) mentioned the forthcoming Budget. Is there anything the Minister can tease us with? Can we look forward to anything in the Budget to support the hospitality industry?

Nigel Huddleston: I do love it when former Ministers try to tempt me in that way, knowing full well what the answer will be. What I can say is that we are listening.

I have gone off script for the past few minutes to try to respond to hon. Members, who have spoken eloquently and with real consideration of the challenges with their asks. There are no easy answers, given the challenging financial services. I and the other Treasury Ministers, and certainly the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, are always listening. We are always open to listening to evidence-based information. In that context, I cannot make any hints or promises about what may be in the upcoming Budget, but I can say that the view and opinion of the hospitality sector, especially as embodied by talented people such as Kate Nicholls at UKHospitality, and many others right across the UK, is valued. The sector used to be incredibly fragmented, and therefore did not have the voice it has now. Now, the sector comes in with credible, decent asks that need to be assessed with evidence. The voice of the hospitality sector has never been stronger in Government. I applaud all the lobbyists and groups for doing that.

Priti Patel: The Minister mentioned UKHospitality and Kate Nicholls and the way they have come together. Clearly, there are problems with labour markets in the hospitality sector, and there have been for many years—it is not a new phenomenon. What are the barriers to UKHospitality and the Treasury working together to create a labour market strategy for the hospitality sector?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, these are ongoing conversations across multiple Government Departments. In my former capacity as tourism Minister, I certainly had extensive conversations. There were sub-working groups at UKHospitality identifying areas for further work. That has had some impact, including through apprenticeship schemes. My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to highlight this issue. We have debated Brexit, which probably goes slightly beyond the current remit, although I understand the impact—and, by the way, the opportunities that come from that. My right hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the domestic skills agenda. The hospitality and leisure sector contributes to one in five new jobs, so it is absolutely pivotal to that.

If hon. Members will forgive me, I will try to get through some of my speech—and not try your patience too much, Ms Bardell—because I am not even on page 1 yet.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Just to clarify, the Minister has a little bit of flexibility. Given the extent of the debate and the number of questions, he is free to go over the 10 minutes and answer everyone's questions—as he would like.

Nigel Huddleston: I will make sure I leave a minute or two at the end for the hon. Member for Stirling to conclude—I may have shot myself in the foot there by giving everybody the opportunity to ask all the awkward questions they now have.

Like many hon. Members, my first job was in the hospitality and leisure sector, with a travel agent. I then had the very difficult choice at the age of 22 between taking a job for Arthur Andersen and becoming a Club 18-30 rep. I wonder if my life might have been considerably different if I had taken that slightly different path. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham is right: jobs in the hospitality and leisure sector help people with numeracy skills, self-confidence and interpersonal skills, which can stay with them for life.

We need to recognise that this sector is not just about part-time jobs for students or young people; we should not forget that there are also valuable, often very high-paying, long-term careers in the sector. The sector has evolved and changed, and is now a major contributor to the UK economy, with £140 billion of economic activity. There are masses of opportunities there, but the reputation and image of the sector is sometimes one of its inhibitors. I am therefore a huge champion of the sector for all the reasons we have outlined.

We have had quite a lot of debate today about the various support measures, including business rate relief. It is worth remembering that the Government provided £16 billion of business rate relief in England through the pandemic. In addition, we launched the temporary 50% retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme at the 2021 Budget. That was built on in the 2022 autumn statement, and the Government announced further tax cuts to the sector in last year's autumn statement—about

£4.3 billion over the next five years—and extended the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme at 75% up to a cash cap of £110,000 per business for 2024-25.

As has been recognised, the Labour Government in Wales and the SNP Government in Scotland were not able to extend those reliefs. I recognise that everybody realises there are considerable financial pressures, but with the greatest respect to my opposite numbers, who have been somewhat critical, I do think this is important and it is something I will play up very heavily: we have done things in England, where we have controlled the levers, that have not been done in Wales and Scotland.

Overall, this tax cut is worth about £2.4 billion for around 230,000 retail, hospitality and leisure properties to continue support for our vital high streets and protect so many small shops and businesses. The Government have also decided to freeze the small business multiplier for the fourth consecutive year. That will protect over a million rate payers and 90% of all properties from a multiplier increase.

For example, as a result of the changes, the average independent pub will receive about £11,800 of relief off their final business rates bill in 2024-25. Combined with the small business multiplier being frozen, they will benefit to the tune of about £12,800 of support. I repeat: that is not the level of support that they would get in Scotland or Wales.

A few points were raised about other areas, and I remind hon. Members that reliefs are also available for improvements in property. If there is an incremental rateable value because of improvements, that will not be included for the first year where eligible. I also remind hon. Members about the changes in alcohol duty and the Brexit pubs guarantee, which are designed to support the pubs sector and to help it operate on a level playing field with supermarkets.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) made many points about skills and jobs. I will not repeat what I said, because I think I have made the point that we are very aware of the importance of that sector and the role we have in developing skills and opportunities.

Cutting VAT was mentioned by nearly everybody, and I want to be clear on this point. As we all know, VAT is a major contributor to the nation's finances, which we then spend on our vital public services. It is forecast to raise about £173 billion in 2023-24. Since we left the EU, we have been taking advantage of multiple reliefs. I believe that if we were to rank ourselves against all other EU countries for the total number of reliefs we are able to exercise through VAT, we would be about second or third. We have been taking advantage of leaving by reducing reliefs and making real differences where and when we can.

The VAT cut for tourism and hospitality that we made during the pandemic came at a significant cost of more than £8 billion. Reintroducing it would come at a considerable cost. That was just one element of the support for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector during the pandemic, but it was a really important part of it.

Anthony Mangnall: I thank the Minister for that response; it is very helpful to get an understanding of what the costs would be around VAT. Was any modelling

[Anthony Mangnall]

done of what would have happened if we had not made that cut and what the impact would have been in terms of lost businesses and rising unemployment numbers? Could those models be produced or published, so that we can make that comparison in Parliament?

Nigel Huddleston: Various pieces of internal and external analysis have been released. We all know anecdotally from experiences in our constituencies that it literally did save businesses around the country. As I said, the Treasury keep tax policy under review all the time—that is a mantra, but it is true. The message I want to get across to colleagues today is that this will not be an easy choice. I understand the asks and we understand the impact, and there are various points of modelling, but it would not be an easy option. I repeat the caution that pass-through is vital when it comes to VAT relief. That did not happen wholly last time, but I understand why, as some of it was cash flow.

Mr Ellwood: Everybody understands the passion with which the Minister is pushing this. I do hope, as I teased last time, that he is having private conversations with the Treasury and making the mathematical case very clear. A business that closes does not pay any VAT at all. A business that thrives because VAT has been reduced somewhat can then pay more corporation tax. That is the mathematical formula that we would like to see, which I think has been presented by UKHospitality, and which justifies reducing VAT to 10% in the hospitality sector.

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend makes a logical point. I assure him that I am listening, but I am not making any promises.

I will refer to a couple of other areas that hon. Members mentioned. I appreciate the tone adopted by the hon. Member for Stirling. He recognised that there are things that the sector is requesting and looking for that Scotland, Wales and other countries are not able to deliver. That does not mean that any of us are not sympathetic; it is about the balance of the support package that we need to deliver. Like many today, he commented on both business rates and VAT.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay has one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country, but also, as he said, one of those that is most reliant on this sector. He raised a variety of points, and he and I have had ongoing conversations about this subject, because he is such a champion of it. His point about the ongoing efforts to make sure that we get more inbound tourists outside London is pivotal. There are various opportunities and measures: VisitEngland, VisitBritain, VisitScotland, VisitWales, Discover Ireland and Discover Northern Ireland all do a fantastic job of helping to support and enable that tourism, plus there is a key role for our transport system.

My hon. Friend is right, however, that about 50% of all inbound tourism spend is within the M25. That is great, and we are not saying that that should be less; we are saying that we want it to be “London plus”. That is a key part of the tourism strategy, and I assure my hon. Friend that we are talking about this on an ongoing basis with DCMS and the Tourism Minister.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) highlighted issues in her fantastic constituency, which I have had the pleasure of visiting on multiple occasions. She highlighted the importance of heritage in the tourism and hospitality ecosystem, and also mentioned flooding. She may or may not be aware that there are opportunities for businesses that are severely impacted by flooding under what is called a “material change in circumstances”. Working with the valuation office, there are opportunities to see, on a case-by-case basis, whether some relief is available. She might want to see whether some of the businesses impacted could consider that, as well as other support measures that we have provided for those impacted by flooding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) raised multiple points. He highlighted the upside of some of the trade deals that we are doing, so his constituency is now probably going to be flooded by Australian barmen and barwomen over the next few years. That is not necessarily a bad thing; I wonder whether they are better cocktail waiters and waitresses than he was.

My hon. Friend also raised the important point that, although the headline rates of VAT in some of our European friends’ countries may be lower, there is often a sting in the tail of quite considerable—startlingly high, in some cases—tourism tax, sometimes at a very local level. There is not a huge amount of evidence to suggest that that works either. There is always a balance, and although something may look like a beneficial tax rate system, one only has to scratch beneath the surface to find that there is something a bit more to it.

Anthony Mangnall: The Minister is giving a comprehensive answer to all the points raised in the debate. I re-emphasise the point that, if he is worried about the £8 billion figure that was quoted as a cost for when we reduce VAT by 15%, he could get around that not only by using UKHospitality’s data, but by tiering it and doing a 2% reduction over a five-year period. I hope that would at least comfort the bean counters in the Treasury and reassure UKHospitality that we are going in the right direction.

Nigel Huddleston: I am yet to see the beans being counted, although I am sure that it happens somewhere. My hon. Friend is building on a very clear message that I have received from right hon. and hon. Members today.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I have had ongoing conversations over multiple years. I do not doubt his passion and support for the sector, or how important the sector is for his constituents. He was right to raise the issue of holiday lettings. I understand that he is disappointed with some of the measures that we have brought in, although some of those measures will make a real difference, including the ability to charge more for some rental properties. All I can say is that we are well aware of some of the additional lobbying for proposed changes and, again, that we are always open to further ideas.

Tim Farron: Although we need labour from outside, we also need to be able to grow our own talent domestically; that is the specific thing that will make a difference. The real problem is the collapse of residential properties for

long-term occupation. The answer to that is a separate category of planning use for short-term lets and a separate category for second homes. Will his Government choose to do either of those things? They promised to do at least the first one.

Nigel Huddleston: All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that we are listening. Some measures are being put in place that local authorities will have powers to implement, but I understand that a lot of people are not happy with the situation. I completely understand the challenges at a local level, particularly when it comes to employment and the unaffordable cost of housing in many parts of the country, as many Members have mentioned.

Rachael Maskell: In my speech I mentioned the extension of covid loans for businesses that have those loans. What is the Treasury's view on extending them so that investment can be made in those businesses elsewhere?

Nigel Huddleston: I cannot comment on any further changes, but there has been some flexibility with covid loans, as we have announced. This is important. Of course, we want those covid loans to be paid back, but that needs to be done over a period of time that is sustainable for businesses. This is in the context of the overall support, including the comments that I made about business rates relief and other things for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. We are aware that the sector was hit so hard by the pandemic and is still in the process of recovering—it is recovering remarkably strongly, but it is not out of the danger zone yet.

Steve Double: Will the Minister give way?

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister gives way, I just say that I gave him extra flexibility so that he could answer everybody's queries and questions, but I want to give an opportunity to respond to the sponsoring Member, the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith). So please keep the intervention short.

Steve Double: On the housing issue, one thing that the Treasury could do is level the tax playing field on the tax breaks between short-term holiday lets and residential properties. That would make a significant difference and would really help. Perhaps the Minister will take that message back.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend and others for their input today. I will briefly comment on a couple of more items before I close, Ms Bardell. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), which is another beautiful constituency that I visit frequently, raised a range of issues, including the importance of the environment in the tourism eco-system and environmentally sensitive tourism. I think we will respectfully disagree on the efforts being made by the Government on decarbonising and so on. I think we have a very proud record. I recognise

that there is a debate in this area, but her broader points about the contribution of tourism to the environment and the importance of sustainability are important.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) raised a range of issues, and I will present to him the challenge that I also presented to my opposite number, the hon. Member for Ealing North. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire made a comment about tax cuts just for the rich and wealthy, but that is so far from reality that I will have to respectfully disagree with him. If he does not believe that we are giving tax cuts to everybody—as I said, the national insurance cuts that we made were for 27 million people—I will present him with the same challenge: let us look at his pay packet for this month and see whether the contribution is lower than December's. If he does not believe that it is lower, with respect, why does he not give that money to charity or back to the Government? It is important that we recognise that the national insurance cuts are meaningful for 27 million people, including many people on low incomes. That is far from the characterisation of saying that these are tax cuts for the wealthy. We have a laser focus on making sure that the low-paid benefit from such tax cuts.

John Nicolson: I am sure the Minister will have heard me: I specifically referred to cuts in inheritance tax. That is what I raised in my speech. If he would like to tell us that that is a red herring and that no such cuts are intended, I would be delighted to hear it.

Nigel Huddleston: No such cuts have been made. As I said, the hon. Member's point was speculation and that is not anything I can comment on today.

Ms Bardell, thank you for your patience. I thank everyone for their contributions. All points have been taken on board, and I thank hon. Members for their passion for the sector.

10.59 am

Alyn Smith: In the time available, I will just thank colleagues for a very constructive debate with a number of good ideas. I think the Minister gets it. He has proven that he understands the sector and that he is passionate about it, but I would stress the cross-party urgency. Whether we are talking about a VAT cut to 5% or 10%, there is unity for a cut. Businesses that go under do not pay any tax at all. They do not employ anybody and will leave gaping holes in our communities. I think the Minister takes that point. He knows he has an opportunity in the Budget coming up. If the Chancellor brings forward measures to support the hospitality sector, nobody will applaud louder than I will, because this is urgent and there is a need for all of us to work together on this point.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fiscal support for the hospitality sector.

Real-Time Bus Information: North-East

11 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered real time bus information in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Bardell, and to open this important debate. I am pleased to see colleagues from the north-east here to support the motion. The Minister can rest assured that I will ask him when he last took a bus in the north-east, but I will start by talking about when I last did not take a bus. That was three days ago, when I chose to walk one and a half miles to Newcastle train station dragging a suitcase rather than wait at a bus stop for a bus that might not come. Had I been in London, I could have looked the information up on one of the many apps that show real-time bus information.

For me, the unreliability and unpredictability of bus services in the north-east is a continual frustration, but for many of my constituents, it is a blight on their life—a barrier between them and their work, their loved ones, their studies and their pastimes. It is a form of cruel and unusual punishment and, for some, a matter of life or death.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She will know, as I do, that there are constituents who are left stranded regularly—school children are left standing in the dark; people are missing hospital appointments or, as she did, having to walk; and people in the outer west really struggle or are not able to make a journey into the city centre on foot so have to save up for very expensive taxis just to get to basic necessities like work, hospital appointments and school. Does she agree on how important real-time information is so that people can rely on public transport and we can therefore grow our public transport service because it has a regular customer base who trust it?

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Her passion highlights the importance of this issue for our constituents in Newcastle and across the north-east.

Given that so many people rely on buses, it goes without saying that bus services should be reliable. The bus service improvement plan published just last year by Transport North East recognised that poor performance affects people who rely on the bus service, especially those from low-income households without cars. As my hon. Friend said, a cancelled or late bus can mean a missed doctor's appointment, trouble at work or even being left stranded, which makes women and girls especially vulnerable. Long waits are also challenging for many disabled people. It is clearly unacceptable and a major barrier to travelling confidently and safely.

People with cars may choose to drive instead, increasing the economic and environmental harms of traffic congestion. We want more people to travel by bus, which means making catching a bus as easy as possible. The difficulty in finding a bus to catch may be why we have seen a downward trend in local bus journeys in the

north-east since 2010, and after covid-19 passenger numbers have struggled to climb much beyond 80% of pre-pandemic figures.

In March 2021, the national bus strategy described one basic way to make travelling by bus easier: better real-time information. The strategy said:

“It is too difficult for non-users to find where buses go. Information online is often incomplete, misleading or hard to locate.”

It went on to say:

“None of the most commonly-used public transport journey planning apps and websites yet provide comprehensive, accurate, England-wide local bus information”,

and:

“A number of apps and websites give inaccurate information when tested.”

It also said:

“Information at bus stops is often poor.”

In a November 2021 debate on buses in the north-east secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), I mentioned a sign in Eldon Square that said, “Working with bus operators to bring you real-time travel information.” I said that the sign had been there for years. After I raised that in the debate, there was immediate action—they took the sign away. That is about all the action we have had under this Government.

As a self-confessed tech evangelist, I like to go on and on about how technology can improve all aspects of our life, including public transport. As an engineer, I know the challenges inherent in technology roll-out. However, this is not rocket science. Indeed, one enterprising Geordie, Mark Nelson, used the time he has spent waiting for buses to develop a bus tracker, which can be found on the SPACE for Heaton website. He told me that there are two key types of data missing that would make it usable by more people: cancelled services and the external factors affecting bus journey times. No matter how long bus companies force him to wait at bus stops, he cannot fix the bad and unreliable information that bus operators provide.

Another commuter into Newcastle Central station tells me that their three-mile journey can take anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour because Stagecoach buses simply do not match the live times on the apps. I waited at a bus stop in Kenton for more than 45 minutes as a succession of Stagecoach buses failed to turn up. Critically, it was only two or three hours before a Newcastle United match, and many fans were debating whether it was better to walk the three miles to the stadium.

I was at Haymarket bus station one evening when the bus we were waiting for disappeared from both the information board at the station and the app. Some left the queue, others phoned friends for lifts, but I clearly remember one distraught young girl on the phone to her mum trying to figure out how to get home safely. In the recent snow, people were forced to wait at freezing bus stops, even if their homes were only metres away, because they did not have real-time bus info. I hope the Minister agrees that accurate, real-time bus information is a matter of safety and accessibility.

When I asked a written parliamentary question on the topic last October, the then buses Minister, the right hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), gave a rosy picture. He told me that the Government had launched the bus open data service—BODS—in

November 2020, with the legal obligation to publish data coming in from 1 January 2021. He said that 98% of buses have an automatic vehicle location device, and that developers have been able to use BODS to create apps for journey planning in the north-east. If all that is true, why have things gone so wrong? Why are bus operators in the north-east failing in their duty to provide the most basic information on the running of their services—services that are subsidised by public money?

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): This is such a hugely important debate. Bus services in the City of Durham are, quite frankly, ridiculous. To add insult to injury, the former buses Minister, who my hon. Friend refers to, is from our patch.

Chi Onwurah: Exactly.

Mary Kelly Foy: Constituents tell me that real-time data is a huge issue, making it impossible for them to accurately plan their journeys, whether for a very rare dental appointment or to get to school on time. It is even worse for those in smaller rural communities where they are often put off using public services due to infrequent or unreliable bus services. It is really affecting them, especially when they are waiting, as my hon. Friend says, for up to an hour for a bus that may or may not turn up. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that we need to see buses in the north-east taken into public control, like in Manchester?

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for her passionate intervention. I agree with her that local accountability would be a huge improvement, which is why I am excited about Labour's plans to give every local authority the power to franchise their buses and reverse the ban on municipal bus ownership.

This is what I would like to see: when someone gets off the train at Newcastle Central station and puts into an app one of our wonderful destinations—Benwell, Scotswood garden, St James' park, Blakelaw community centre, Kenton School—I want them to know when a bus will come to take them there. Does the Minister agree that that must be the test? Why is it not happening?

Nexus, the Tyne and Wear passenger transport executive, told me that the real-time systems for passengers in the north-east are

"fragmented and need both investment and harmonisation".

Each bus company, whether it is Arriva, Stagecoach or Go North East, has an app and real-time feed, created to its own design and specification, decided by corporate headquarters HQ. I was told that the Arriva app is designed in Germany, making integration more challenging. Apparently, they did not know about the disappearing bus bug until I raised it with them, and they have still failed to respond to my letters. Will the Minister encourage them?

Different operators provide their data feeds to different standards. Should the Government not use their levers—guidance, bus service improvement plans, city region sustainable transport settlements and so on—to ensure greater collaboration and standardisation in real-time bus information provision? Nexus tells me there is no

specific duty on bus companies around real-time information that it can enforce, but the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North West Durham, told me that there is a duty to supply data. Does the Minister believe that local or regional decision makers should have the powers to enforce real-time information delivery to an agreed standard?

As I know from my time working in competition regulation, standardisation does not stunt competition but enhances it, by allowing the best, most innovative apps to win out. When people travel across our region they should not have to download 10 apps in order to do so. There is also the problem that the technical systems and infrastructure underpinning those services do not guarantee a high enough standard of information. They are too open to human error—for example, when drivers decide to change their running boards early in their route—and they cannot account for simple things like a bus being at the start of its route. What are the Government doing to enable improvements in infrastructure, after more than a decade of local government cuts?

It should not take MPs to get bus operators and Government working on this issue. Bus operators should be aware of the failings of their services. Where passengers find an issue, there must be a clear avenue to make a complaint and get redress. I note that the accessible information regulation, which applies to journey information while someone is on a bus, will have a clear complaints enforcement process; why can we not have something similar for the information needed before someone gets on the bus?

The legislation that created BODS requires that the Government publish a review of the regulations at least every five years. That deadline of July 2025 approaches. Specifically, will the Minister confirm that his officials will respond to the issues raised today, and that members of the public, or their representatives, will be able to provide feedback?

Lastly, I want to question why the previous Minister gave such a rosy picture when I asked my question in October, when we all experience such difficulty in accessing real-time bus information. Does the Minister understand the very real issues that bus passengers in the north-east are experiencing? If so, will he retract and condemn the tone struck by his predecessor? It is disgraceful that, when real-time bus information has been standard in London for years, we in the north-east still do not know when and if a bus is going to turn up. It shows what Tory levelling up really means: Geordies left to shiver at bus stops in the dark, both literally and metaphorically. Does the Minister accept that we need a Labour Government to fix our broken bus services? Finally, when did he last take a bus?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I was delighted only last week to take the 148 into work here in Westminster, having visited the local bus depot in Camberwell.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady has had 15 minutes. I have barely finished my first sentence, and she wants to interrupt me.

Chi Onwurah: In the north-east!

Guy Opperman: The situation is that the last bus I took was the 148 last week. *[Interruption.]*

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. If Members want to intervene on the Minister, they can do so in the usual way. Shouting from a sedentary position disadvantages not only themselves but the public, who are paying attention to an important debate.

Guy Opperman: The 685 and the 122, which are run by two different organisations, are the buses I take in Northumberland.

I will try to address some of the points raised. Clearly, we accept that buses are, without a shadow of a doubt, the most popular form of public transport in our country. They are essential to our national transport system in both urban and rural areas, and they play a vital part in the economy that we all wish to see thrive. In the year ending March 2023, around 128 million passenger journeys were made by local buses in the north-east. That is an increase of 12% compared with 2022. Following the introduction of the £2 fare cap in January 2023, bus fares in England outside London fell by 6.2% between September 2022 and September 2023. I congratulate the many bus operators in the north-east that have signed up to the subsidised £2 fare cap scheme, and I hope that others can see the benefit of doing so.

I will set out the national bus strategy and the bus service improvement plan in a little detail, and will then come to the more substantial questions of the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). In March 2021, the Government published England's national bus strategy, setting out the vision for bus services across the country. It sets out how we will deliver better bus services for passengers through ambitious and far-reaching reform.

As a first step, the Government asked every local authority to work with their bus operators to develop the bus service improvement plan—BSIP for short. Those plans are intended to set out each local authority's vision for improving bus services in its area and to act as a guide to help design local transport networks that are tailor-made for the communities they serve. The central aim of the national bus strategy—to get more people travelling by bus—can only be achieved by making buses a more practical and attractive option for more people. Strong local plans delivered through enhanced partnerships between local transport authorities and bus operators or franchising operators are crucial to achieving that.

The Government have invested over £4.5 billion to support and improve bus services since March 2020. We have consistently provided funding to subsidise local bus services through other routes. We have provided over £200 million a year through the bus service operators grant directly to operators to help keep fares down and maintain extensive bus networks. A further £42 million is provided to local transport authorities annually from the bus service operators grant to subsidise socially necessary bus services; of the 80 English local transport authorities outside London, Nexus receives almost £1 million a year to subsidise services in the north-east through that route. We are also providing funding to local authorities so that older and disabled people up

and down the country can travel on buses for free. That is a concessionary scheme that costs around £1 billion per year.

Further funding of £2 billion has been allocated to prevent reductions to bus services following the pandemic, £1 billion of which was allocated in 2022 to help local authorities deliver their bus service improvement plans. Subsequently, the Prime Minister announced an extra £1 billion in bus service improvement plan funding—redirected from the High Speed 2 decision—to deliver improved bus services in the north and the midlands as part of Network North.

Catherine McKinnell: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I have a number of points to make, but yes of course.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Minister for giving way. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) raised some specific issues about real-time information. I hope the Minister will not talk the debate out without addressing them. The Minister will also know that there are issues across the entire north-east regional network. He should bear in mind that providing more information could hugely increase tourism. For example, tourists come to our region, explore the beautiful Northumberland coast, walk halfway up it and get a bus back; I do so regularly, but relatively recently I stood for 45 minutes in the freezing cold, waiting for a bus to turn up in Bamburgh.

Guy Opperman: I was coming to the issue of real-time information on what is called the bus open data service. The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023, which were formulated in collaboration with local authorities, Guide Dogs and various other disability organisations, came into force on 1 October 2023, so the idea that we are not doing anything is, with respect, wrong. When it comes to real-time information, there are apps such as Google Maps, Trainline, Apple Maps, Citymapper and Moovit in every major region across England.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am trying to respond to the points raised by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). Is this a work in progress? Yes, it is, but it gives passengers control over how they travel on buses. The app helps them save time and plan their journeys.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: One second. I cannot be accused of not answering the point when I am trying to answer the questions asked by both the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North.

In 2020, we launched the bus open data service to support the digital transformation of bus services. It requires all bus operators of local services in England to open up high-quality, accurate and up-to-date passenger information, including timetables, fares, tickets and vehicle location information. Those improvements are clearly designed to give a better journey experience and provide people with the information they need to plan. That is clearly in all our interests.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Okay, but I am trying to answer the hon. Lady's questions.

Chi Onwurah: But the Minister is not answering my questions, and I fear—if it is in order, I will put it in this way—that he may be unintentionally misleading the House: he said that the Google app and other apps give people the information necessary to plan and control their journeys. Google does not provide real-time bus information in the north-east. If the Minister is not aware of that, he needs to spend more time on the buses and less time answering questions without giving the facts.

Guy Opperman: Clearly, there is a five-year review that comes through in 2025, as the hon. Lady identified. All aspects will be considered. She mentioned the shortage of bus drivers. We have a plan to address that, and we are working on trying to get—

Chi Onwurah: I did not mention bus drivers once. I do not know whether the Minister is reading from a previous speech, but I did not mention a shortage of bus drivers. The debate is on real-time information in the north-east. Can the Minister possibly speak to that?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady criticised the fact that buses were not there at the appropriate time. There is a common problem: it is unquestionably the case that bus operators up and down the country have a driver shortage. If there was a full complement of drivers, they would be more able to fill the gaps that occur from time to time. Doing that requires more drivers, which is why there is a plan, with local jobcentres and skills bootcamps, to train them up and ensure that we have a full complement—without a shadow of a doubt. That would enable bus

operators to provide more regular services and not have gaps, which unquestionably exist. Does that help in terms of real-time information? Clearly, gaps makes it difficult. I am acutely conscious that there are problems with the roll-out. The service was introduced only in the last couple of years, and it is being rolled forward and improved on a daily basis.

Let me address some of the other points raised by the hon. Lady. Franchising is a matter for the Labour party to pursue if it wishes to do so, but the evidence seems to show that it will lead to fewer services, not more. Clearly, the matter of how the Labour party is going to pay for that prospect is an interesting one. It is unquestionably the case that we want to see greater collaboration between the apps, and that it something that we are happy to do.

I am also happy to write to the hon. Lady to address any point in relation to the enforcement of the Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 by local bus companies. It is unquestionably the case that the regulations apply from, in the final instance, October 2026. They require the majority of local bus and coach service to incorporate audible and visible route, destination and upcoming stop announcements, which are particularly important for disabled people; we hope that they will be welcomed.

Finally, I stress that we have commissioned research to understand disabled people's experience of bus services and the infrastructure serving them. That is important. I acknowledge and appreciate that there are ongoing problems, although they are being slowly but surely addressed by the change in the regulations and the rules. We want to ensure that all people in society have the opportunity to use a bus on a regular basis.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Internationally Recruited Health and Social Care Staff: Employment Practices

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered employment practices for internationally recruited health and social care staff.

I am very pleased to introduce this very important debate on a very important issue, which in the hubbub of the emotional conversation around immigration has not, as far as I am aware, been thoroughly discussed or even addressed; it relates to the critical work undertaken by people in the health service and particularly in social care. What I have noticed, and what has been brought to my attention, is that because of high levels of immigration, we have brought in people who are recruited to work in our health and social care system who have often, though not always, been badly treated and poorly paid.

We all know that the health and care worker visa has been exempted from the increase in the earnings threshold for skilled workers, so a lot of the people underpinning our social care and healthcare earn very little income; they are also often very vulnerable and not particularly fluent in English. Given the concern felt by everyone in the House about human trafficking and modern slavery, there is also a real concern that a large number of healthcare and social care workers are being exploited in a way that none of us wants to see.

There is a particular issue with regard to workers who leave their contract before an agreed period. The code of practice allows for this, but there has to be a reasonable expectation; fees owed as a result of workers leaving their contracts early should be reasonable. I have heard reports of fees in excess of £10,000. That is completely unacceptable. In that situation, the contracted employee is being exploited—and it very much has the look and feel almost of extortion. I am sure that the Minister is very concerned about this issue. In the midst of a very charged debate around immigration, it is something about which any Government professing humanity, and looking after our people, should be concerned.

On top of all the exploitation, and in the context of staff who are often highly vulnerable, there are reports that rogue international recruitment agencies have extorted—that is a word I use with some degree of caution, but they have extracted payments—from people. That is really a form, dare I say it, of trafficking. Often when the workers find themselves in the UK, perhaps because of language barriers or a lack of knowledge, they find themselves with no recourse; their employment conditions are often deplorable, but they cannot find a way to push back against some of the more extreme demands. I mentioned repayment clauses, and anecdotally I hear that there is often a lack of understanding of what exactly people are signing up to.

We all understand that we need people who can operate in our social care system and support us in maintaining the health of an ageing population, but that employment needs to be regulated. One statistic that particularly horrified me was that between January and September last year there were something like 76 reports and referrals with modern slavery and human trafficking indicators in the care sector alone. That is a couple a week, and of

course that could be just the tip of the iceberg. I am very pleased to be able to have this debate, and I look forward to hearing what the Front Benchers—particularly the Minister—have to say.

I have spoken about the problem and outlined the situation broadly. I think we all feel a measure of concern about it, but we have to look forward and think about ways we can improve the situation. I have spoken to friends, and liaised with people I know at the Royal College of Nursing and some of its officials, and a lot of what they say is eminently sensible: there should obviously be standards for induction; the Department of Health and Social Care needs to establish pastoral and professional support; and there needs to be some sort of structure by which we can monitor potential exploitation and even trafficking in this area.

From what I have heard, we know very little about this phenomenon: we know very little about the number of people whose lives are blighted by exploitative practices. We talk all the time—in this House and outside—about immigration. We talk about the scale of immigration, but we rarely talk about the types of immigration that we are seeing, and I am not aware that we have dealt with this specific issue.

There is a code of practice for the international recruitment of health and social care personnel in England, which was last updated in August 2023, but what is a code of practice? It seems to me that it is really only a start in investigating the seriousness of what is being alleged. Publicly available hard evidence is difficult to come by, but we all know of reports; in my constituency, I have heard pretty hair-raising stories about the conditions in which many such workers find themselves.

I think there is a question about the code of practice. We should always be trying to get the best standards. I am sure that the Minister is fully aware of that, given her experience. We must always be interrogating ourselves, and ensuring that our guidelines and codes of practice are fit for purpose and up to the job. Given reports of rising numbers of exploitation cases, there is a broader question about whether the code of practice for international recruitment is really up to scratch. I know that colleagues and friends in the RCN have questioned whether the current code is really doing its job.

I am afraid to say that the issue of human trafficking and modern slavery will always be associated with immigration and bringing people into the UK. It is a very negative side-effect of seeing huge numbers of people coming into the UK about whom we know very little. I appreciate that the Minister is here today to represent the Department of Health and Social Care, but it is an issue not just for that Department; there are wider agencies of Government and more Departments involved. I will be very interested to hear what she says and, if at all possible, about the work that her Department is doing across Whitehall, with Treasury and Home Office colleagues, to get a better measure and a firmer grip of this chronic and increasing problem.

2.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I thank the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for leading the debate and setting the scene so very well. I have to put on record our thanks to all

the wonderful health and social care staff, who, as we all know, go above and beyond the terms of looking after us and our constituents; they give a wealth of ability, energy and time, and regardless of where we are, the job they do is undeniably challenging. We thank them dearly, and we mean that.

It is also always great to be here in Westminster Hall to give a Northern Ireland perspective, as I always do in these debates. Health is devolved back home, so the processes there are slightly different. I will also make a couple of important points—everybody's points are important—to remind hon. Members that although we are discussing internationally recruited health and social care staff, some of our own people here who wish to do the same job are restricted from doing so.

In November 2022, Northern Ireland welcomed 133 new international nurses, mostly from India and Zimbabwe, who took up permanent posts across Craigavon, Lurgan and South Tyrone hospitals. At such a challenging time for the health and social care sector—with ongoing demand for services, issues within the workforce, and lots of developments—ensuring sustainable care for others should be at the forefront of our priorities.

I am keen to say that there are clearly issues in terms of entry requirements and placements for those wanting to study nursing, medicine and so on in Northern Ireland universities. I suspect that the same problems occur in other parts of the United Kingdom. I am aware of so many people who wanted to be a nurse or in medicine, and wanted to stay in their own country to do so, but did not gain the entry requirements needed or there were no places for them. Whenever the Minister responds to the debate, perhaps she could tell us what discussions have taken place with those universities to ensure that the opportunities and number of places are increased—in Northern Ireland and across the whole United Kingdom.

For example, I have a constituent who attained 10 A* grades in her GCSEs—my goodness, this is a smart lady! She also completed her gold Duke of Edinburgh award and went to on to help with healthcare in small communities in Africa; that is very commendable. By the way, I know this lovely young lady well, and she will go far and do well. In her A-levels, she got 3 A* grades and one A, and she attended interviews but did not receive a place in university in Northern Ireland. If she had, she would have stayed in Northern Ireland. Whenever we talk about recruiting internationally—we should be doing so, and highlighting that issue—we also have to highlight the fact that we have talented people at home who wish to stay, but there is not an opportunity for them to do so.

Ultimately, that young girl went to Wales to study, with a further £5,000 of debt for each year of her degree. She is now a junior doctor in Cardiff, but the point is that she should have been given that opportunity in the place where she wanted to live, work and serve. The question for me is: will she ever come home to Northern Ireland? While Wales has gained her, Northern Ireland has lost her. I am all for securing our health and social care workforce, and if that means going international, let us do that; but there is also a source of talent back home.

There seems to be an issue with those who want to study nursing in their own country but are unable to do that because of placement issues, so will the Minister tell us whether that is one reason why we are struggling

to maintain a steady workforce? If we can train them back home and keep them, we will not have to source them internationally. It all comes down to funding, which comes from Westminster. We need to increase the number of spaces that universities can facilitate. With great respect, I ask the Minister whether it is possible to engage with the Department for the Economy back home in Northern Ireland. Hon. Members have heard the news today: the Northern Ireland Assembly will be up and running, hopefully shortly. What can be done to give local students more opportunities to study in their own country?

Northern Ireland offers wonderful opportunities for international recruitment. We recruit internationally all the time. The number of people on the permanent register in Northern Ireland who were initially registered outside of the UK increased to 3,794 in 2022-23 from 3,399 the previous year—an increase of 400 international nurses. We recruit internationally and are pleased with the contribution, ability and talent they bring to Northern Ireland. I welcome the wealth of experience they bring, but I want also to be a voice for those students from Northern Ireland who cannot get a place and therefore have no choice but to leave Northern Ireland and study, work and live elsewhere.

Will the Minister engage with the Department for the Economy back home in the Northern Ireland, with the Assembly, and with local universities such as Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and Magee university, to see what more can be done to facilitate greater placement opportunities for Northern Irish students in our local universities and, ultimately, to ensure that they take up nursing and medicine opportunities in Northern Ireland? The health service can only gain from that, and it would reduce the numbers of people we have to source internationally.

2.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Hosie, and it is great to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) has made a great contribution to the House by securing this important debate and making his interesting opening speech.

The exploitation of workers, wherever they are from and whatever the circumstances, is unacceptable, and we should stand against it. Likewise, we should be deeply concerned about the state of social care in our country. The two things are clearly interlinked. The background, of which I am sure many Members will be aware, is a sharp rise in shortages in the social care workforce. That rise essentially followed from Brexit, but other issues will have led to that shrinking of the labour pool.

Perhaps understandably, the Government's response in February 2022 was, among other things, to lower salary requirements and visa fees for migrant social care workers. That has had a significant impact on the numbers of people coming in on social care visas: there were 101,000 social care visas in 2022-23, up from 22,000 just the year before—a fourfold increase. As a result, vacancies have fallen. It does not feel like that in my part of the world, but the stats bear that out: there has been a reduction from 10.6% to 9.9% in 2023. The vacancy rate for the UK economy as a whole is 3.5%, so a bit of maths tells

[Tim Farron]

us that the vacancy rate in social care is getting on for three times above the national average. The increase in the number of care worker visas continues to accelerate, with 34,000 applications in quarter 3 last year.

One observation made by those who analyse the sector more scientifically—but it is my personal observation in my community as well—is that migrant workers are to a large degree replacing UK workers, who are moving to more attractive sectors. Incoming migrant workers are therefore not really filling gaps at all. Rather, they are filling additional gaps that British workers are vacating simply because care is not attractive financially or in other ways.

That highlights the big problem that is the source of all this. Social care is an utterly vital sector on which many of us depend, yet we pay a pittance to the people who lovingly and professionally care for the most vulnerable in our communities. They often have poor job security and poor working conditions, which of course impact on recruitment and retention. If this were improved, there is no doubt that we would secure more UK workers in the profession, and perhaps not put ourselves under pressure when it comes to the obvious issues of exploitation.

There was a debate in Westminster Hall this morning on hospitality and tourism. When people like me say that part of the answer is to have less restrictive visa rules for migrant labour, the Government say the answer is simply to pay British workers more. I would say to the Government, “Take your own advice.” Social care workers are paid a pittance because we underfund social care, so if the Government believe that is the way to ensure British people work in this sector, then pay them properly, and do not exploit people who come in from overseas either, because they are hugely valuable to what we are trying to achieve.

Exploitation should seriously worry us all. There are many pieces of evidence—the right hon. Member for Spelthorne set many of them out wisely and correctly—but one figure that really blew me away comes from the charity Unseen, the modern slavery and exploitation helpline. It reported a—wait for it—606% increase in the number of modern slavery cases in the care sector from 2021 to 2022. That is an absolutely astonishing increase.

As an adjunct, talking about migration policy is often emotive. Through the Government’s Illegal Migration Act 2023—it is the Act that is illegal, rather than the act of immigration—people arriving on our shores by irregular means will not have access to this country’s modern slavery provisions, unlike others. What will be the consequence? Many victims of modern slavery will not get the care they need. I also suspect that we will find that people will go to our shores and simply not claim asylum, going under the radar, and that they will be exploited all the more outrageously.

Returning to the issue at hand, the director of labour market enforcement has identified adult social care as a high-risk sector for labour exploitation, with live-in and agency care workers believed to be at particular risk. Employers who are guilty of exploiting their staff are unlikely to demonstrate any better set of ethics towards

the vulnerable residents who are also in their care. The increase in the salary threshold for skilled workers will not apply to those coming in on health and social care visas, yet people on those visas will, from 11 March, not be permitted to bring in dependants. That is a cruel and demoralising thing to do to people who we rely on to care for those we need the most. It is likely to lead to fewer applications, worse retention, and therefore a bigger problem for our social care sector.

In response to the vast increase in reports of exploitation of those on the health and social care visa, the Government have announced that care providers in England will be required to be regulated by the Care Quality Commission in order for them to sponsor visas. It is a good thing that care homes will have to be regulated by the CQC to sponsor migrant workers. My question for the Minister, however, is will they be required to have a minimum CQC inspection rating of good or outstanding before they are able to do so? Secondly, have any extra resources been provided to the CQC to enable them to undertake this role with the health and social care visa, given the additional effort it will involve? What powers will they have to enforce labour standards? Surely, due to the concerns raised, recruitment should only take place via agencies on the ethical recruiters list. I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

We need to value care work, and we need to reflect that in the pay and conditions people receive. That includes treating migrant workers well. I reiterate that the decision to end their rights to have family with them is cruel and pointless, given that those people will not have recourse to public funds anyway. It is a cruel and almost performative piece of policy. It seems that the Government feel all the more inclined to give into the temptation to put silly populism and appeasing a small number of people out on the margins of the electorate ahead of governing wisely and compassionately. Whether I agree with the Government of the day or not, I always hope they will govern wisely and compassionately, yet this is another example of them failing to do that.

Labour market enforcement needs to be better resourced. It is important to establish a single enforcement body that is accessible to workers in practice and adequately funded, that is provided with robust enforcement powers, and that has secure reporting pathways. The Government must separate all labour market and immigration enforcement activity.

I have a few other thoughts about what else the Government ought to think about doing. The Health Foundation has suggested that we need to recognise that workforce planning must take account of the range of social care services and providers, as recruitment and retention can differ from place to place, and can vary considerably by care provider. For instance, places offering contract employment will find it hard to retain staff, and in some places the availability of public transport can have a massive impact on the retention of personal assistants. For those living in Cumbria, in Appleby, Ambleside or Arnside, the existence of the £2 bus fare is completely irrelevant if there ain’t no bus for them to use. That applies to people working in social care, but also to other parts of our community.

It is worthwhile getting to the very bottom of all this, which is the way we treat social care. Had we been living to the ages that we are now, when my late, great, right hon. Friend the noble Lord Beveridge wrote that important

report in the 1940s, and if families had been as they are today, then I am sure social care would have been included in the national health service right from the beginning. Yet in the decades that have followed, we have attached it to the side of the health service, like a rickety lean-to. It is time we treated social care as we always should have: as integral to, and equal to, the national health service.

The situation is awful. What are the diseases we fear—those which, I guess, we fear more as we get older? Maybe the two main ones are dementia and cancer. But what a lottery: those with cancer at least get their care provided through the national health service, while those who end up with dementia are on their own and might lose absolutely everything. That is a nonsense. I want us to channel Beveridge and do what he would do today, which I am certain would be to ensure that social care workers are considered equal in value to those working in the health service, and are paid and treated accordingly.

That is why I think that free personal care is something the Government should consider seriously. I am very proud that the current Scottish Government maintain a policy that we introduced when we were in power alongside the Labour party in the '90s and noughties. These issues are particularly relevant to communities such as mine. We are 10 years above the average age in Westmorland and Lonsdale. Our need for care is that much greater than in other parts of the country, and we value it hugely.

By the way, it is also vital that we value unpaid carers, who look after loved ones at great cost to themselves, and to whom we owe a huge debt. We should do more than just say thank you; we should change payments, benefits, and all sorts of other allowances that allow them to succeed. It was an honour for me to do the Great North Run last year, to raise funds for Carer Support South Lakes. Let us make sure we back those outfits that support our carers so well.

In conclusion, I am asking that we take the issue of exploitation seriously, that the Minister answers the questions that I and others have put to her today, and that we recognise that this is all a function of our failure to treat the labour market wisely and compassionately, and our failure to treat social care as we should. If we invested in social care properly and paid carers properly, the knock-on effect would be happier people who stayed in their positions, who were easier to recruit in the first place and who had career prospects. Those who are cared for would be happier and better cared for, and the pressure on our national health service would evaporate, or at least be alleviated, almost overnight.

In my communities in Morecambe bay and the rest of Cumbria, often more than 32% of the beds in our hospitals are occupied by people who are fit to leave, but for whom there is no care package to help them to leave. That has consequences for A&E waiting times, cancer waiting times and ambulance response times, and it is all down to the fact that no one has yet been brave and compassionate enough to tackle the care crisis meaningfully. I hope this Government will do, but if they do not, I am determined to play a part in doing just that in the next Parliament.

2.59 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for securing this debate. He made balanced and measured remarks and I share a number of his concerns.

I will begin my contribution with a huge and heartfelt thank you to our NHS and social care staff in Scotland, many of whom looked after me during the four months I spent at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow back in 2020 and who care for my constituents in East Dunbartonshire in our many care homes, GP practices, pharmacies and hospitals. This debate discusses a critical aspect of an issue that I continue to raise time and again: NHS workforce shortages. The Government's latest draconian plan to curtail immigration, banning those who come to these isles to work in the care sector from bringing their families, including children and spouses, is another shambolic and cruel attempt by the Government to shift blame. Anti-migrant and quite frankly racist rhetoric has become symptomatic of contemporary Britain, largely fuelled by the Government's culture war. In introducing the change in legislation, they have concocted a narrative that frames migrant workers as the problem. Let me be clear: this Government are the problem.

They have allowed our health and social care workforce to crumble in front of our eyes due to 14 years of austerity, starving it of much-needed investment. Preventing overseas care workers from bringing their families is a dehumanising move, viewing migrant workers as resources to be used for work rather than as the people that they are; people with families whom we need to come to these isles. Migrating to the UK for such arduous and underpaid work might be someone's best bet for a better future, but in doing so they are forced to leave their dependants behind, having to leave their families to care for ours.

Overseas care workers have been treated appallingly by this British Government. Many sold everything to fund their move to the UK. The Home Secretary and the rest of the Cabinet clearly do not value the social care sector since they were content to sign off on the visa rule changes. Disappointingly, the Health Secretary has defended the visa changes too. The only thing the announcement will achieve is to break up families, scare workers and erode trust.

Now, social care workers who come here face a sentence of destitution, and it is far too simplistic to suggest that there are ample numbers of people already based here to fill the gaps in the health and social care workforce. It is not a sector that pays adequately and people do not want to fill the gaps in employment, so we need people to come from overseas too to fill the skills gaps. The sector is struggling, and struggling badly, due to terrible political decisions.

Skills for Care, the workforce development and planning body for adult care in England, estimates an average 9.9% of roles in adult social care were vacant in 2022-23. That is the equivalent of approximately 152,000 vacancies. What are the Government doing to address those vacancies? They are making it harder for people to come here and fill them. The number of vacancies decreased by around 11,000 between 2021-22 and 2022-23 partly because of increased recruitment of overseas workers, demonstrating how crucial those recruits are in tackling the shortages we face.

[Amy Callaghan]

Donald Macaskill, the chief executive of Scottish Care, has said that workforce shortages are “an enormous challenge, and one of the reasons for that is the legacy of Brexit”.

He went on to say that

“what we need is a flexible immigration policy, which isn’t as hostile and toxic as the one we have now”.

The fact of the matter is that the social care sector cannot function without overseas staff.

Plans to prevent overseas care staff from bringing family members with them to the UK risk worsening the sector’s already significant shortages. If care workforce numbers fall, unmet needs will continue to escalate. Too many people in need struggle to access good care as it is. The plan to curb migration for care sector workers will undoubtedly only make that worse. We have an ageing population, which will need more care and we will struggle to provide that care without international recruitment. Those needs are being undercut by this British Government. Social care requires a major fix, but this certainly is not it. Without migrant staff, care homes could close and support would disappear for the vulnerable living in their own homes. The Minister must rethink this cruel visa plan before permanent damage is done.

There is another area in which this British Government cause a headache for our constituents. If the new restriction reduces the number of people who are migrating to the UK to work in the already understaffed care sector, it is unpaid carers who will bear the brunt. Those unpaid carers are already in a dire situation, with evidence suggesting that they are more likely than non-carers to live in poverty, to be isolated and to be depressed. Although many family members would continue to care for loved ones, even with more paid help, we should not underestimate the importance of paid care workers in providing support and respite.

Today in the UK, if someone performs unpaid family care for 35 hours or more a week and earns under £139 a week from paid work, they can claim carer’s allowance to help them get by, but that allowance is only £76.65 a week. The Minister is already struggling to attract workers within the UK to work in the care sector, and now she is facing additional barriers to overseas recruitment. That is all due to colleagues who are so obsessed with decreasing net migration that they will happily watch an understaffed health and social care service fall into further ruin.

How does the Minister justify dissuading social care workers from immigrating to these isles, when they are quite literally keeping our system afloat? When will the Government finally commit to solving the underlying problem by making care work a more attractive career path and by training, retaining and reforming in the health and social care sector? That last point was explored in depth by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

This Government fundamentally are not acting in Scotland’s best interests. We want and need more people to come and work in our health and social care services, not fewer. The alleged problems that this British Government are trying to address with their new policies on overseas recruitment are not issues for Scotland. We strive to create a warm and welcoming environment that encourages people from overseas to make Scotland

their home. We want and need overseas recruits here. The Tories’ hostile environment is not working, but there is another path for Scotland. The Scottish Government have outlined their vision in the policy paper, “Building a New Scotland: migration to Scotland after independence”. That policy will make it easier for people with skills and expertise to come to Scotland and contribute to our businesses, communities and economy. We would set visa fees at a fair level and offer family schemes to encourage those who come to Scotland to put down roots and make Scotland their home.

The Scottish Government are also supporting international recruitment with a pilot project that was launched in summer 2023 to support providers with sustainable and ethical international recruitment and to gather information on how we can best support both providers and the workforce through the visa sponsorship process and develop supporting materials to be shared across Scotland. We will not ask overseas workers to abandon their families to come and care for ours; that is not what Scotland is about.

Only once these decisions can be made by Scotland, for Scotland and in Scotland can we have the full power to ensure that our health service is well staffed and well looked after. It is clear that whatever party forms the next Government in this place will not make decisions based on Scotland’s specific needs, and it is only once we achieve independence that we can ensure that our NHS and the health and wellbeing of our ageing population and our population more generally are in safe hands.

3.8 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hosie. I shall begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing this important debate and on the way in which he opened the debate; it was incredibly insightful and certainly chimed with a number of the issues that have been raised by Members across the House, as well as with the concerns we share about the role of an international workforce and how we look after those people who come to this country to help those in our social care service.

I also thank my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I know that it is convention to call him “hon. Member”, because he is from a different party, but he is my friend, because—I do not know whether I am stalking him or he is stalking me—we are always at the same debates. He made an important point about how we get workforce planning right across the United Kingdom. I am aware that if, at some stage in the future, I were to have the Minister’s job, it would be very easy to come up with a workforce plan for social care that plugs the gaps in England by pinching staff from Northern Ireland. We have to ensure that, as we go forward with our workforce planning, there are enough people in the social care workforce across the whole of the United Kingdom. We must not create a perverse situation whereby working in social care in England becomes very attractive at the cost of social care in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. We must work together on this journey of upskilling and building a workforce for the future.

Likewise, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—I will call him a friend too as we are all friends in this Chamber—made some really important points. He spoke about the challenges—not

just workforce challenges but general challenges—in delivering quality social care and other public services in sparsely populated areas such as his constituency in the Lake district, which are linked to other issues that he speaks passionately about in the Chamber, including housing and transport. We need to join up those things if we are to attract the right kind of social care workforce to meet his constituents' needs.

I disagree profoundly with the desire of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for Scotland to be separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. I am a proud Unionist. I have Welsh heritage, as my surname, Gwynne, indicates. I am half-Scots, as my first name, Andrew, suggests. My Scottish gran from Lochwinnoch was very adamant that I have a Scottish name. And obviously I am English—I am Mancunian—and proud of that. I see the benefits and the strength that comes from the people of the islands that make up the United Kingdom working together for the common good. I get that under the devolution settlement Scotland has the ability and the responsibility to develop, provide and plan social care services that meet the needs that are particular to the towns, villages and cities in Scotland, but migration is a reserved power. There must therefore be a relationship between the way in which the Scottish Government meet those needs and plan health and social care, and the United Kingdom Government's wider responsibilities on migration.

We can be in no doubt that we have a workforce crisis in health and care services right across the country. Members have said that there are 152,000 vacancies in social care alone. I have been meeting providers and representatives of local authorities, and they tell me that the challenges are massive. That is why we need a proper grasp of how we build the workforce of tomorrow responsibly. It takes only the opening of a new supermarket in somebody's area for social care to lose a whole swathe of low-paid workers because they get paid more to stack shelves, so there is something fundamental there.

We are failing to recruit the staff we need, and staff in the services are leaving. That is not sustainable. Our health and care workforce so often represents the best of Britain, going above and beyond to keep us and our loved ones safe. We cannot and must not exclude from that recognition those who come from overseas to support our health and care system. They make huge sacrifices day in, day out, and they deserve our immense gratitude and respect. They must not be used to score political points, as is too often the case.

As we have heard, overseas workers, particularly those in social care, often face very challenging environments and are vulnerable to shoddy employers, so it is vital that we ensure we have a system in which the exploitation of overseas workers is simply not tolerated. Steps must be taken to stop those who perpetrate abuse. That is not only good for them; it is essential if we are to ensure a decent quality of care. That should not detract from recognising that most workers from overseas come here to do legitimate jobs and are employed by legitimate care companies, including some that enjoy high CQC ratings for the quality of care they provide. However, those people still face abuse and exploitation in the workplace.

We must also recognise that the contribution of overseas care workers to our care economy has been, and continues to be, crucial to the functioning of health and social care.

We should be deeply grateful; without them, many more care services would have closed in the last few years, leaving thousands without the support they need. Even with their contribution, Age UK estimates that 1.6 million older people in our country have some form of unmet need for care, and because our population is ageing, the demand for care is increasing all the time.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale referred to Beveridge and old age. An ageing population is a massive challenge to this country because of care needs and things such as pensions and the sustainability of the welfare state, but the real challenge in adult social care—this links to the issues related to our ageing population—is that in the past, people born with severe learning or physical disabilities did not live long into adulthood, if at all, and they are now living way into adulthood. Huge cost pressures are building in the system around working-age adults with disabilities, which we also need to address; it is not just about the ageing population.

We need to recruit and retain more care workers to give the sector the workforce it needs to deliver for those needing care, and we will support that. That is why we do not just have a workforce plan for the NHS; we have ensured that we have considered social care as well. The next Labour Government will introduce the first sectoral fair pay agreement in adult social care, which is testimony to the persistent battling of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who started her working life as a social care worker. We will ensure that pay, terms and conditions and training and development meet the needs of staff. As part of our 10-year plan for fundamental reform of the sector, which culminates in the creation of a national care service in England, we will ensure that social care is no longer a route for those seeking to abuse overseas staff and fuel the perception of care being the bottom rung of a ladder.

We must make sure that we build a career pathway that incorporates training and has parity with caring responsibilities in the NHS as part of our workforce plan, so that there is more fluidity between the NHS and social care. Somebody who starts off as a nurse should be able to have a career pathway that ultimately leads them to be the chief executive of a major care provider. Why shouldn't somebody who starts as a social care worker have a career pathway that leads them to be the chief executive of an NHS trust? We can only do that by building a workforce that has some form of parity.

We will ensure that, in future years, comprehensive independent workforce assessments are made, so that NHS and social care staff can keep up with the demands of a growing and ageing population, rather than falling behind. I get so frustrated at the lack of progress on some of these issues. I know the Minister is trying her best, but for too long, under too many different Governments, social care has been seen as that lean-to, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale put it. It is time that we have a Government committed to fixing social care and to developing the services we need, built around the needs of the people who require social care services, and it is time that we have a workforce plan that drives up quality, ensures career progression and fills those gaps. We need that general election—the country is crying out for change after 14 years of this

[Andrew Gwynne]

Tory Government delivering an NHS and social care system that is broken. It is time to fix that broken system—it is time for Labour.

3.20 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for opening the debate and setting out some of the challenges we face in international recruitment in health and social care. I pay tribute to our international health and care workers, who play an important part in our health and care system, looking after people and bringing their skills, equipment and compassion to look after loved ones. We benefit enormously across the UK from their knowledge and skills. In return, it is imperative that employers, whether in health or social care, provide a safe and supportive environment for their staff to work in.

I want to be clear that international recruitment is not the long-term answer to our health and social care workforce needs. We have been clear about that as a Government, and I have been clear about that personally. That is one of the reasons why, on the NHS side, we have our long-term workforce plan, investing in training our home-grown healthcare workforce. On the social care side, we have a 10-year vision for social care, which includes ambitious workforce reforms, which are in progress, including the first ever national career structure for care workers and new national qualifications. I am determined that care workers—indeed, care professionals—be recognised for their skills and supported in their work and career.

I would say to the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), that she should read up on these care workforce reforms, as should the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who called a moment ago for a care workforce pathway. I know he is relatively new to this role—we have not done that many debates opposite each other—so I ask him to go take a look online. He will see our care workforce pathway programme, which we have published and which we worked closely with the sector on to develop this national career structure. We did so exactly because it was one of the things we knew was missing from social care, and because when people come into social care, they want to see that they have an opportunity to progress in that career. We are also developing national training that will be recognised across different employers. Those are just two of the headline policies of a truly ambitious reform programme for the social care workforce.

Amy Callaghan: I do not particularly appreciate being given homework by a Minister who is doing so much damage to the health and social care sector in Scotland. I have certainly done my homework already—I do not need to be given some by her.

Helen Whately: I think it is probably helpful if I move on, rather than our having some sort of back and forth.

I turn to the question in hand, which is specifically to do with international recruitment and the reasonable concerns raised by my right hon. Friend the Member

for Spelthorne about the exploitation of some workers who come to support us in this country in health and social care. One of the things he spoke about was the code of practice. He is absolutely right that we have a code of practice for the international recruitment of health and social care personnel, which sets out ethical recruitment and employment standards that employers must adhere to. The code is kept under regular review. In fact, my right hon. Friend referred to the update of the code last year. I can assure him that my Department works closely with the Royal College of Nursing and other trade unions and stakeholders to strengthen that code and make sure it addresses the current issues and ethical concerns. For instance, we have set out stricter principles on the use of repayment clauses in employment contracts, and the code is now explicit that charging recruitment fees is illegal under UK employment law. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that we should continue to make sure the code of practice truly captures all that it needs to, and is as effective as it can possibly be.

Alongside the code of practice, we have the ethical recruiters list. This contains a cohort of recruitment agencies that have agreed to operate in accordance with the rules of the code. The list is run by NHS Employers, and it makes it easy for employers in the NHS and the social care sector to check that recruitment agencies are signed up to meet the high ethical recruitment standards we expect. Any organisation suspected of breaching the code will be investigated, and can be removed from the list.

Most overseas staff have a positive experience working in the UK, but I acknowledge that, regrettably, this is not the case for all. We know there are some rogue agencies and employers that take advantage of people who want to come to the UK to work. We have published guidance for prospective overseas candidates to help them make informed decisions and prepare for life in the UK. The guidance sets out what candidates should check in their employment contracts before signing them, what working rights and standards they can expect in the UK, and how to recognise and deal with exploitation, should that unfortunately be something they experience.

My Department is working with colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to disseminate that guidance effectively, so that it reaches prospective candidates at an early stage and helps make informed decisions and avoid scams and unethical practices. We want them to be able to do that in their home countries, before they even apply to work here in the UK.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne mentioned punitive repayment clauses in employment contracts. We are clear that those are unacceptable, and in certain cases illegal. There are some instances where repayment clauses may be used legitimately to cover some up-front costs incurred, should an employee decide to leave their job after a short time. But in all cases, employers must make it clear in contracts what is to be reclaimed, and how and when that will take place. Instances where repayment clauses are excessive, or extended over a lengthy period, have the effect of trapping international workers into jobs, and that is unacceptable. Repayment clauses cannot be used by employers to cover the cost of agency fees, certificates of sponsorship or the immigration skills charge.

As I mentioned, the code was updated to address that issue. The NHS has gone further, producing additional bespoke guidance for NHS employers to explain how to implement the code's principles when using repayment clauses. That will ensure transparency and fairness in employment contracts for all international recruits working in the NHS.

Another issue raised by my right hon. Friend is that of recruitment agencies charging international candidates high fees to find them work in the UK. For UK-based agencies the law is clear: charging a candidate any recruitment fee to find them a job in the UK is illegal. The Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate is the organisation responsible for regulating employment agencies, and it will investigate such misconduct and prosecute where appropriate.

However, we do face the challenge of agencies based overseas that fall outside the UK's jurisdiction. Regrettably, we have limited direct levers to stop the unethical treatment of workers overseas, but we have taken steps to try and mitigate the risk as far as possible. First, our international candidate guidance, which I mentioned a moment ago, warns potential candidates that they should not be paying any kind of fee to find work in the UK, and that they should not work with any agency that requests such a fee. Secondly, our embassies and high commissions are actively working with higher-risk countries to tackle exploitative practices by recruitment agencies overseas. NHS Employers, as holders of the ethical recruiters list, undertakes regular spot checks of agencies on that list to ensure they are complying with the code of practice.

As a Department, we are working collaboratively with the labour enforcement agencies that take action against those breaking the law in the UK. Those include the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, UK Visas and Immigration, and the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate. We therefore have a multi-agency approach across Government which uses our collective intelligence, capabilities and resources to respond to concerns about exploitation. That includes providing insight, advice and guidance to businesses and supply chains in relation to possible labour market offences.

My right hon. Friend mentioned language skills and the potential challenge for somebody whose English might not be fluent, to navigate the landscape and know their employment rights, for example. It is clearly important that the language skills of anyone providing care in England are good enough to communicate with their employer, the people they provide with care, and other care and healthcare professionals.

Care providers must ensure that their chosen candidates have the skills needed to work in care and should assess a candidate's English proficiency at the interview stage of recruitment. For somebody to work in social care, employers should ensure a good standard of English. For staff from overseas, the Home Office sets English language proficiency requirements. Individuals are required to prove they can speak, read, write and understand English to at least level B1 on the common European framework of reference for language scale.

My right hon. Friend also asked about cross-Government work in general on tackling exploitation. I can assure him that we are working across Government. My Department is working particularly with the Home Office and UKVI, both at official and ministerial level. I have had several conversations with Home Office

Ministers about our care worker visa scheme and what we are doing to tackle the risk of exploitation and abuse.

I worked closely with Home Office colleagues on the recent changes to the care visa. We agree about striking the right balance with overseas care workers, who are supporting us in some of the challenges of meeting the social care and healthcare need in the UK. We also need a balance between international workers and our home-grown workforce, ensuring that there are safeguards for international recruits.

Following those conversations, we have announced changes to the care visa scheme, as referred to during this debate. One is that, as of March, we will no longer allow care workers to bring dependants with them. Another safeguard is that we are restricting sponsors to CQC-registered care providers. At the moment, as long as someone is providing social care, CQC-registered or not, it depends on the sort of care provided.

The Government do not have all the answers at the centre, and I feel strongly about that. That is one reason why, as we have introduced the care worker visa, we put £15 million funding into regional partnerships of local authorities, to have established leads around the country for international recruitment, to support employers and recruits. I meet our regional leads, to hear what it is like in their areas, and to discuss what they are doing on the ground to support employers and social care staff. For instance, they are supporting providers with legal and HR advice on recruiting and employing international staff.

There is a specific example relevant to this debate. East of England has commissioned Unseen to run seminars and provide one-to-one support for care providers on safeguarding and spotting signs of exploitation. I continue to work with those leads to get the best possible insight on the ground on the extent to which internationally recruited workers may face difficulties. That could happen if someone has been brought here for a job with a particular sponsor who loses the licence to employ them, and the leads are working hard, trying to support recruits in that situation. I am also setting up a meeting directly between our regional leads and the Home Office and UKVI, to ensure that they share their intelligence directly, making the most of the leads' work and insights.

I want to come briefly to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). He mentioned the connection between social care supply and delayed discharge in his local area, which is something that I have done a huge amount of work on over the past year. I want to be clear, particularly on this topic, that social care does not exist just to discharge and support the discharge of patients from hospital. Social care is absolutely an end in itself, supporting both older people and those of working age with care needs.

We know that there is a connection between discharge delays from hospital and social care, because some people who are delayed in hospital, when they are medically optimised for discharge, are in need of social care packages. That is why we put in an extra £600 million in funding to support discharge over the past year, and there is another £1 billion coming this year. We have also put in an extra £570 million of funding to support social care. Just this morning, I was talking to a number

[Helen Whately]

of directors of adult social services from local authorities who assured me that that funding has made a meaningful difference to social care funding and supply.

I know that there are still significant financial pressures, and the national living wage increase puts an additional pressure on care providers and local authorities for the coming financial year. While that increase is a good thing for those at the bottom of the pay scale, it also places financial pressure on employers and those funding social care. I assure the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that that increase in supply, thanks in part to the extra funding, has helped to speed up discharges over the past year and reduced some of the delays, and we have seen an increase in the number of people being discharged both overall and particularly with social care support. We have made progress on that point.

I come back to this point in closing. I want to be categorically clear, in the light of this debate, that no member of staff in health or social care should face abuse of any kind, and illegal and unethical international recruitment and employment practices will absolutely not be tolerated. Internationally recruited staff play a really important part in caring for people across health and social care. They have helped us to build and increase our health and social care workforce. On the NHS side, we have achieved our manifesto commitment of 50,000 more nurses. On the social care side, we have over 20,000 more care workers in the care workforce. We have seen vacancies come down and retention improve, so we have been making progress on both the social care and the NHS workforces. While international recruitment plays an important part, it goes hand in hand with our work as a Government to build up our home-grown workforce both on the NHS side, with our NHS long-term plan, and the social care side, with our ambitious social care workforce reforms.

3.38 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have had a wide-ranging and generally quite even-tempered discussion, although people have occasionally strayed into the political stuff. The point of these debates is to have a broad and tempered discussion, and the spirit with which we have debated this matter does the House proud.

This issue has not had the attention that it deserves, and it is clear that Members on both sides of the House and from all parties are concerned about it. It is also abundantly clear that, whoever the election decides will form the next Government, it will be even more important and critical that this issue has our focus, whether that Government is Conservative or Labour. I am delighted that the Minister spoke at length, showing her understanding and experience. This is only really the beginning, and I look forward to more debates in the future on this sensitive and difficult subject.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered employment practices for internationally recruited health and social care staff.

3.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: Driving Licences

4 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I will call Dr Coffey to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential impact of leaving the EU on driving licences.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I am delighted to see several other hon. Members here for this short debate.

The essence of what I am trying to put across today is that we have an opportunity—a Brexit bonus—to look again at some of the driving licence regulations that were put in place thanks to our membership of the EU in order to ensure, first, that we support rural communities and, secondly, that we unlock economic growth opportunities. I think the Government have already recognised that. In particular, I am seeking reform of our driving licences so that the C1 and D1 categories are applied to everybody who has passed a driving test in this country, in the same way that those of us who passed our test before 1997 acquired grandfather rights. That was an arbitrary deadline, and driving tests have got longer and longer.

This issue first came to my attention when I visited Halesworth Area Community Transport and was told about its challenges in getting more drivers. To drive a van for that not-for-profit organisation, as it then was, people had to pay £2,000 to £3,000 to do a course and pass a test thanks to the regulations. When I went to see the Minister, I was told that they were EU regulations, and that as long as we were part of the EU there was absolutely no way we could change them.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I commend my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. This is all about grandfather rights and the cost to others, and I just hope the Minister is listening to what she has to say. We look forward to all people getting the same rights as those who passed their test before 1997.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend was recently a Minister in the Department for Transport and was involved in the response, so he will know the Department's thinking—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. There are Divisions in the House. I will suspend the debate for 15 minutes for the first vote and 10 minutes for any subsequent votes, so let us all be back here for about 4.19 pm.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.16 pm

On resuming—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): The new end time for the debate will be 4.44 pm.

Dr Coffey: It is a pleasure to resume our debate, having just undertaken democracy in the voting Lobby. I was just starting to talk about community transport.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): This June, we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the D-day landings in northern France. My constituents and those of Members here today will be making the journey to the commemorations in Normandy by minibus and in other vehicles. Will my right hon. Friend and the Minister join me in calling on the drivers to ensure they have the right licensing and other arrangements in place, so that their journey is both safe and smooth?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. While there are wider community transport links—I was starting to talk about the Halesworth area, and there are community buses in other parts of my constituency such as Southwold—at times we also need to be able to call on a wider range of drivers to take as many people as possible to these special events. The D1 could be used—and has been used in the past—by teachers or parents, for example, to make connections for children, perhaps to the clubs they run. I am conscious that, if we allowed that for those who had taken their test pre-1997, not everybody might want to take advantage of that, but I think we should take the opportunity to do it as quickly as possible.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very good points. She touched upon community transport and voluntary work. I chaired a community transport organisation for some years, and indeed was a driver for disabled adults because of my driving licence. Does she agree that we need to allow younger drivers—we are talking about some people in their 40s here—the opportunity to serve their communities, such as via ABILITY community transport, which serves my constituency of Northampton South?

Dr Coffey: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure his organisations have talked about the lack of people who are able to readily come forward, and the costs they are enduring. I know that has happened in my constituency. Investment was made in people but, understandably, after they pass a test and get this extra licence—because they did not take their driving test before 1997—they will quite often get a job, and while they might still be committed to community transport, that commitment will perhaps not be on the same scale.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for bringing this forward. One of the interventions earlier on referred to grandfather rights. Does she not agree that the punitive response of the EU will lead to problems that exist only on paper and in imagination? Does she also agree that someone who was qualified to drive in Europe on the basis of their driving test five years ago still goes through the same vigorous testing as now, and they should be entitled to drive, just as they were? She deserves to be congratulated on bringing this forward. She is absolutely right, and the more I think of the EU, the more I thank the Lord we are out of it.

Dr Coffey: I believe this is a real opportunity to adopt some sensible approaches and that that would be welcome across the House. I am conscious that the Government

signed up to the Vienna convention in 2018. There are a number of things in there, and we had already adopted these regulations pretty much under EU regulations. However, we have the opportunity to make changes, and this is just like in the Vienna convention; we put in reservations against elements of that. We have put a reservation in to say that people do not have to wait for the pedestrian crossing to tell them to go; they can cross the road if there is no traffic coming. We have used our common sense for regulations affecting people in this country while still having a safe environment.

It is important to hear from the Minister how other, European and non-European countries go about this, in particular for D1 and C1. I come back to the real need to make it more straightforward for people to get D1 licences, because those sorts of services are closing down or are starting to have to be commercial. That is not what we need for our communities. I understand the challenge of the cost of living and the fact that volunteers' time is precious. More and more people do want to volunteer. At the moment, we still have a threshold; quite a lot of people coming forward have had those licences before. But it is about the next generation. It is about that that community link, particularly with younger children. People have had to take tougher and tougher tests over the years—far tougher than the ones I took. I do not see why we should expect them to pay £2,000 or £3,000 more and go through all sorts of activities to do something that is frankly quite straightforward.

I turn now to C1 and the commercial and economic impact. I went on about this within Government for several years. When we left the European Union, I had the opportunity to look at regulations that either hindered or helped or were things that we might want to tweak. I saw this as a standout opportunity, as a result of my constituency experience of the community of Suffolk Coastal. That was also driven by my experience as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the time. Recently, as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I saw this as an opportunity for economic growth and to alleviate the impact on rural areas.

I have to say that my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) did listen. He put out a call for evidence, which I was pleased about. I think it reflects that the Department more broadly does not want to make any changes here, which disappoints me. That can be determined to some extent in some of the response, or the summary responses and aspects of the response, that the Government gave at the time.

But I have not given up, because I think this is the right thing to do. I think it is the right thing for our economic growth, and so do the majority of people who responded to the call for evidence. There were business people saying that this would be good. It would be much more efficient to run a single trip in a 4.6-tonne van than to be restricted to multiple trips, as it would require fewer journeys to transport the goods. It would mean fewer vehicles on the roads and fewer trips. This is good news.

I should have explained what C1 does: it covers, not the heavy goods vehicles that we all know, but vehicles between 3.5 to 7.5 tonnes. That is an important threshold—and by the way, this also applies to a number of commercial activities. To go back to D1, a lot of the community minibuses were rightly equipped to take people with

[Dr Coffey]

disabilities and wheelchairs. Some minibuses are just under 3.5 tonnes, but as soon as the equipment and the person in the wheelchair goes on to the minibus, it goes over that limit. As a consequence, activities can be suspended or services withdrawn.

I turn to the responses. A significant number were very pro and wanted a change without any conditions whatsoever. That was the biggest result, at 43% I think, while there were those who thought we could have an opportunity, but with some changes to conditions—at the moment, the licence would apply only from the age of 18, but once people turn 70, it has to be reviewed. I agree with that, which is why I want to see reform, but in combination, that is 73% of the people who responded to the call for evidence who wanted the change and felt that it could be made safely or that it might need no adjustments at all. I am open to discussion with the Minister about possible reforms—perhaps two or three years since driving, or perhaps a slightly older starting age than 18—but the important thing is to make this as straightforward as possible, rather it being about the cost that goes in.

I should also say to the House that this issue actually stops people driving ambulances, and has done for the last couple of years. Although people were already undergoing advanced training and blue light training, because they were waiting to get a C1 assessment, they could not drive an ambulance. That has led to a driver shortage.

We all know what happened in the HGV driver crisis, as it was called at the time. I do not criticise HGV drivers for that at all—I have cousins who are HGV drivers, and they diligently help to power the economy of the country. However, with the explosion of much more localised delivery, which reflects patterns of consumption in the market, the local delivery element can become attractive to people. Instead of being away from home for several days at a time, travelling and staying overnight in the cab, they can have a much more localised job.

Taking this opportunity would open up the market, enabling many more drivers to take advantage of these opportunities and allowing businesses to grow their business, reflecting the availability of labour. By making this simple change, we would significantly increase the availability of drivers to help to drive the economy, which is absolutely vital.

I know that tests have become a lot tougher since I took mine, and I am conscious that there will be organisations that worry about this. I am not looking to try to make things less safe; I am trying to reflect the fact that our driving standards have got higher over time, yet key elements are holding up, at significant cost. The impact of that on the economy, on economic opportunity and on our communities really needs to be considered.

There may be some other things that we need to look into, such as MIDAS—the minibus driver awareness scheme. I am not suggesting, by the way, a full repeal of the regulations needed for C1E. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield was quite keen on making things more straightforward for trailers when he was Transport Secretary, but we are also talking about people driving camper vans or with a horse-box. There are all these different sorts of activities where,

thanks to an EU regulation that we now have the opportunity to remove, we have just loaded on cost. There would be fewer vans on the road, making fewer trips—it all makes sense, and would actually be a sensible way to improve safety.

I am conscious that the Chamber is filling up with Members who expect the next debate to start in two minutes. Because of the Divisions, this debate can now finish later, and I hope that this much wider audience will hear why this simple change could make a massive impact in their local communities. I will conclude, though, because I am conscious that the household support fund is very important—I was involved in establishing it, and I should have put my name down for that debate, too.

Having worked with this Minister for many years when we were together in the Department for Work and Pensions, I know that he is assiduous and cares about his constituents in Hexham. I also know that he is innovative. Together we worked on many things that might not have come to complete fruition while we were together in the DWP, but we know they were the right things to do. They are now part of the Government's plan to unlock economic opportunity, and we will continue to be interested in and motivated by them.

The Government set out a plan for drivers, which I think was a really good plan. We need a few extra additions to the plan for drivers, and I hope that the Minister will work with me on that. I should give him notice that on 21 February it is my intention to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill, and to work with him in advance of that, to try to ensure that we find a good process that helps our rural communities and helps the economy, while maintaining of course the safe roads that we all enjoy.

4.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who I was delighted to serve under at the Department for Work and Pensions, where I did eight wonderful years. That was good training for the work that I am doing at the Department for Transport, trying to wrestle difficult problems and find long-term solutions.

My right hon. Friend approached the debate in a very constructive and positive way: we are trying to find the art of the possible, rather than perfection on an ongoing basis. She and I both represent seriously rural constituencies, and although I am bound by the wonders of collective responsibility, and echo and endorse everything that the Government do, I share her concern that there is a definite lack of drivers in rural communities in the circumstances that she outlined. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) also set out his knowledge of community transport on behalf of the people of his constituency. It is a genuine issue, and to pretend otherwise is naive and wrong. We must acknowledge that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal has been a doughty campaigner in this space. I look forward to her ten-minute rule Bill and subsequent private Member's Bill, which as I understand it, looks to reform the process and find a way through. My hon.

Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney), who is a member of the Transport Committee and formerly held my role, put his strong views on the record.

Clearly, the legislation is complex, but it is ironic that my driving licence—this applies to the driving licence of anyone above the age of approximately 43—entitles me to drive these vehicles, even though I passed a driving test that, on any interpretation, was of a lesser standard in days gone by. And yet, someone who is under the age of 42 has done a much more vigorous driving test—it is no question that it has got harder, and quite right, too—but is not so entitled, because of the 1997 grandfather rules, even though they might be a policeman or someone who drives a response vehicle. That strikes me as an anomaly.

I accept and entirely understand the concerns of those who do not want someone who is newly qualified to drive a much more substantial vehicle, and it is entirely right to be mindful of that. A multitude of arguments were set out in the detailed call for evidence, which was published and updated in summer last year, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal knows. It outlined particular concerns about the legislation. She will be aware that on 6 June we published the responses to the call for evidence, which sought evidence on, among other topics, the road safety impacts of returning to the pre-1997 licence position. This is not a simple issue, and it is a vital duty of this Government to ensure, to the best of our ability, that road safety is paramount and is observed on an ongoing basis. The analysis of the responses showed that there was support for some form of extension to the driving licence entitlement, but there were also some concerns about road safety.

My right hon. Friend also rightly identified the international obligations that apply by reason of the 1968 Vienna convention, which lists C1 and D1 as separate categories, and which we ratified in 2019. That would need to be addressed. There is also the issue of ongoing driver shortages. We need a legitimate examination of that issue in relation to bus drivers, delivery drivers and HGV drivers, and of whether the change that she seeks would alleviate the pressure that unquestionably exists on the economy and the communities that we all serve. One would also have to think about driver medicals, because we require C1 and D1 drivers to demonstrate a higher medical standard.

Let me respond to a couple of other points. My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak) rightly lauds and applauds the work of his local community to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the D-day landings on 6 June, and the work that all are doing to commemorate that historic date. I will do everything I can to assist him and his constituents to ensure the safe passage of his community as they, quite rightly, pay their due respects.

Several colleagues have raised legitimate concerns on community transport, and that has unquestionably been taken on board. I will certainly do everything I can to

try to find out the extent of that issue, and all evidence we can elicit to clarify just how grave that situation is would be of great assistance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal outlined the position in relation to ambulances. I confess that that is not in my briefing and I am not aware of that issue specifically, although I know it was in the call for evidence, in particular. I think that is a legitimate question and I will take it up with the Department of Health and Social Care to try to clarify the extent of that problem and the difficulties that exist. Any Government, and particularly this Government, are passionately committed to trying to alleviate those particular problems on an ongoing basis.

To summarise, we always look to keep the driving licence regime under review, and there has been a call for evidence. If there was to be change, it would require consultation, so any implementation of change would have to be consulted upon. For my part, I see a significant difference in respect of a community volunteer who is, for example, a qualified policeman of 40 years of age being allowed to drive a community minibus. There is also the larger issue of how we deal with C1s, and the age of individuals and their experience on an ongoing basis has to be addressed.

We are clearly considering the ongoing position with the European Union and the extent of any new driving licence directive that may or may not come in, which has been agreed by the European Parliament. That may also constitute an opportunity for my right hon. Friend to address those particular points on an ongoing basis. I thank her for her ongoing campaign, which is massively to her credit; it is what Back Benchers can and should do. I know that she is a doughty proponent of positive change and I welcome her efforts to improve the lives of those in her community in Suffolk and the community organisation that she represents. I commend her efforts, and I look forward to working with her.

Question put and agreed to.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Given the delay for the vote, we are not scheduled to start the next debate until 4.44 pm, and I am minded to wait until that time to allow those who remember the rules to get here in good time. It is rather obvious that the next debate is very heavily subscribed, with at least 10 Back-Bench speakers already notified to me, and we require the Opposition spokesperson to start their summing up at 5.27 pm, with the Minister at 5.32 pm. That would imply that those Back Benchers who wish to speak can take a maximum of three rather elegant minutes to say what they need to say, and then sit down to give everybody else a chance—although even with three minutes, we may struggle. If some colleagues are not called to speak, I apologise; stick to three minutes and we should be okay, but that depends how long Sir Stephen Timms takes. We have another five minutes until the next debate.

4.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Household Support Fund

4.44 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Household Support Fund.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I am delighted that we have the opportunity to debate this matter. Since October 2021, the household support fund has provided £2.5 billion in local crisis support. I am delighted that both of the Ministers responsible for setting it up, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), are in their places, as is the current Minister, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). The fund has played a crucial role. At the autumn statement, I asked the Chancellor whether it would be extended into next year. His answer was yes, but it turns out that that was incorrect; the documentation did not bear that answer out, and we still do not know the answer to my question, hence the debate.

In the 1930s, the then Unemployment Assistance Board offered one-off additional payments on top of weekly assistance. From 1988, discretionary payments were centralised in the Department for Work and Pensions social fund. The coalition Government replaced that with local welfare assistance, making the fair argument that local authorities were best placed to distribute the funding. The social fund budget went to local authorities, but it was never ringfenced to the new local welfare assistance. As local council budgets have been squeezed, leading to recent bankruptcy announcements, councils have cut back. Local welfare assistance spending fell 87% from 2010-11 to 2019-20, and 35 councils operated no local welfare assistance at all in 2021-22. That decline was only ended by the household support fund.

The remarkable Liverpool-based charity End Furniture Poverty sent freedom of information requests to every local council about the year 2022-23. Eight said they depend entirely on the household support fund to fund local welfare. In a further 23 councils, the fund provides more than half of their spending. Of the £91 million spent by local authorities on local welfare assistance in 2022-23, only £34.7 million came from councils' core budgets; 62% came from the household support fund. Failing to extend the fund now, with no replacement, would end vital support in the midst of a continuing crisis, but it would also end a feature of social security that has been supported by every Government since 1934.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. He is right to put the situation in context, because it has to be viewed against the backdrop of 14 years of ideological austerity cuts, combined with the worst cost of living crisis. Not only has destitution increased by 61% in the past three years, but local authorities are poorer and cannot provide this support. Does he agree that, should the fund be cut, it would take away the essential lifeline that many families who struggle to put food on the table rely on?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree with my hon. Friend, as I do with the press release issued last Friday by the Minister. It said:

"The Household Support Fund is there for anyone who needs a helping hand."

The question is whether it will still be there in six weeks' time, which is the subject of this debate.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. In Manchester, the household support fund provides a vital safety net to 60,000 residents, including providing cost of living support payments for 12,500 vulnerable households. Does he agree that, by not guaranteeing funding for the next financial year, the Government are putting at risk essential support schemes for many vulnerable people? After all, our constituents are struggling financially due to the Government's economic mismanagement, with soaring inflation, a massive spike in energy bills and sky-high mortgage rates.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. I understand why people want to make interventions, but if they are that long, colleagues will be reduced to around two minutes each.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I noticed that the leader of Manchester City Council wrote to the Prime Minister today, on behalf of the eight core cities, calling for the household support fund to be extended, making the point that it would be "catastrophic" for many people in our poorest communities if it is not. Given your remarks, Mr Hosie, perhaps I should not give way again.

I have no doubt that we will hear examples of the positive impact of the household support fund. At the Work and Pensions Committee last week, we heard from the head of benefits and advice at the Royal Borough of Greenwich. Like many councils, Greenwich has used the fund to support, in the school holidays, families entitled to free school meals. She told us how important it has been to those families to receive that £15 a week per child during the holidays. If the fund is not renewed, those families will have problems buying food in the Easter holiday.

One group that depends on the household support fund consists of hard-working, law-abiding families from overseas—often with children born in the UK—who have leave to remain in the UK but not yet indefinite leave, and who therefore have no recourse to public funds. They cannot claim universal credit, however tough their situation. Many councils have been able to support those families through the household support fund. Without it, there would be nothing.

The household support fund contributed £9.6 million towards essential white goods and furniture in 2022-23. The fridge of a pensioner in my borough, Newham, was not working. She is the guardian for her two grandchildren, one of whom has cancer. She was able to buy a fridge thanks to the household support fund.

The need for the fund to continue is clear. One-off help has always been needed, but gas and electricity prices are respectively 60% and 40% higher today than in 2020. The Trussell Trust, which had a reception in Parliament today, gave out 1.5 million emergency food parcels between last April and September—16% more than in the previous year. The continuation of the fund is crucial.

The current uncertainty is bad for everyone involved. One local authority told End Furniture Poverty:

"Part of the nightmare of this funding is, out of a team of 26, I have three permanent members of staff...we're constantly onboarding and training people."

Another said:

"Delaying the decision and failing to give local authorities sufficient notice has made it impossible to plan."

This is no way to govern.

The Government can take some pride in the household support fund, but uncertainty undermines it. At a webinar attended by nearly 200 people yesterday, comments in the chat included:

"Without it, there will be no localised welfare assistance in Warwickshire."

"In Brighton and Hove, our 50+ emergency food providers will have no way of coping if HSF is removed."

"On the Isle of Wight we have used some of HSF to provide much needed funds for... food banks so they can purchase sufficient food to keep up with demand as donations have depleted drastically."

Barnardo's told us that it will publish a report about this precise issue next week.

Let me conclude by quoting a single mum of three in Greenwich. She said of the household support fund:

"It is a lifesaver... I hope and pray it continues."

I agree, and I hope the Minister will too.

4.53 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing the debate and for his work on this issue as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member. The Committee has heard evidence on the fund, and it is clear that it has been a vital support to families since its introduction.

The fund has been essential in supporting vulnerable households in need with food, energy and water bills, and other associated tasks, with at least 50% of the total funding required being spent on families with children. The scheme was well received by residents in North Devon and across the UK. Recognising that, the Government have extended the fund several times. We all know that it has been a particularly tough time across the country, not least given rising energy prices as a result of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, but the scheme's end in March 2024 will come at a cost to vulnerable families.

Despite the Government's hard work on bringing down inflation, continued economic pressures on vulnerable families mean that the household support fund is still needed in constituencies like mine. In North Devon, 30% of children live in poverty. The campaign by Barnardo's to extend the fund has been supported by residents back home, as the fund provides a lifeline for families in urgent need of practical help. Throughout the pandemic, the fund allowed councils to significantly expand local support where households were struggling to afford essentials or facing severe hardship.

I have written to Ministers at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about disparities in rural council funding. Councils and other frontline services report record demand for local welfare support. Devon County Council has warmly welcomed the more than £10 million it has received from the fund in this financial year. In a six-month window, the fund provided help in over 50,000 different cases.

Ilfracombe in my North Devon constituency is the third most deprived rural town in the country, in contrast with the much wealthier south of the county, and I have

been continuously presenting a case for more funding in the town. I am not confident that this is the right time to be cutting funding from those who need it most without a replacement. I understand that the Government will continue to keep all their programmes under review, but I would be most grateful if the Minister could set out further steps and tell us about potential replacement schemes, as successful as the household support fund, that will provide a safety net to our most vulnerable families.

4.55 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing this debate on such an important issue.

In Salford City Council, the household support fund is run by the excellent Salford Assist service. Last year, nearly 19,000 people accessed emergency funds. As in the example given by my right hon. Friend, the fund also provided vouchers to ensure that children entitled to free school meals had food in the school holidays.

I am deeply concerned that the future of the fund is not secure past the end of March. Salford City Council has had its funding cut by £245 million since 2010. There are literally no funds to fill the gap that ending the household support fund would leave. Eighty-four per cent of councils that responded to a recent Local Government Association survey said that hardship had increased in their area, and in Salford, demand for the fund has increased by 86% in the last year.

Carers are particularly hard hit by the cost of living crisis; according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a third of them live in poverty. Carers Trust highlighted that the household support fund has enabled carer organisations to work with local councils to ensure that carers who are in need of financial help have access to the household support fund.

I will give a couple of examples of how the fund has been used to support my constituents. One constituent had lost everything when she fled a domestic violence situation with her two small children. She was offered social housing but it was unfurnished. The household support fund was essential in helping to provide basic furnishings for her new home.

Another constituent contacted me when a change of job meant she was put on an emergency tax rate. She was living in private rented accommodation with her partner and two children, who both have long-term health conditions. The children's health issues meant that her partner had to stop work to look after them, and the family was finding it more and more difficult to meet the cost of their rent. She said:

"I have lived in Salford all my life, paid my contributions, provided for my children, maintained a home, but right now with all factors in play, this is becoming more and more unachievable as time passes."

With the energy crisis and the cost of living crisis, I am contacted by so many people who are in hardship due to rent increases or sudden changes to their salary or benefits. That is where the support of the household support fund is vital. This is not the time to remove that support. I and my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who is here, and for

[Barbara Keeley]

Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) have raised the matter with the Secretary of State and asked him to meet us and a cross-party group of elected councillors to raise our serious concerns about the potential impact of losing the household support fund in Salford. I hope the meeting can be arranged soon and I hope we get a commitment from the Government to continue this vital fund.

4.58 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing this important debate. As we worked closely when I was a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, he knows how strongly I feel about the subject.

In 2020, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—then a Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—and I set up a small ministerial working group on food and essential items. We recognised that despite the significant support given to the most vulnerable during the pandemic, including free school meals, healthy start payments and the holiday activities and food programme, on top of the additional support specifically relating to covid, some families were still struggling, especially during the school holidays. We wanted to design a scheme that provided targeted support with a focus on food and bills. We also believed, as the right hon. Member for East Ham rightly pointed out, that local councils were best placed to understand which groups needed extra support and to get to the families most in need.

We initially started with £63 million secured from the Treasury for local welfare assistance. That then morphed into an additional £170 million through the covid winter grant scheme and then became, in October 2021, what it is today, which is the household support fund, with £842 million. Indeed, I understand that, so far, more than £2 billion has been distributed. As the right hon. Member for East Ham rightly set out, it has already helped millions of people and families, and like him I urge the Government to continue it so that it can continue to support millions more.

I understand that the fund is the Minister's responsibility, but ultimately it is down to the Treasury. She is an excellent Minister, for whom I have so much time, and I have no doubt that she will point rightly to the considerable support currently available to families. However, we know that despite that there will sadly continue to be households that will struggle; they will struggle to afford the essentials and face severe hardship. The household support fund allows councils directly to target help to the hardest-hit families and individuals, as well as providing food for children who need it over the holidays.

I gently say to the Minister that, as the right hon. Member for East Ham pointed out, any family or household could be in crisis with energy, food and other essential items, such as the unexpected breakdown of a boiler or white goods breaking. I also gently say to her—noting that I have very little time—that the fund is a targeted safety net for when families and individuals

have nowhere else to turn. When I look back at my time in the Government, it is one of the things that I am most proud of, because it has made a huge difference to millions of families up and down the country. I urge the Minister and the Treasury to ensure that the scheme is continued, so that it can go on to support millions more.

5.1 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Ind): I will take up the theme of the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), but I first thank my friend the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for the able way in which he introduced the topic. Views are probably widely held and similar across the Chamber.

I thank the Minister for replying to the letter that I sent to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up. The reply arrived this morning, and it gets straight to the heart of the matter. The question, of course, is: will there be a continuation of the scheme? The Government's position as of this morning, set out by the Minister in the letter, is as follows:

"No further decisions have been taken on the Fund and the Government continues to keep its existing programmes under review in the usual way."

Apart from thanking the Minister for her candour, I have two observations: this is not fair, and we are running out of time. Local authorities must plan ahead for the rest of the financial year, and there is absolutely no chance whatsoever of them finding the money from their own resources, particularly in the metropolitan districts, whose budgets have been constrained yet further.

I have been an opponent of the Conservative party all my life, but at least there was an element of it that believed in social justice and helping those who, through no fault of their own, needed extra help because they were the poorest. This is not doing such a thing. I usually argue my case in practical terms, but this is immoral and wrong. The Minister should announce a reversal of the policy, or at least a further implementation—that might be a better way of putting it—at the end of the debate.

5.3 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and very much agree in particular with the starting point of his contribution. It has been my experience—I speak as a councillor in London for 24 years—that local authorities know their communities best and are always in a stronger position than anyone in central Government to deploy resources in a way that reflects the needs of a particular community.

My constituents have had the benefit, for many years, of a local authority that has worked both with its own resources and with a network of charitable and voluntary organisations, ranging from some that are relatively new and sprung up to support refugees, such as the recent one in response to the arrival of large numbers of people from Ukraine, to those that have long-standing roots, such as Charlotte Gell's Ickenham coal charity, which was established to give a free bag of coal to people

in need of heating and today provides grants to those struggling with energy costs. It is that range and depth of resources that is so important. The local authority adds to that the ability both to identify households that are in acute need and, often, to signpost those who may not qualify for a particular type of support to another organisation that may be in a position to assist.

As we know, it has been part of the mission of local authorities, since their very inception, to address the relief of poverty. That is one of the reasons why, in my time as a councillor, I was keen to support the efforts in the late 2000s to establish the food banks, such as the Hillingdon food bank in 2009. However generous a safety net of benefits system we think we have, there will always be individuals and households that are at risk of falling between the cracks.

I have had the benefit of extensive research that has been carried out by both the Local Government Association and London Councils. I thank them for the work they have done to draw attention to the benefits that come with local authorities taking the lead on this issue. I hear from constituents that one of the weaknesses in the current fund relates to the ability to deploy resources outside local authority boundaries—individuals who may find themselves in temporary accommodation are an example of those who may be falling between the cracks. It is clear that we could be doing more work to ensure that resources are addressed flexibly.

Recognising the exceptional contribution that the fund and others, such as the holiday activities and food programme, have made to supporting the relief of poverty, and also recognising the fact that the fund does not sit on its own, my key plea to the Minister is that, once this policy comes to an end and a new iteration is developed, its successor respects the local knowledge and expertise of our councils. They are in the best position to identify the individuals who are the most in need and most able to benefit from the support that the fund offers.

5.6 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing this crucial debate.

Salford City Council recently commissioned Greater Manchester Poverty Action to research the impact of the household support fund. That research showed that the fund has been a vital lifeline for people in Salford. As my colleague stated, nearly 19,000 low-income households access the scheme. That is a staggering 86% increase from the year before and is set to increase even further this year. Therefore, both the Salford City Mayor and all three Salford MPs were extremely concerned that the autumn statement seemingly omitted to clarify the Government's position with regard to the continuation of the fund.

The Minister must understand that to withdraw this fund at a time when the cost of living crisis is demonstrably outstripping so many incomes will have disastrous consequences for our most vulnerable residents, families and children who simply cannot make ends meet. For so many, cutting this vital lifeline will mean that they are quite simply catapulted into further destitution, hunger, fuel poverty and worse. For many, their health will be put at extreme risk.

Given that the Government are supposedly consulting on the next provisional local government finance settlement, will the Minister provide financial clarity today by confirming the extension of the household support fund? Will she also commit to formally ringfencing financial measures such as the household support fund and the ongoing revenue support grant calculations for local government, to support the most deprived residents during the cost of living crisis? Will she confirm that she will not cut the current services grant for local government, and that she will instead increase it by inflation to reflect the financial pressures that local authorities face at this time? Will she work with the local government sector to urgently address the acute financial pressures facing local authorities?

Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) said, will the Minister meet me, along with the Salford City Mayor and Salford MPs, to urgently address these issues?

5.9 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing it. He will recall the situation that we were faced with in the middle of covid, when covid was continuing for longer than we had initially expected. Recognising the challenges that families and pensioners were facing, it was right that we took that action then. I give credit to the Prime Minister, who was then the Chancellor, for working with me and my Department to establish the household support fund. It was with great pride that I formally announced the fund on 30 September 2021.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to raise local welfare assistance. Indeed, it was the Department for Work and Pensions that handed money to councils—it was not ringfenced, but the Department took a localist approach. That funding was kept in as part of the baseline grant for many years; I think it was not until 2020 that it was removed from the information that was formally published on the transfer, recognising that councils were still being funded on local welfare assistance.

I am conscious that covid was a challenging time. In particular, we wanted to make sure we went to the upper-tier unitary authorities that had statutory responsibility for children and adults. We made sure the funding was ringfenced, and we also imposed reporting conditions to ensure the money went either directly into people's hands or to agencies that could make a difference.

I am conscious that quite a lot of councils resorted to vouchers for funding, but I commend Telford and Wrekin Council, and others like it, for thinking ahead. Instead of just handing out vouchers, the council identified the children who were struggling at home and started buying coats for people—they considered the long term. I would have loved to have seen more innovation in some of the ways the money was spent—whether that concerned bed poverty or similar issues—so that the local elements could be identified. It was important to increase funding for pensioners too; they did not have any opportunity to increase their economic income and were struggling.

I hear what councils are saying, and I do think the Government should extend the household support fund—whatever they may choose to call it in the future. We should challenge councils more to work with, for

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

example, community foundations, whereby significant tax relief is given to local philanthropists to make the money go further. At the same time, we still have the holiday activities and food programme. That was established in October 2021 and was deliberately targeted at young children who were receiving free school meals. Those are the sorts of initiatives in which I am proud to have played a part. I urge the Minister to look further at how we can make the most of the money we distribute.

5.12 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing this important debate.

I will focus my remarks on children and the lifeline that the household support fund provides to so many children living in poverty. Many Members will be aware that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently published a report that estimated that approximately 1 million children in this country are experiencing destitution. That is 1 million children growing up not knowing the comfort of a warm home or where their next meal will come from. The household support fund has enabled councils, which know their local populations' needs best, to provide local welfare support to those families who are on the edge. It is vital that that funding continues beyond March.

As we have heard, many councils up and down the country, including my own in Richmond upon Thames, have used the household support fund to ensure that children eligible for free school meals are able to access them in the holidays through vouchers or cash support for families. School holidays are a time of real hardship, and children go hungry. Across London alone, councils are providing school holiday food support to almost half a million children over this academic year.

Richmond is also using money from the household support fund to support looked-after children and care leavers with food and fuel payments. These are some of the most vulnerable children and our young people in our society, and the Government's welfare system has allowed them to fall through the net. But the household support fund has enabled councils to catch them and ensure they are not left destitute.

The need is growing: Richmond is projecting an overspend in the current round of HSF allocation because of rising need. Demand for support remains at unprecedented levels, and with the Government withdrawing energy bill support, this winter is set to be even tougher for many families.

I am sure the Minister will refer to other measures, such as the uprating of benefits and the local housing allowance, but they do not credibly replace the HSF and will benefit only specific groups. The beauty of HSF is that it affords flexibility to local councils, and the partner organisations they work with, to target support at those who need it. I pay particular tribute to Richmond AID and Citizens Advice Richmond for their work in administering grants.

What will happen come April? We all know that local authorities throughout the country have finances that are in an extremely precarious state—indeed, many local

authorities are on the brink of bankruptcy. There is no alternative funding stream. The reality is that without the HSF, councils will be forced to make difficult decisions about what essential support to families in greatest need they will have to cut. Once again, children and young people are in the firing line, so I implore the Minister to make the case to the Chancellor to extend this lifeline to our most vulnerable constituents.

5.15 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing this extremely important debate.

We have to look at who is in most need with regard to the household support fund. These people are so desperate. What are they after? They are after food. It is 2024, and we have people pleading—begging—for food. The people in receipt of the support are people who are on the breadline, as other speakers have explained. It is a lifeline—it is a lifesaver. Why on earth the Government are considering not continuing the fund, or have possibly already made the decision not to continue it after the next month or so, is beyond me.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend, like me, seeing more and more people coming to his constituency advice sessions who are in desperate need, pushed into penury and really struggling to make ends meet? What they need now is certainty that the Government will say, "Do you know what? Yes, we'll extend the household support fund and we'll do it now."

Ian Lavery: I totally agree. These people are after food; they are after soap powder; they are after sanitary products. Potentially, they are after heat, warmth and light. This is 2024, for goodness' sake! We all understand it; we all have people in our constituency surgeries who are suffering greatly as a consequence of this.

As politicians, we all have decent lives and we are all very comfortable, but we see constituents who are in desperate need of help. They are not after luxuries; they just want to keep themselves clean and feed their kids. That is what the household support fund is for.

I place on the record my massive thanks to Northumberland Communities Together. It is led by Julie Leddy, who is getting into the community and has been able to speak to people. The people who need support the most are the hardest to reach. Julie and her team have been absolutely fantastic.

The household support fund needs to be funded adequately and needs to be renewed on a multi-year basis. We need to encourage non-digital applications. Most of all, we need to ensure that the fund continues in the best interests of the people who, sadly, we all see in our constituency offices on a regular basis, who have got absolutely nothing.

5.18 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie, and to be making my first Westminster Hall speech in a debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms).

I am not alone in this Chamber in expressing deep concerns for my constituents, who face a cost of living crisis that they neither asked for nor deserve. Just this afternoon, I was speaking in Parliament with the Trussell Trust, which warns of an unprecedented level of demand for food banks across the country. In my constituency, the demand for its food banks has risen by 44% since 2022 and by an alarming 101% since 2018.

I have been heartened and genuinely inspired by the community spirit shown in Tamworth during these tough times by the work of the Community Together CIC, led by Lee Bates; the Tamworth Co-operative Society, which donated stock to produce 450 food parcels for children and their families at Christmas; and the Heart of Tamworth community project, which runs weekly lunch clubs for those who are lonely, isolated and vulnerable. The Manna House project has played a crucial role in our community, offering counselling services, a food bank and many other initiatives. My constituent Liz Wadsworth created the community-run Tamworth Pantry, which has repurposed an old bus into a mobile community support station.

Now is not the time to withdraw support from struggling households. We need assurances from the Government that the household support fund will continue past March 2024. Between April 2023 and March 2024, Staffordshire County Council will have received just over £11 million from the household support fund. If the fund is not continued, it is extremely likely that councils will not be able to afford to replace that funding. A Lichfield District Council cabinet member wrote to me on the state of the council's finances:

"How can councils fill in the gaps when it comes to supporting the most vulnerable, when they are struggling with the pressures of providing statutory services under the extreme cuts of the last 10 years?"

The Government must extend the household support fund.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Preet Kaur Gill. Is that Preet? *[Interruption.]* Apologies! I call Yasmin Qureshi.

5.21 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It's okay. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing this important debate.

The household support fund is worth £5.5 million for people in Bolton. Following reassurance in the autumn statement, it was understood that it would continue, but of course we have heard nothing from the Government. Bolton Council has had to hold back a further half a million pounds to bolster its local welfare provision service and mitigate the impact of possibly losing that £5.5 million. Today, another blow has been dealt to Bolton Council with the announcement that its service grant is going to be cut by a staggering £2.4 million.

Withdrawing the household support fund is taking away £5.5 million from desperate households in Bolton, which we need to support vulnerable people and pay for their clothes, food and other essentials. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that Bolton is now in the top five for child poverty in the north-west. The household support fund is a lifeline for my constituents. I urge the

Minister: please do not cut the fund. It is a great safety net for the families and individuals facing the greatest hardships.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Sarah Maskell. Sorry: Rachael Maskell. Forgive me—it's been a very long day.

5.22 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We all make mistakes, Mr Hosie.

I have to ask: what do we come to Parliament for? It brings real shame that in this day and age we are sent here to beg the Minister to provide essential funding for our constituents living on the poverty line. It is not only that they are already in poverty, but that just five weeks out from the Budget, we have to stand up in this place and call for emergency support funding. Of course, the fund is not a solution to the deep deprivation that we are seeing across all our communities; it will take a Labour Government to get into the root causes and address the poverty that, shamefully, we see across our constituencies because of the inequity in the economy that the Government have driven.

The household support fund is a lifeline for many of our constituents. That is why it desperately needs funding today. It cannot wait for the next Budget. Local authorities certainly cannot wait that long to plan how they are going to support their communities. With the housing disparities in York, with low wages and with the highest housing costs across the north, my constituents really struggle.

I stand here on behalf of all councils in Yorkshire, especially North Yorkshire. Across Yorkshire, 1 million awards were granted between October 2022 and March 2023; £94 million is needed. That is why we need the Government to come forward with an announcement today. We know there are many people out there who are going to exploit our constituents if that money is not forthcoming, so we need to do it to safeguard their interests. We also need to ensure that we stave off the cold and the hunger for the families we are here to represent.

I have to say that it is simply not good enough to stall us further. We have written to the Chancellor, we have had the data, we know the statistics and now we need the answers. I trust that the Minister will announce exactly what the Government will do to help those most in need. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that the welfare support that our constituents receive is nowhere near enough for the essentials. We need that to be addressed, too, but today we need this money coming forward, because this is the last thread of the safety net on which our constituents depend. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

5.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing the debate and on setting the scene so well. We have had marvellous contributions from right hon. and hon. Members. From the outset, I want to be clear that Northern Ireland has a different method of allocation—it is a different system. Our access to the household support fund ended with the energy costs support,

[Jim Shannon]

and our constituents are directed to find equivalency in the discretionary support fund, as we have no existing household fund.

The funding in Northern Ireland is deliberately so pared back that people can claim discretionary support for only a small number of reasons. Simply being unable to cope is no longer one of them. It should be, but it is not. Those who suffer domestic violence and have to leave all their goods in the middle of the night cannot access good enough support. That is just one example.

Yet again, the ordinary person in Northern Ireland is still paying more to be part of the Union. If only we got all the benefits of being part of the Union! I am very supportive of it, but I think it is time that that was looked at. The Government committed today in the Chamber to looking at the Barnett consequential and seeing whether we can have the equivalent of the Welsh provision. If we do, that will be a step in the right direction.

I have outlined in another debate how money in the local economy shrinks. The hon. Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) mentioned food banks; I will speak about my food bank, to give some equivalency. Take a middle-class family with two working parents who perhaps used to take a wee weekend holiday once every quarter. The hotel now misses out on its income from them, so it cuts back the hours for the cleaner it employs, and the cleaner loses their income. The family no longer go to the restaurants they used to go to, so that money is pared back. Where do they end up? I will tell you where they end up, Mr Hosie: they end up at the food bank.

An answer has to be given to explain why the cost of gas and oil is substantially lower, and yet the savings are not being passed on. As an example, one family I know have paid £250 for their gas bill. They are a small family with two children. If they cannot manage it, there is no way in the world that pensioners can. The Government must step in with help for energy costs, not simply for those on benefits who need the help, but for all people who are struggling in every working and non-working capacity.

The Newtownards food bank, which is based at the House church in Newtownards in my constituency, is the first ever Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland. The stats tell a story—I will finish with this point, Mr Hosie, because I know you are looking at the clock. The food bank helped to feed 1,272 people in December 2023, compared with 988 in December 2022. That is an increase of almost 29%. Many of those were new referrals: people who had never been before. That shows where we are. Poverty in Northern Ireland has risen, and people who have never had to claim before simply cannot meet the escalating costs. Action is needed, and action is needed now.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Vicky Foxcroft—five minutes.

5.28 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing the debate, and I thank him for his invaluable work as Chair of the

Work and Pensions Committee. This debate is hugely important, as we can see from the number of Members present. I am frequently grateful for the rigour with which the Committee conducts its inquiries and for the superb job that it does of holding the Department to account.

The question that all Members are asking today—I started writing down individual Members, but it was literally all of them—is “Will the household support fund still be there?” That is a question to which I hope the Minister can respond today. As we have heard, since its announcement in September 2021, the household support fund has provided much-needed short-term support to many vulnerable households. However, as we head towards the Chancellor’s spring Budget, its future remains uncertain.

All hon. Members have outlined why the fund is so needed at the moment. The right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned the financial challenges that local authorities are under and the vital support that the fund provides. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) outlined research on why it is such a vital lifeline.

As shadow Minister for disabled people, it concerns me that the future of the household support fund is in doubt while we are still in the grip of a cost of living crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) spoke for the first time in Westminster Hall—I have to say, I could not tell—and outlined the cost of living pressures her local constituents face: higher energy bills and the extra costs that disabled households face. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) highlighted devastating cases of people fleeing domestic abuse and the way in which the household support fund has supported them.

I would like to highlight an issue I have come across in my constituency casework. My office is trying to assist a young person who lives in one borough and attends a school in another. Both boroughs are using the household support fund to pay for free school meal vouchers during the holidays—many Members mentioned this issue—but the home borough bases support on a pupil’s school address, while the other bases it on their home address. This frustrating situation means my constituent is missing out on support that both boroughs are, in theory, happy to provide. It is worth noting that, while local authorities are best placed to spend the money how they see fit, the variation in how one qualifies for support can lead to problems.

This debate has made it clear that the Government must carefully consider the future of the household support fund. Local authorities, such as my own in the London Borough of Lewisham, are being left in limbo as they try to plan for their 2024-2025 budgets, which may lead to interruptions to service provision and job losses. In an ideal world, we would not consider the future of the household support fund in isolation. When the fund was announced, my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), who at the time was our shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, said:

“Temporary and inadequate sticking plasters are no substitute for a proper social security system that offers security to families in hard times.”

That remains true. However, for now, it is for the Government to say whether or not the fund will continue for next year. Labour's plan for a new deal for working people, for affordable energy, for safe and dry homes and to get people better jobs and better pay is the long-term plan that we are focused on delivering, but today we need to hear the Government's plans. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said, the people who rely on this fund are desperate. They are pleading—begging—for food and we must give certainty on the future of the fund.

5.33 pm

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. First, I would like to add my voice to those of others in thanking the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for securing this debate. As Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, I know he is not only passionate about supporting those in need, but very thoughtful in the suggestions and the comments that he makes. I think we both recognise—indeed we have heard it from virtually every Member—the significant help that the household support fund has provided to people across England and, via Barnett consequentials, more broadly across the nation since its inception and during these challenging times. At this point, I feel it is only right for me to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for their diligence and grit in ensuring that this reached those people who need help the most, as we have heard from every constituency. The attenuation of this scheme, and the fact that it is directed at those who need help the most, is a mark of its true success.

The right hon. Member for East Ham showed how beneficial the household support fund was, and how its local nature and adaptability was part of its success. Since its launch in 2021, the Government have provided more than £2.5 billion, including Barnett consequentials, to support those most in need. This includes last year's provision of some £842 million for England plus Barnett consequentials, bringing it to £1 billion in this year. The additional funding has enabled the latest and longest extension from April 2023, with those funds currently being delivered incredibly effectively by local councils. Across England, 153 local authorities have used this funding to provide—[*Interruption.*]

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Unfortunately, there is a Division. I will have to suspend this sitting for 15 minutes for the first vote, and then for 10 minutes for any subsequent vote. Let's hope we can be back here at 5.51 pm.

5.36 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.51 pm

On resuming—

Jo Churchill: I hope I am picking up where I left off.

Across England, 153 local authorities have used this funding to provide a variety of support to help households with their essential costs. As we have heard from across

the Chamber, that support has included—not exhaustively—vouchers for food and energy costs, warm clothing, and enacting simple energy-saving measures. Since April 2023, councils have also been able to fund advice and guidance services as part of their offer, helping to direct individuals towards longer-term help and support.

Since its inception, the household support fund has provided help to millions of people in a wide variety of circumstances. There were more than 26 million individual awards of support across the first three schemes, which ran from October 2021 to March 2023; indeed, totting it up roughly, over £100 million of support was given to councils in the constituencies of Members sitting here. We know that around two thirds of the funding from these schemes was used to support families with children—that was heard very clearly—and that was in addition to other support that we have made available, including the £200 million per annum holiday activities and food programme, which will carry through into 2024-25. We have also extended free school meals to more groups of children than any other Government in the past half century.

Many Members have raised concerns about the end of the current household support fund on 31 March. Some have even suggested that the Government have cut the fund. I re-emphasise the remarks I made in a debate in this place two weeks ago. To be clear: the Government continue to keep these matters under review. No decision on the future of the scheme has been taken, and the current scheme runs until the end of March.

Although the household support fund does important work, and we have heard about much of it, it is only a part of what we are doing. As I am sure the right hon. Member for East Ham will agree, over the past two years in particular, in the light of the pandemic and Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, we have provided one of the largest cost of living support packages in Europe, and further support is still to be delivered in 2024-25. For example, over 8 million households across the UK on eligible benefits have received two of the three cost of living payments, which will be worth £900 in total this financial year, and the third cost of living payment—a further £299—will be made to most eligible households next month.

To put things into context, the annual welfare spend in Great Britain will be £276 billion this year. Having uprated benefits in line with inflation for 2023-24, we have announced a further increase of 6.7% in working-age benefits for 2024-25, subject to parliamentary approval—as we know, that order began its journey through the Commons today. On top of that, we are increasing local housing allowance from April, which will benefit a further 1.6 million low-income households by, on average, around £800, and we are increasing the national living wage for people aged 21 and above by over 9.8% from April. That means there will be an annual increase in gross earnings of more than £1,800 for someone working full time on that wage. Those workers who are at the younger end—at 21 or 22 years old—will see an increase of some 12.4% on average, as we extend the national living wage to them.

Additionally, we have reduced the main rate of class 1 national insurance contributions to 10% from this month, providing a tax cut for a further 27 million working people. Nevertheless, we rightly remain committed to that strong safety net for those who need it, particularly

[Jo Churchill]

during challenging economic times and when lives get a bit turbulent. We have always believed that the best way to help people improve their financial circumstances is through work and support, and that approach is based on the clear evidence around the beneficial role of work, and especially full-time work, including the part that it can play in lifting people out of poverty.

Data from 2021-22 shows that there were 1.7 million fewer people in absolute poverty after housing costs compared with 2009-10, including 400,000 fewer children. With more than 900,000 vacancies across the UK, our focus is firmly on helping people take their first steps into work and progress towards financial independence. We know that for many, many people, that can be a challenge in itself. We therefore need to make sure that there is the right support to help people on that journey, which is why we have introduced WorkWell, the back to work plan, Access to Work and many other schemes. We have heard today that the fund is ringfenced, goes to upper-tier authorities, looks towards local attenuation and looks to make the best of all those charities that do so much for our communities. I thank hon. Members for those positive words.

In summary, the household support fund has done much to help those in need, providing billions of pounds through millions of individual awards. Local authorities have used the funding to help those most in need. As I have said, the current round will end on 31 March, as planned. However, we remain committed to a sustainable long-term approach to supporting vulnerable individuals and tackling poverty, alongside inflation-matching increases to benefits and the state pension, increasing the national living wage and reducing national insurance, as the Government continue to empower people to move into work and have control over their own lives.

I have heard everyone's comments, both on the success of the scheme and the local focus. Hon. Members will be aware that there is a fiscal event on 6 March. It is not for me to pre-empt what may be included. However,

I will ensure that the comments from today's debate are passed to No. 11. On that note, I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House to continue to support those most in need, and I again thank the right hon. Member for East Ham for calling this very important debate.

5.58 pm

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to everybody who has taken part in this debate. I particularly welcome the robust cross-party support for the household support fund, not least from the two former recent Ministers responsible for it, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I also welcome the positive tone the Minister has taken in her remarks about the household support fund; perhaps we should all wish her well for her discussions with the Treasury in the next few weeks so that the fund gets extended.

We heard a powerful case being made across the Chamber. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), who all spoke powerfully.

I want to make a final point. The household support fund was initially announced for six months. The longest it has ever been in place for was a year. Each time it gets changed, the goalposts have shifted. Local councils really need a longer-term commitment so that they can plan to make the most of this very welcome funding. I very much hope it will be extended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Household Support Fund.

5.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 31 January 2024

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Calocane Case: HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Rapid Inspection

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Following the sentencing of Valdo Calocane on Thursday 25 January, I have asked HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) to undertake a thorough and rapid inspection of the CPS actions in this case.

The independent inspection will address the concerns raised by the victims' families about the charging decision and the approach taken by the CPS in engaging with the families.

I have made this reference to HMCPSI under section 2(1)(b) of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000.

HMCPSI will report to me before Easter, so that any lessons to be learned can be rapidly implemented.

[HCWS230]

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Brexit: Fourth Anniversary

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Today, the Department for Business and Trade will be publishing an update detailing the wealth of Brexit benefits the Government have seized since the UK left the European Union on 31 January 2020.

Since the UK's departure from the EU, this Government have cut burdensome red tape for business. We have built dozens of trading relationships with new friends and old allies. And we have taken back control of our laws, borders, and tariffs. This new-found agility was crucial in helping us get through the pandemic with the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe—which in turn allowed us to reopen our economy even sooner.

Where some predicted decline for Britain's economy after Brexit, the UK has shown expansion.

Since the referendum in 2016, the UK has grown faster than Germany, Italy, and Japan and at a similar rate to France. Our services exports are at a record high of £472 billion and the IMF predicts that between 2024 and 2028 the UK will see the third fastest growth in the G7—stronger than France, Germany, Italy and Japan.

Through Brexit, the UK is capitalising on its economic might, while the Government deliver real, tangible benefits not just for British business but for the British people, too.

We have simplified import tariffs on almost 6,000 goods. Our UK global tariff is lowering costs for both businesses and households. And we have made it easier and cheaper for developing countries to sell to the UK—lifting people out of poverty abroad and lowering prices at home without compromising on quality.

The UK now has a little under 50% of products that are tariff-free compared to the EU's 27%.

We have also knocked down approximately 500 trade barriers since 2020, including in the US—our single largest trade partner. We have signed memorandums of understanding with seven US states while agreeing quotas for British steel and aluminium—boosting exports and supporting 80,000 jobs across the UK supply chain.

No longer bound by EU state aid rules, we are driving growth in our coastal communities through our freeports programme. In Teesside—the UK's biggest and first operational port—our tax reliefs, business rates retention policies and investment are helping to generate millions for the local economy while creating thousands of new jobs.

The Government are leveraging our post-Brexit freedoms to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business.

We have already revoked or reformed over 2,000 pieces of EU law with a clear road map to go further.

At the same time we are making it easier for small and medium-sized enterprises—which account for over 99% of UK businesses—to raise finance while simplifying annual leave and holiday pay, and reducing onerous record-keeping requirements under the working time regulations.

Brexit has allowed us to undertake one of the largest shake-ups to procurement rules in this country's history. Our new procurement regime means a simpler, more effective system, helping SMEs secure a greater share of approximately £300 billion of expenditure every year.

The update we are publishing today also shows that, in addition to delivering for British business and the British people at home, we are delivering for them abroad, too.

The Department for Business and Trade has negotiated free trade agreements with 73 countries from Mexico to Malaysia. We have secured the most comprehensive deal that the EU has ever agreed to in its history. These countries accounted for £1.1 trillion of our trade in 2022 alone.

Our trade deals with Australia and New Zealand—the first to be negotiated from scratch after Brexit—are helping home-grown companies break into new markets on the other side of the world, with the potential to bring in billions of pounds of new investment for the UK.

Our digital agreements with Singapore and Ukraine—regarded as blueprints by other nations striking similar deals—will boost our trading relationships in the digital economy and services sectors by extending market reach and ensuring the secure, tariff-free flow of digital content.

The UK will also shortly be joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. It will make over 99% of UK goods eligible for zero tariffs in the Asia-Pacific's most dynamic economies.

This year, the Department for Business and Trade is seeking further deals with more fast-growing economies including the Gulf Co-operation Council and India.

We will cement global Britain's status as an outward-looking, international trading powerhouse, redrawing the rules so businesses can thrive, markets are competitive and consumers are protected.

We will drive further investment from British and international businesses into our economy while strengthening our advice and support for home-grown companies looking to grow and export.

Over the coming year, we will continue to open up new markets for business, promoting free trade, economic security, and resilient supply chains as core pillars of the UK's trade policy.

We are sticking to our plan to deliver the long-term change our country needs and build a brighter future for the United Kingdom, seizing the many opportunities and benefits Brexit has afforded the British people.

[HCWS231]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telegraph Media Group: Pre-emptive Action Order

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): On 26 January, I issued a public interest intervention notice (PIIN) in relation to the anticipated acquisition of the Telegraph Media Group Ltd (TMG) by RB Investco Ltd.

This is further to information my Department received that RedBird IMI has made changes to the corporate structure of the potential acquiring entities of the Telegraph Media Group, and this has created a new relevant merger situation.

This PIIN relates to concerns I continue to have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the anticipated acquisition of TMG by RB Investco and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

The PIIN that I issued on 30 November 2023 in relation to the anticipated acquisition of the Telegraph Media Group Ltd (TMG) by Redbird IMI media joint venture remains in force.

I have now made an order to prevent actions by the parties to the merger that might prejudice the process or impede my ability to protect the public interest during the period in which either the 30 November intervention notice or the new intervention notice is in force. The order prohibits transfer of ownership or control of the TMG business without my prior written consent. It also requires the parties to ensure that no steps are taken to integrate the TMG business with any other enterprise, that no significant changes are made to the management and structure of the TMG business or the boards of both the TMG business and the entities aiming to acquire TMG. The acquiring entities must ensure that no step is taken to change the structure of the potential acquiring entities of TMG. The parties must take all reasonable steps to encourage key staff—managerial, executive and editorial—to remain within the TMG business and must also do what is within their power to ensure that key staff within the TMG business are not removed or transferred without my prior written consent.

This order came into force at 11 am on 30 January 2024.

This order revokes the pre-emptive action order that I made on 1 December 2023. The 30 November 2023 PIIN that I made remains in force. Revocation does not prevent me from taking enforcement action, if necessary, in relation to any breaches of the previous order.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will keep Parliament updated on progress with this media merger case.

[HCWS228]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pharmacy First

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): Following constructive consultation with Community Pharmacy England, I am very pleased to inform the House that on 31 January, the Pharmacy First service will be launched in community pharmacies in England.

Pharmacy First was announced in May 2023 in the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care. This made significant new funding available for community pharmacies to deliver Pharmacy First and to deliver more blood pressure checks and contraception consultations. The new and expanded services will release around 10 million appointments in general practice per year once scaled. We want to do everything we can to support our GPs in supporting patients with higher acuity conditions—a job they do so well. Making use of the clinical skills in community pharmacy does just that.

Four in five people in England can reach a community pharmacy within a 20-minute walk and there are twice as many pharmacies in the most deprived communities. Our vision is to support community pharmacists to evolve further into a more clinically focused role, with members of the public able to take full advantage of their skills and capabilities. Pharmacy's role has been increasing in recent years. In 2019 we set out how we would work to embed and integrate community pharmacy into the NHS, delivering more clinical services and making them the first port of call for many minor illnesses. We had already made good progress, for example:

General practice, NHS111 and urgent and emergency care (UEC) can now refer patients to community pharmacies for advice and treatment for minor illnesses, and NHS111 and UEC can also refer for urgent medicines supply. Over 3.4 million referrals have been made through these routes to date.

We expanded the new medicine service which supports over 200,000 people a month when they start new medicines and we introduced the discharge medicine service which supports 8,000 patients a month who have had their medicines changed following a visit to hospital, reducing medication errors and readmissions.

Over 9,000 pharmacies have delivered over 2 million blood pressure checks since October 2021, allowing those with high blood pressure to be identified and referred for onward management. The delivery plan has made funding available for 2.5 million additional checks. It is estimated this could prevent over 1,350 cardiovascular events such as heart attacks and strokes in the first full year of service, and could lead to savings of around £13 million across primary, secondary and social care.

We introduced a contraception service in April 2023 to enable community pharmacists to manage oral contraception on the basis of an existing prescription and in December 2023 this service was expanded so that pharmacists can now also initiate

oral contraception. The delivery plan has made more funding available for this service so that up to half a million women will be able to access oral contraception through their pharmacy.

Pharmacy First will go further, building on this success and enabling pharmacists to supply prescription-only medicines, including antibiotics and antivirals where clinically appropriate, to treat seven common health conditions without the need to visit a GP. The seven conditions are sinusitis, sore throat, earache, infected insect bite, impetigo, shingles, and uncomplicated urinary tract infections in women. Patients will be able to walk into a pharmacy if they have symptoms or may be referred to a community pharmacy by a GP or NHS111. Ninety-four per cent of pharmacies have signed up to deliver Pharmacy First from 31 January 2024.

The investment in Pharmacy First will also deliver significant upgrades in the digital infrastructure in community pharmacy. This will streamline referrals to and from other NHS services, provide additional access to relevant clinical information from the GP record, and share structured updates quickly and efficiently following a pharmacy consultation back into the GP patient record.

Pharmacy First is the next step on the journey to make the best possible use of the knowledge and expertise of community pharmacists and their teams, improving patient access to care.

[HCWS232]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Funding Settlement 2024-25

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (James Cleverly) has today laid before the House the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2024-25 (HC 482). The report sets out the Home Secretary's determination for 2024-25 of the aggregate amount of grants that he proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. Copies of the report are available from the Vote Office.

The allocations that have been laid before the House today are as set out in my statement and the provisional Police Grant Report of 14 December 2023.

For 2024-25, overall funding for the policing system will rise by up to £842.9 million when compared to the restated 2023-24 police funding settlement, bringing the total settlement for 2024-25 up to £18.4 billion. Available funding to local policing bodies will increase next year by up to an additional £922.2 million, if Police and Crime Commissioners were to take-up the precept flexibility and using latest forecasts, taking total funding for local policing bodies to £16.4 billion.

Compared with 2019-20, this represents a total settlement increase of up to 30.7% in cash terms. Not only has the Government delivered the funding committed in the spending review 2021, but the 2024-25 settlement has gone even further to provide additional funding for policing. This demonstrates the Government's continued commitment to giving policing the resources they need to keep the public safe.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2024-01-31/HCWS229/>.

[HCWS229]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme Levy 2023-24

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) Regulations 2014 require active employers' liability insurers to pay an annual levy, based on their relative market share, for the purpose of meeting the costs of the DMPS. This is in line with the insurance industry's commitment to fund a scheme of last resort for persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer's insurer.

Today I can announce that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2023-24, the 10th year of the DMPS, is £27.3 million. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2024.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their share of the levy, together with how the amount was calculated and the payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen nine successful years of operation, assisting many hundreds of people who have been diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma. The ninth annual report for the scheme, along with the annual statistics, was published on 28 November 2023 and is available on the www.gov.uk website. The report was also deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. I hope that Members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS227]

Petition

Wednesday 31 January 2024

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Policies relating to the climate and nature crisis

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the UK Government needs to significantly strengthen its manifesto and policies with respect to the climate and nature crisis, as called for by 2000 business professionals and leaders; further that there needs to be a rapid scale up in investment, and support essential training for the transition; further that there needs to be a more robust plan to restore nature and halt further decline by 2030 which would involve a National Plan for achieving nature targets and robust regulatory frameworks enabling our rivers, seas, food and farming to thrive; and further that there needs to be an end to new fossil fuel developments in the UK including new licensing rounds and approvals for oil and gas exploration, in line with calls from the UN Secretary-General, climate scientists and the IEA.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitions and take immediate action to ensure that these three areas are underpinned with robust policies and regulation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by the right hon. Member for Kingswood, Chris Skidmore, Official Report, 8 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 806.]

[P002877]

Observations from the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart):

We are proud of the UK's leadership in tackling climate change. The UK is the first major economy to halve its emissions, and we continue to have one of the most ambitious 2030 targets of any major economy. Our significant investment in the UK's world-leading clean energy sector has increased our renewable electricity capacity sixfold since 2010, bolstering our energy security.

Since 2010, the UK has seen nearly £200 billion of public and private investment in low-carbon energy sectors, using innovative approaches such as the contracts for difference scheme, which is now copied around the world. Our policies are backed by billions of pounds of Government funding and will leverage around £100 billion of private investment and support up to 480,000 jobs in 2030. The Government have also committed £960 million to a green industries growth accelerator, to support clean energy manufacturing.

The Government's net zero and environmental goals depend on the UK having the right workforce, with the right skills and capacity in the right locations across the UK. To tackle emerging and future workforce demands

across the economy, the Government convened the green jobs delivery group and are focused on the creation of a cross-Government green jobs plan, for publication in the first half of 2024. The green jobs plan will provide the Government and industry actions needed to ensure that we have a sufficiently skilled workforce to deliver on the Government's net zero, nature and energy security targets.

This Government are committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it. In 2018 we published our 25-year environment plan, which sets out our long-term approach to protecting and improving our natural environment. The Environment Act 2021 includes a legally binding target to halt the decline in nature by 2030. This, and other targets, will tackle some of the biggest pressures facing our environment. They will ensure progress on clean air; clean and plentiful water; less waste and more sustainable use of our resources; a step change in tree planting; a better marine environment; and a more diverse, resilient and healthy natural environment.

Meeting these ambitious targets is a national endeavour, requiring all of us to play our part. Recent actions to meet our species abundance target include the launch of our multimillion-pound species survival fund in June, and the announcement in November of the 34 projects selected for the second round of our landscape recovery scheme. Our agricultural transition plan sets out increased incentives for farmers to deliver positive environmental outcomes, and by 2028 we will see at least 70% of farmers and land managers undertaking environmental land management actions alongside food production, crucial to helping achieve our challenging targets.

New oil and gas licences will slow the decline in UK production, rather than see it increase above current levels. New projects, such as Rosebank, are expected to have lower production emissions than the current North sea average. The alternative to new licences will see increased imports of LNG with four times higher emissions than domestic production.

Even with continued exploration and development, oil and gas production is expected to decline by 7% a year, faster than the rate required to keep warming below 1.5°C. New licensing is also crucial to support the transition to net zero—the skills, jobs and supply chains in the oil and gas sector are the same ones that we will need for renewables. If we pull the rug from under the sector, the transition will be more difficult.

Ending new licences in the North sea would make no difference to our consumption of fossil fuels but would lead to more higher emission imports, threaten 200,000 jobs, risk billions in tax receipts and undermine the energy transition. It makes no sense. That is why we have introduced the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill.

As the Prime Minister has made clear, this Government remain committed to delivering net zero by 2050, and our 2030 and 2037 targets. Our biggest challenge is persuading other countries to join the UK on a net zero pathway, and we will continue to build on the positive results of both COP26 and COP28 in doing exactly that.

Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 31 January 2024

EDUCATION

Children Not in School: National Register and Support

The following are extracts from the Opposition Day debate on Children Not in School: National Register and Support on Tuesday 23 January 2024.

David Johnston: As my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister said, the motion conflates two separate things: the issue of persistent absence, which is when pupils miss 10% or more of their **lessons**, and the topic of home education for those who are not in school.

[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 228.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston).

Errors have been identified in my speech responding to the Opposition Day debate on Children Not in School: National Register and Support. The correct statement should have been:

David Johnston: As my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister said, the motion conflates two separate things: the issue of persistent absence, which is when pupils miss 10% or more of their **sessions**, and the topic of home education for those who are not in school.

David Johnston: There were 380,000 fewer **persistently absent pupils** in the past academic year, and in the last academic term overall absence was down to 6.8%, from 7.5% in the autumn term the year before.

[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 228.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Wantage.

Errors have been identified in my speech responding to the Opposition Day debate on Children Not in School: National Register and Support. The correct statement should have been:

David Johnston: There were 380,000 fewer **pupils persistently absent or not attending** in the past academic year, and in the last academic term overall absence was down to 6.8%, from 7.5% in the autumn term the year before.

David Johnston: Of course, mental health challenges underpin some of the absence—something raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), among others. That is why we have been rolling out mental health support teams, which now cover **44%** of pupils in schools and colleges and will cover 50% of those pupils by March 2025.

[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 229.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Wantage.

Errors have been identified in my speech responding to the Opposition Day debate on Children Not in School: National Register and Support. The correct statement should have been:

David Johnston: Of course, mental health challenges underpin some of the absence—something raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), among others. That is why we have been rolling out mental health support teams, which now cover **35%** of pupils in schools and colleges and will cover 50% of those pupils by March 2025.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Wednesday 31 January 2024

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Policies relating to the climate and nature crisis	11P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 31 January 2024

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EDUCATION	11MC
Children Not in School: National Register and Support	11MC

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**not later than
Wednesday 7 February 2024**

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