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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 9 June 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Fraud Reduction

1. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect the public purse by reducing fraud. [900324]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): We have spent taxpayers' money on building counter-fraud services, including the counter fraud function, counter fraud profession and a data analytics hub. Her Majesty's Treasury and the Cabinet Office are going further, spending £24 million on a public sector fraud authority, which will bring increased scrutiny to counter-fraud performance and build a broader and deeper expert service for public bodies.

Alexander Stafford: The Labour party cost each individual hard-working taxpayer £500 a year through fraud and error when it was last in office. Can my right hon. Friend confirm what action he is taking to reverse Labour's shocking legacy and oversee cost-cutting programmes across Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of the proper expenditure of taxpayers' money, which we always remember it is; the Government have no funds of their own. We have announced significant efforts on the counter-fraud service, most recently with the announcement on the public sector fraud authority, which is part of a wider programme of £750 million. That spending is not a virtue in itself, but £1 spent fighting fraud brings a proper, bankable return to taxpayers by bringing wrongdoers to justice and getting money back, and that is what we will continue to do.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I could not agree more with the Minister. Let us have a bankable return for the taxpayer, because the Public Accounts Committee has found that £4.9 billion of money given in bounce back loans is fraudulent. What is he doing to get almost £5 billion back for the taxpayer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to say we have Corporal Hindsight on duty in the Chamber this morning. The socialists were calling for bounce back loans to be issued faster, and therefore, inevitably, with fewer checks at the time. The public sector fraud authority is being set up and the fraud departments within Government are working with the British Business Bank and with banks—I have seen a number of them personally—to get them to use their systems to claim the money back from people who have taken it fraudulently. The Government take it extremely seriously, but the socialists must remember what they were saying a couple of years ago.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): But what is my right hon. Friend doing about the internal fraud within the Government, caused by low productivity and bloated and dysfunctional public services?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a great one for holding the Government and the bureaucracy to account, and he is right to do so. That is why we are looking to significant productivity increases by reducing the size of the civil service back to where it was in 2016, to ensure that services are provided to the public efficiently and effectively. As we reduce the number, so there will be significant taxpayer spending on better technology, because the use of technology speeds up actions for citizens and reduces costs for the taxpayer.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Angela Rayner.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Leader of the House talks about socialists, but let us talk about the Conservatives. He will be aware that a Conservative peer is under investigation by the National Crime Agency over fraud. PPE Medpro, a company linked to Baroness Mone, was handed hundreds of millions of pounds in Government contracts during the pandemic. It is now reported to have been raided by the police, as has her home. There are serious questions about the due diligence performed on that company, so can the Leader of the House let us know what evidence they hold and why they are refusing to put a single sheet of it out into the public domain? What do they have to hide?

Mr Speaker: I should just say that he is no longer the Leader of the House. I know we all assume he is, but there we are.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was going to point out to the right hon. Lady that business questions will follow in due course and that that would be her opportunity to raise such things with the Leader of the House.

Angela Rayner: Well, that was a way of deflecting from the actual serious question that the Government are not willing to answer because they know there is suspicion about the way in which they handled those contracts.

On the topic of protecting the public purse, as we speak this Government are frittering away almost half a million pounds a day on storing personal protective equipment unfit for human use. That is after £10 billion has already been wasted, alone, on unusable, overpriced and underdelivered PPE. In fact, useless PPE storage is costing the taxpayer nearly half a million pounds a day.

Will the Government's procurement Bill close the loophole and prevent cronyism from corrupting our politics and wasting public money?

Mr Rees-Mogg: These charges made by the socialists are completely false. They have no bearing on reality and they completely ignore what was the requirement two years ago. We needed PPE. There was a global shortage. Everyone in the world was buying PPE, and British manufacturing managed to turn round and supply it in unprecedented quantities. If I remember rightly from when I was Leader of the House, domestically produced PPE went from about 1% to well over 70%, possibly even over 80%. This was an enormous effort, and it has to be said that everyone was calling for it at the time, because it was urgent to protect people in care homes, in hospitals and in offices as masks and PPE were demanded and this was delivered. The right hon. Lady would have sat on her hands and done nothing, expecting it to take months and months to procure a single pair of gloves.

Infected Blood: Compensation

2. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people affected by contaminated blood cases. [900325]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): As the Minister responsible for the infected blood inquiry, I announced this week the publication of the study by Sir Robert Francis QC on a framework of compensation for people directly affected by infected blood. The Government are considering Sir Robert's recommendations and I will update the House as this work progresses.

Duncan Baker: I was contacted by a constituent who has been affected by the infected blood scandal. As for so many across the country, this has been a very traumatic moment for everybody who has been impacted. As my right hon. and learned Friend says, on Tuesday we have the release of the very welcome study that has come forward. Can we now move at pace on compensation for those who have been impacted? Will he think about the recommendations for interim payments, and will that be able to help the victims quickly now?

Michael Ellis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for rightly raising the concerns of his constituents. I know that Members across the House will have constituents in similar positions. Sir Robert will give evidence to the inquiry on 11 and 12 July, so just a few weeks from now, and the Government will need to reflect very carefully on his evidence to the inquiry in considering his study. But the points my hon. Friend makes are very valid and have been noted. There are complex factors to take into consideration and we will be doing just that.

National Resilience Strategy: Food Security

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure food security preparedness as part of his Department's national resilience strategy. [900326]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): The Government are working closely with the food industry to ensure that the UK's food security is resilient to shocks. The resilience strategy will be published this summer and will reflect a range of global resilience issues.

Kerry McCarthy: This situation has become increasingly urgent because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has seriously disrupted global food supplies. Will the Minister comment on rumours that the Government are reportedly abandoning many of the recommendations in the national food strategy, on which their response is long overdue, including measures that would help us to improve our food security?

Steve Barclay: We are working in partnership with the food industry—indeed, only yesterday I chaired a roundtable with industry representatives—and also working in partnership across the United Kingdom. We had representatives from the devolved Administrations there yesterday for what is a common purpose. We all want to see resilience, given the pressure on food prices, and we are working in partnership with industry representatives to take that strategy forward.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps his Department is taking to mitigate the effects of the war in Ukraine on world supplies of food?

Steve Barclay: One specific area is working with international partners as to how we get the grain out of Ukraine. There is a pressing timescale on that—a four-week window—so the matter is urgent. Indeed, when I met the US ambassador who has newly arrived in her post, that was one of the issues we discussed, as we do with other international partners.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the need to secure knowledgeable farmers—I am very fortunate in my constituency to have many—what discussions has the Minister had with counterparts in the area of skills and learning on fostering a supportive route to farming and diversification to secure our food supplies at home?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. I suggest that he looks first at the approach we took in the autumn, when our supply chains were under pressure. We showed considerable flexibility and worked with industry leaders such as Sir Dave Lewis on how to adapt our approach. Obviously, there are schemes such as the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which has a review mechanism that potentially allows an extra 10,000 workers if required. There is also the opportunity to invest in areas such as agri-tech, and policy from the Chancellor such as the super deduction facilitates that investment.

Government Procurement Policy

4. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the effectiveness of Government procurement policy. [900327]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Our two Departments are working closely together on matters of procurement policy on a continuing basis, as demonstrated by the provisions being made in the Procurement Bill for defence contracts. I have had regular conversations with my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement during the drafting of the Bill.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that answer. Last year, it was announced that a competition would take place to replace the electronic countermeasures. Four companies made bids, including two from my constituency, one of which already supplies that equipment. Three were sifted out on the ground that their answers on the supply chain question were not sufficient, even though the three have very strong supply chain records and gave honest answers to the questions. I believe that that is an unfair and potentially dangerous decision. Will my right hon. Friend look into it, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have had assurances from the Foreign Office that it carefully evaluated the bids in line with its procurement process, and that the answers and documentation supplied provided limited assurance that either supplier could deliver electronic countermeasure systems within the procurement timeframe required. However, I commend my hon. Friend for standing up for his constituents and seeking redress of grievance, which is what this House exists for, and I will question the Foreign Office further to give him further reassurance that the process was carried out fairly and his constituents were not disadvantaged.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Rachel Hopkins.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I wish you a very happy birthday tomorrow?

The Procurement Bill is important business. The Opposition are concerned that the Government showed little understanding of spending taxpayers' money efficiently and effectively by irresponsibly wasting billions of pounds of taxpayers' money during the pandemic. The Procurement Bill is a huge opportunity to ensure that every pound of taxpayers' money spent takes account of social value—true value for money—to distribute growth, meet environmental targets and develop social wellbeing, but it does not mention social value once. Does the Minister agree that including in the Bill an explicit commitment to deliver social value will help to restore public trust in Government spending, after the failures of the pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: How remiss of me not to wish you many happy returns for tomorrow, Mr Speaker. I expect that Chorley will be en fête over the weekend and that what it was doing last weekend was merely a warm-up for the main event.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) for bringing up the Procurement Bill, which has now started its passage in the other House. What is of fundamental and overwhelming importance—I think we agree on this—is value for money, and that is front and centre of the Bill. The other bits around procurement may be good to do, but if we do not achieve value for money, taxpayers' money will not be well spent.

I go back to the procurement of PPE two years ago. Had we followed the normal procurement rules, it would have taken three to six months before we ordered a single extra glove. That cannot have been the right thing to do when there was an emergency. I am glad to say that the Bill provides better emergency procurement procedures.

Government Efficiency: Online Services

5. Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) improve Government efficiency and (b) reform Government online services. [900328]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Digital transformation is central to improving the delivery of Government services. My Department is leading work to improve the efficiency of the top 75 Government services; to embed a build once, use many times approach to technology; and to build a new system that will enable citizens to prove their identity and access online Government services through a single account, one login. In the last financial year, technology platforms built by Cabinet Office digital generated £74 million of savings to Government—six times more than cost to run.

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for outlining the Government's improvements in online applications, but may I ask what conversations she is having with the Home Office? Many Carshalton and Wallington residents have been in touch about delays in the Homes for Ukraine scheme and passport renewals, so what discussions has the Cabinet Office had with the Home Office on improving its online application systems?

Mrs Wheeler: Home Office colleagues are working harder than ever to deal with huge surges in demand for passports and visas as a result of the recovery from the pandemic and the UK's response to the illegal war in Ukraine. The Home Office is currently prioritising Ukraine visa scheme applications in response to the illegal invasion of Ukraine. The Government are communicating directly with other visa customers to note that economic visas are taking longer to process at this time. Staff are being redeployed to those visa routes and further staff are being recruited and onboarded. More passport applications are being processed than ever before, with nearly 2 million applications completed between March and April. Despite that, the vast majority of passports are being processed within 10 weeks.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Minister's warm words do not match the reality of the Government's plans. Their all-male cuts committee, headed by the Chancellor, will not create efficiencies by cutting 91,000 civil servants; in fact it will gut the civil service's capability to deliver the vital frontline services that our communities rely on. Will the Minister explain to the public how all Departments being asked to model 20%, 30% or 40% job cuts will better serve their needs when it comes to getting their passport on time, not having to wait in queues at the airport or accessing swift justice in our court system?

Mrs Wheeler: I am afraid the hon. Lady is out of step with reality. Many MPs have gone to the hub in Portcullis House and have got turnarounds for their constituents'

passports. Many people have got their passports within nine days. *[Interruption.]* She is asking about technology: improvements in artificial intelligence mean that if there is no issue with someone's passport, it is returned within nine days flat.

Civil Service: Broadening and Diversifying Expertise

9. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to broaden and diversify expertise in senior posts within the civil service. [900332]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): What an exciting time we are having this morning. The Government will provide a range of entry routes and a renewed focus on driving the movement of skills, experience and knowledge within the civil service, and between the civil service and other sectors, through loans, secondments and intergovernmental placements and fellowships. We have strengthened the external by default recruitment requirement for all senior civil servant roles, so all Departments will be able to recruit the people best placed to lead and work in Government.

Damien Moore: The civil service fast stream ensures that the best and brightest in our society, no matter their background, rise to the top. Does my hon. Friend agree that restoring the fast stream would ensure that the top ranks of the civil service continue to be world leading in their breadth and depth of knowledge?

Mrs Wheeler: Fast stream places for autumn 2022 will be honoured and our direct entry apprenticeship and internship schemes will continue to bring new and diverse talent to the civil service. While we pause the fast stream for the 2023 intake, we will take the opportunity to further improve the fast stream offer. That reform will ensure that when the scheme reopens, it is focused on driving up specialist skills in the civil service, as well as improving the regional representation of the fast stream.

I know that my hon. Friend works hard with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials on their international agenda in his capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on Belgium, Luxembourg and Tunisia. I take the opportunity to update him that, as part of our global Britain agenda and the establishment of the new College for National Security, we are launching international strategy and security fellowships, which are secondments, and where possible—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the greatest respect for the Minister, but these are very long answers. We are certainly wandering away from where we started. Let us move on to the shadow Minister.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Increasing the diversity of the senior civil service is key to strengthening leadership and expanding expertise. Representation of ethnic minorities and disabled people in senior roles is still below the working population average. Given that the fast stream is a proven route to senior roles, it should be used as a tool to boost diversity, so the decision to freeze the scheme puts a reckless, ideological cuts agenda ahead of a sustained strategy to create a senior civil service that truly reflects our country. Can the

Minister explain how cutting 91,000 jobs and freezing the fast stream will help to increase diversity in the senior civil service?

Mrs Wheeler: I am afraid the hon. Lady is missing the point completely. Respectfully, taxpayers should have value for money, and a civil service that has grown by 24% in only a few years is outrageous. The most important point about diversity is that we are moving jobs out of London, with regional jobs all over, and we are reflecting the public in those regional jobs.

Brexit Opportunities: Discussions with Welsh Government

10. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What recent discussions the Minister for Brexit Opportunities has had with the Welsh Government on the UK Government's assessment of the potential merits of the UK having left the EU. [900333]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I am very grateful for this question because it is an opportunity to remind the hon. Gentleman that the people of Wales, in their good sense, voted in a higher proportion to leave the European Union than did the people of England.

My officials and I undertake regular engagement with the devolved Administrations on the opportunities arising from leaving the European Union, including on the Brexit freedoms Bill and the reviews of retained EU law. I was pleased to have a meeting with the Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution on 23 May to discuss the Brexit freedoms Bill, and I look forward to further such discussions to ensure we maximise the benefits of Brexit for the people of Wales, including the exciting development of a freeport.

Hywel Williams: Post-Brexit freight traffic through Holyhead is down by 34%—permanently so. This is not teething troubles and it is not post covid; it is a permanent failure. In January last year, the Secretary of State for Wales told me that he was in talks with the Welsh Government to make sure that Holyhead “flourishes”. Eighteen months later, does this Minister consider that Holyhead is flourishing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think everyone is keen that Holyhead should flourish, but inevitably there are competitive routes for transport. It is inevitable in any free market system that people will choose the routes that they decide to use. But there are also issues with the Northern Ireland protocol and, if the hon. Gentleman continues to attend as regularly as he does, he will no doubt hear announcements in this House on the protocol.

Cost of Living: Leaving the EU

11. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the impact on the cost of living of the UK having left the EU. [900334]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Her Majesty's Government understand that many people are worried

about the effect of rising prices. That is why we recently announced over £15 billion of additional support, targeted particularly at those in the greatest need. That brings Government support for the cost of living this year to over £37 billion.

We need to look at the wider context here. It is challenging to separate out the effects of Brexit on the UK economy. Indeed, it is worth noting, as Julian Jessop has been pointing out, the very high rate of food inflation in Germany, which I do not believe is an effect of Brexit. We have also seen an illegal war in Russia and supply chain problems following the pandemic. So we will move on with the Brexit freedoms Bill and the Procurement Bill, which will help us to get more opportunities for growth from leaving the European Union.

Chris Stephens: But Brexit-related trade barriers have driven up the cost of food in the UK by 6%, making life harder for everyone struggling with the cost of living crisis. So severe is the harm that 60% of leave voters accept that Brexit has driven up the cost of living. Does the Minister accept that, and what do the Government intend to do about the rising cost of food across these islands?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not know where these figures come from. The hon. Gentleman himself said it, but I am not sure there is any greater source for these figures, though perhaps he will make them available in the Library if there is some better evidence for them.

What we have done by not adding controls on 1 July is ensure we do not add costs to things coming into this country. We believe in free trade. We do not believe in non-tariff barriers. We believe in being as open as possible. That is why my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade is negotiating dozens of free trade agreements, many of them already successfully adopted. That is what we will continue to do because a free and open market reduces prices, which we can do as we are no longer under the yoke—the onerous yoke—of the European Union.

Mr Speaker: I call Peter Bone, who is no yoke.

Brexit: Economic Opportunities

12. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What progress his Department has made on identifying potential economic opportunities arising from the UK having left the EU. [900335]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The Government and I are very committed to ensuring we maximise the opportunities of leaving the EU to support economic growth. My hon. Friend, with his invariable parliamentary perspicacity, follows from one question to another seamlessly, because what we need is the removal of overburdensome and bureaucratic regulation such as solvency II and the clinical trials directive to create new pro-growth regulatory frameworks in data and AI. Her Majesty's Government are already delivering an ambitious programme of work to unleash innovation, propel start-up growth across all sectors of the economy and help to level up parts of the United Kingdom. The Procurement Bill alone will cut 350 separate pieces of EU law to one UK law. I have also been receiving excellent ideas from readers of *The Sun* and the *Sunday Express*.

Mr Bone: I apologise to the House, Mr Speaker: perhaps I should not have asked that question as it obviously required the giving of a long list of benefits.

In my constituency, Weatherbys, the global administrator for horse racing, has developed an e-passport to ease movements of thoroughbreds around the world and provide essential welfare data. If the Government were to link that e-passport to the Government system, that would be a massive Brexit dividend. May I ask the excellent Minister for administrative affairs whether he would put a rocket under the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, make it be courageous and cut the red tape, cut the delay and get this done?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have good news for my hon. Friend: DEFRA's equine identification team has been in contact with Weatherbys during the development and launch of its e-passport, and the merits of its e-passport will be considered along with responses from a recent consultation, which closes on 28 June. So it is a case of, my hon. Friend asks and it shall be given. Seek and he shall find.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesman, Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In October 2019, the Brexit Opportunities Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and assured businesses that the “broad, sunlit uplands” of Brexit lay ahead. Yesterday, I spoke to Elizabeth, whose company, Gracefruit, has exported chemicals for cosmetics to the EU for almost two decades. She weathered the financial crash, but such was the impact of Brexit that she has told me she no longer has the

“mental or emotional energy to make a success of a once-thriving business.”

So would he like to tell Elizabeth, and all the others struggling with red tape, soaring costs and a loss of market, when they can expect those “broad, sunlit uplands” to arrive?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The sun is shining, metaphorically, regardless of the meteorological conditions outside. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that we are in charge of how this economy works, but what we cannot do is make the EU dance to our tune. If it wishes to disadvantage its own consumers—if it wishes to put up prices for its consumers—that is a matter for the EU, but we are producing a dynamic, open, free market UK economy.

Brendan O'Hara: The idea that the Minister for Brexit Opportunities believes that the sun is shining for small and medium-sized companies in this country is absolutely unbelievable because, in the first year following Brexit, Elizabeth's business fell by 65%. Because of red tape and new regulations, her product line had to be reduced from 350 products to one, and the company has had to lay off 50% of its workforce. So it is Brexit that has been an unmitigated disaster for Gracefruit and so many other long-standing successful businesses. Is it not time that this Government stopped playing games with people's lives and livelihoods and admitted that their Brexit experiment is a lose-lose for everybody, bar a few double-breasted suit-wearing hedge fund managers and City spivs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is fundamentally wrong and he actually explains why it was right to leave the EU. What he is talking about is not British red tape—it is EU red tape. We are freeing people in this country from red tape because we look at the United Kingdom playing a global role—trading with the globe, being as economically productive as anywhere in the world. He comes here and explains that the red tape of the EU strangles enterprise and innovation and destroys business. That is why the EU is a failing economic option and why we sing hallelujahs for having left it.

Covid-19 Inquiry: Final Report

14. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): If he will take steps to help ensure that the UK Covid-19 Inquiry publishes its final report in this Parliament. [900337]

18. **Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): If he will take steps to help ensure that the UK Covid-19 Inquiry publishes its final report in this Parliament. [900343]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): May I join others in wishing you many happy returns, Mr Speaker? It must be great to be the youngest Speaker of the House of Commons in generations.

Under the Inquiries Act 2005, the process, procedure and timing of the inquiry are matters for its independent chair Baroness Heather Hallett. She has made it clear that she will be doing everything in her power to deliver recommendations as soon as possible.

Alex Norris: More than 170,000 people have lost their lives to covid-19. That is an awful lot of empty places at the dinner table and a lot of broken hearts. The families desire rightly to know what happened to help them grieve. I heard what the Minister said about the limits on his agency in the matter, but I did not hear him say that, in his opinion, it would be valuable to have those answers as quickly as possible, and that ought to be within the life of this Parliament.

Michael Ellis: The hon. Member is completely right to raise his point, which I know is one that the House will agree with. The inquiry's draft terms of reference actually require it to

“produce its reports (including interim reports) and any recommendations in a timely manner.”

To be fair, Baroness Hallett has made it clear that she will do everything in her power to deliver recommendations as soon as possible. I agree with that—it is part of the terms of reference—and we will work to that, as I know she will.

Feryal Clark: Seven hundred and fifty-one: that is how many people died within 28 days of a covid-positive test in my borough of Enfield. Those people are not just numbers; they represent hundreds of families who are grieving the loss of loved ones and want answers. They should not have to fight and struggle to get those answers. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. I join my hon. Friend in asking the Minister to do the right thing by those families, including those in Enfield, and ensure that the inquiry reports back as soon as possible.

Michael Ellis: I am sympathetic to the hon. Member's point, and I know everyone will be. The consultation on the terms of reference that Baroness Hallett engaged upon is now complete. She received more than 20,000 responses from members of the public. She had already held meetings with bereaved families and sector representatives across the UK and she has now published her recommendations for the inquiry's final remit. The Prime Minister will be consulting with the devolved Administrations. Every effort will be made to go as fast as is reasonably possible while also getting proper inquiry results. I know that Baroness Hallett will work to that, too.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We already have the most important lesson, which is to avoid lockdowns, isn't it?

Michael Ellis: I think that my right hon. Friend will agree that the Prime Minister and the Government made every effort to avoid having lockdowns where that was possible. Unfortunately, occasionally, it was necessary so to do.

Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Global Cyber Threat

15. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking with international partners in response to the global cyber-threat posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [900338]

16. **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking with international partners in response to the global cyber-threat posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [900339]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): The Government are dedicating significant resources to understanding and countering Russia's cyber-threat, working with our allies. That has included joint advisories with our Five Eyes partners on how to mitigate that threat.

Giles Watling: With daily cyber-attacks against this place as well as institutions and companies across the country, what are we doing to stem the tide of aggression from Russia?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are spending £2.6 billion over the next three years to counter that threat. That is additional to the significant funding going into the National Cyber Force, which gives us offensive capability as well. Alongside that, we have a whole of society approach as set out in our national cyber strategy. I know that you, Mr Speaker, will take a great interest in particular in the north-west cyber-corridor, which is about leveraging that investment in the National Cyber Force and making it about skills across the north-west as a whole.

Damian Collins: Does my right hon. Friend agree that disinformation campaigns from hostile foreign states such as Russia also pose a cyber-security threat and that it is important that tech platforms work closely with the intelligence services and the Cabinet Office to identify proactively those threats and to address them?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right on that. I know that he has taken a close, long-term interest in the issue, so he will be aware both of the provisions in the National Security Bill on capturing foreign interference as an offence and of the measures in the Online Safety Bill that will force big tech platforms to take action on disinformation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I wish you a very happy birthday for tomorrow, Mr Speaker.

The US has voiced concern about potential cyber-attacks on major infrastructure operators. What recent assessment has been made of the threat level to UK interests and what additional steps have the Government taken to address it?

Steve Barclay: The assessment is a sobering one. If I just take online scams as one example of cyber risk, there has been a fourfold increase from 2020, with the national cyber strategy seen as thwarting 2.7 million online scams. I am sure the hon. Member and the House will agree that this is a UK-wide threat. That is why we are working closely with the devolved Administrations and industry to look at our skills, taking both a whole of society approach and a whole of the United Kingdom approach to countering that risk.

Civil Service Staffing: Member Correspondence

19. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of civil service staffing to support timely responses to correspondence from hon. Members. [900346]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The Government attach great importance to the effective and timely handling of correspondence. Officials remain committed to providing the highest level of service. As part of our commitment to transparency, we have published data related to letters from MPs and peers answered by Government in 2021, which shows that Cabinet Office timeliness improved each quarter, with 89% of letters—89%—received from hon. Members in quarter four responded to within 20 days.

Rachael Maskell: To get a response: the Equalities Minister, four months; the Health Minister, often four months but can be six months; and the Defence Minister, seven months, with our staff chasing and chasing, while being on the phone for three hours, or up to five hours to UK Visas and Immigration. Behind every letter and every call our office makes is someone in need—often pressing need. We all know that this is due to capacity, so how can the Government state that they plan to cut 20% of civil servant jobs, 91,000 people, when they cannot even cope with undertaking the most basic of tasks?

Michael Ellis: I recognise the importance of the correspondence for those constituents who write in. It might be instructive to know that Departments have continued to receive a significantly higher volume of correspondence in 2021, mainly due to the pandemic, and that has had an impact on resource and timeliness of responses. During 2021, most Departments continued

to receive a significantly higher volume of correspondence. The Department for Transport was able to answer 92% of 13,363 letters, the Ministry of Defence 88% of 3,773 letters, and the Department for International Trade 84% of 2,182 letters, within 20 days.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I gently say that I and the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), have been struggling to ensure that Members' letters, from all sides, are answered? We should not try to defend the indefensible. I will be honest: Members need letters on behalf of their constituents to be answered as quickly as possible and, unfortunately, I am getting all the complaints. So I just want to add that to the burden to take away.

I call James Grundy. Not here.

Topical Questions

T1. [900348] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): Mr Speaker, I feel I should have started with a birthday tribute; I think the credit for that goes to the Opposition Front Bench.

After the wonderful platinum jubilee, which I know colleagues across the House enjoyed, I pay tribute to the work of civil servants across government, who played a key role in facilitating it. As part of the platinum jubilee celebrations, a civic honours competition was held for city status. The Government were pleased to announce that Her Majesty the Queen had commended city status to Bangor, Colchester, Doncaster, Douglas, Dunfermline, Milton Keynes, Stanley and Wrexham, and that lord mayoralty status was granted to Southampton. I know Members will take great interest in those awards.

Colleagues will have seen the work of our armed forces, as part of our work for the jubilee. One of our first actions on taking office was to create the Office for Veterans' Affairs to co-ordinate support across government. As we approach Armed Forces Week later this month, the Cabinet Office remains focused on our goal to ensure that the UK is the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028.

Alex Norris: Our constituents face ridiculous backlogs for passports, driving licences, decisions from the Home Office and much more across Government. I am afraid that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) did not get an answer to her question: we are told that this will get better, but we are also told that we can afford to cut 91,000 civil servants—how are those two things compatible?

Steve Barclay: Let me take that question on directly. First, the situation has got better, and the response has been addressed in Prime Minister's questions and in other questions today. To be specific about how we are dealing with this, we are looking at business and the scope of machine learning and technology. At the moment, only a very small proportion of the passport application process is automated. If the photo is taken in a booth as opposed to at home, that significantly increases the level of automation that can be delivered and that, in turn,

reduces the number of staff who are manually required. It is such a luddite approach from Opposition Members to suggest, when businesses such as Amazon are showing exactly what technology can deliver, that the Government who are there to serve the taxpayer and the public should not embrace the same technology that we see in our best companies.

T3. [900351] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): Many of my constituents are frustrated that, while there are delays in getting passports and driving licences renewed, many civil servants continue to work from home. Will the Minister update the House on his progress in getting civil servants back behind their desks?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Since the pandemic began, civil servants have been delivering the Government's priorities both from the workplace and occasionally from home. I have written to all Secretaries of State outlining their abilities to ensure that Departments return to pre-pandemic occupancy levels, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency has done so, too.¹ We are willing to assist in any way we can. I add, by the way, that the vast majority of passport applications continue to be processed well within 10 weeks.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): May I say what a luddite approach it is not to see home working as something that can be efficient? We in the Opposition can see that.

Less than a year since his last outsource government review was published, Lord Maude has again been appointed to lead a review of the civil service, a role that he performed in Government for five long years. Will the Minister tell us what value for money and performance measurement has taken place since the conclusion of Lord Maude's last review; what tender process has been conducted to award Francis Maude Associates that work; and what conflict-of-interest assessment has taken place? Or are Ministers lining the pockets of their mates with the public's hard-earned money once again?

Steve Barclay: Usually, one would expect the House to value corporate memory and experience and the fact that the reforms initially put forward by Lord Maude were a cornerstone of the declaration of civil service reform, signed by the Cabinet Secretary and my predecessor as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). If one looks, for example, at the changes in Government relating to functions and the role of developing functional expertise—whether that is in the Government Property Agency or is about commercial contracts or digital and IT—one can see the value for money that is delivered by bringing in that expertise. This is about learning from the best in the private sector. That is why it is a luddite approach to see any change that brings in technology and new ways of working as a threat to the trade unions that support Opposition Members.

T4. [900352] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is clear from the exchanges in the House this morning that not just my constituents, but many constituents are experiencing delays with passport processing, visa applications and driving licence renewals. I know that Ministers have replied on this

issue already, but will the Minister reassure me and my constituents that the planned reduction in the civil service will not impact on the capacity of the processing done by those teams, and that the recruitment taking place—particularly in the Passport Office—will be directed into the frontline to speed up the application process?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend will know, having been a senior business figure before coming to the House, that it is about linking resource to outcomes. We have increased resource in the Passport Office on a temporary basis; we have put in 650 staff since April last year to address the surge in applications as a result of the backlog from covid.

At the same time, there needs to be a change in how we deliver public services, and particularly in how we digitalise access to them. Too often, the same information has to be entered multiple times when addressing things from the Government. We will streamline that through the single sign-on process, and the Passport Office will be one of the beneficiaries of that programme.

T2. [900349] **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that the worst covid outcomes have disproportionately been felt among communities from ethnic minority backgrounds. What steps will his Department take to ensure that those health disparities are examined under the terms of reference set out?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important point. In the work of the equalities unit in the Cabinet Office, a key focus is on variations in the data across social groups, place and economic background, so that we can learn the right lessons. I am sure that, as part of the inquiry review, Judge Hallett will be looking closely at the data, particularly where there are variations within it.

Mr Speaker: I call David Duguid. Not here, again.

T5. [900354] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I press the Paymaster General on his earlier answer about contaminated blood? More than 400 infected people have died since the infected blood inquiry was announced. Sir Robert Francis's report suggests that the Government should offer "substantial interim payments". How soon will the Government respond to that report and implement its recommendations for those affected?

Michael Ellis: As I said earlier, Sir Robert will give evidence on 11 and 12 July. The Government will want to hear what he has to say. We will study it very carefully and will act as expeditiously as possible after that.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I was grateful for the recent meeting with the Minister for Brexit Opportunities about the Procurement Bill, along with other hon. Members sanctioned by China. Given the further revelations and documents about the extent of abuse, torture and human rights violations in Xinjiang and other parts of China, will the Government now commit to a full audit of all public service contracts with any Chinese firms that are in any way implicated in those abuses? Will the Government's default position be to award no contracts to any companies in any way implicated in those forms of abuse?

1. [Official Report, 16 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 6MC.]

Steve Barclay: I very much recognise the considerable interest in and concern about that issue across the House. A cornerstone of our procurement legislation is much greater transparency about the £300 billion of taxpayer spend consequent on that legislation each year. That transparency will better enable the House to have discussions about exactly the point that my hon. Friend raises.

T7. [900356] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): As a consequence of smothering Brexit red tape, a third of UK exporters to the EU have simply stopped trading. Contrary to the frankly ridiculous answer that my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) received, that has hammered the economy, cost thousands of jobs and undermined economic recovery from the pandemic. How can the UK Government claim that Brexit is slashing red tape when it is plainly Brexit-derived trade barriers that are driving businesses into the ground?

Steve Barclay: That is a very straightforward question to answer. It is the freedoms that we have from our exit from the European Union, on things like the £300 billion of procurement that we have just heard about, that allow us to put clauses in our legislation about social value, targeting procurement to better benefit small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly where that reduces food miles or allows social value around disability employment, an issue that was raised earlier. Those are the social value provisions in the procurement legislation that we are able to have as a consequence of our exit from the EU.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Brexit Minister tell us which Departments are co-operating with him wholeheartedly and which are dragging their feet? Does he plan to report, perhaps quarterly, on the progress that each Department has made?

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): My hon. Friend tempts me, but I remind him that the Government speak with one voice. What I will say is that yesterday there was a meeting between Ministers and the Secretary of State for Transport. His Department has, I think, 375 bits of retained EU law, and he is tackling those with great enthusiasm. We need to ensure that people know what the rules are, so that they can point to one and ask, "Is this really necessary?" and I am working with all Departments to do that.

T8. [900357] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, I still take great interest in its work. I am reliably informed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) that yesterday the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration told the Committee that he had asked to meet the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to talk about the cross-Government approach to channel crossings and had been refused a meeting, and that the Home Secretary had cancelled requested meetings with him six times. Is this an acceptable approach to such a serious issue, and when will there be a meeting?

Steve Barclay: One of the purposes of Cabinet Office questions is to enable Ministers to respond to issues as they arise. Obviously I have a range of external meetings that reflect the responsibilities that we have discussed in

the House, not least my roundtable on food security and resilience, an issue that was raised earlier. As for the wider approach to illegal immigration, that is a policy matter for the Home Secretary, who leads external engagement on the issue, but of course the Cabinet Office plays a supporting role in relation to Home Office colleagues.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I just want to make it clear that the Government's approach to the study conducted by Sir Robert Francis was to publish it at the same time as their own response. That is what we were told—although the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood and many campaign groups had asked the Government for openness and transparency, and for the report to be published when it was given to the Government. Given that two people are dying every week as a result of the contaminated blood scandal, may I press the Minister on this issue? Do the Government accept that there is a strong moral case for compensation to be paid, irrespective of any legal liability, and for interim payments of at least £100,000 per individual to start now?

Michael Ellis: Let me start by commending the right hon. Lady for her work in this area. I know how hard she has been working for some time. As she knows, the study was published this week and a statement was made in the House. The study makes recommendations for a framework for compensation and redress for the victims of infected blood, which can be ready for implementation on the conclusion of the inquiry that the Government initiated, should the inquiry's findings and recommendations require it. I cannot second-guess what the outcome will be—that is the reason for the inquiry—but Sir Robert has rightly put the views and experiences of the infected and affected, who have suffered so much and for so long, at the heart of his study, and we will expedite this as far as we possibly can.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) about the contaminated blood scandal, I emphasise that the victims of the scandal need reassurance. We have not had much reassurance this morning. When will the interim payments be made, and do the Government support recommendation 14 of Sir Robert Francis's report?

Michael Ellis: The Government have committed themselves to providing support for those who have been infected and affected, and ex gratia support has been given to those affected by this issue since 1988. As I have said, Sir Robert has made a number of recommendations about compensation, which need careful consideration. It would be remiss of the Government to rush that. It is most important that we are able to reflect on his evidence, which he is due to give in four or five weeks' time, and we will do so after that.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On, again, the subject of the contaminated blood report, may I reiterate the need to support the families who lost loved ones, such as the Smith family from Newport, who lost Colin, aged just seven, after he was infected by blood from an Arkansas prison? Will the Minister ensure that that aspect of Sir Robert Francis's report is acted on? As others have said, this is long, long overdue.

Michael Ellis: The hon. Lady is right to raise that case, and there are many tragic and appalling cases that are similar to it. This is why the Government launched the inquiry, it is why they asked Sir Robert Francis to write his report, and it is why they are acting in a way in which previous Governments over the course of decades have not acted. We will process the matter just as soon as we reasonably, practicably can.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker—the happiest of birthdays.

Why are the Government so bloated? In the UK, we have more Government Ministers than France, Germany and Italy put together, and more than India, Canada and Australia put together. When I arrived in this House in 2001, the Prime Minister made do with one Parliamentary Private Secretary. This Prime Minister has four PPSs; Mrs Thatcher had only one. Why is this Prime Minister so much less efficient than either Tony Blair or Mrs Thatcher? Is it not time, if we are going to have a cull of civil servants, that we had a cull of Ministers? At least one quarter of the Front Bench should go. Would somebody like to name one?

Steve Barclay: I used to think that the hon. Gentleman liked to have the opportunity to question Ministers, and it is good for him to have such a range to choose from. The key issue is how we are delivering for the public. That is what we as a Government are focused on and that is what the transformation programme will deliver.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's reply to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) a few moments

ago about the need to join up Government information so that people do not have to put their data into Government systems all the time. Does that mean that the Minister will be moving forward with plans for automatic electoral registration?

Steve Barclay: The scope of the single sign-on programme has already been set in terms of the 75 services within the scope of how we make doing business easier. This is about looking at where data is entered—for example, for a passport or a driving licence—and how we then enable that to facilitate access to other services, such as access to benefits, so that we make the customer journey for our constituents as frictionless as possible. I think that that is of interest across the House.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Centrica's veteran action pathway provides veterans with a secure role, training and support. It is a really positive opportunity for veterans looking to re-enter the civilian workforce. How are the Government supporting the private sector to develop initiatives like this that specifically focus on supporting veterans?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We are supporting the private sector by giving a national insurance contribution holiday to those such as Centrica that employ service leavers, and we commend them for doing so. We know that military service gives people fantastic skills for life.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the urgent question. I have allowed the sub judice waiver before, and that will continue.

Northern Ireland Protocol: First Treasury Counsel

10.32 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet office if he will make a statement on requests made to the First Treasury Counsel to assess Government proposals to override the Northern Ireland protocol.

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): As the Foreign Secretary set out to the House on 17 May, to respond to the serious situation in Northern Ireland the Government intend to bring forward legislation to fix the Northern Ireland protocol. As she also set out, the Government's view is that such a course of action is lawful and in accordance with international law. In line with long-standing convention, we do not set out details of the internal deliberations regarding that view, but we will be setting out further details about the Government's legal position in due course.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. It was reported on Tuesday evening that Sir James Eadie QC, First Treasury Counsel, had not been consulted on the legality of the Government's proposed legislation to override the Northern Ireland protocol. This was denied directly by the Prime Minister yesterday in a response to a question from the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood). It would now appear that, at the very least, the answer given by the Prime Minister to the hon. Gentleman was incomplete.

We have learned in subsequent media reports that while Sir James was consulted on aspects of the proposals, he was in fact asked not to give an opinion on whether the plan would breach international law, and was told to assume that there was a respectable legal basis for the Government's position. Can the Minister confirm to the House that this information in the public domain is correct? Was Sir James asked to give an opinion on the merits of the legal advice that the Government had been given or not? Can the Minister tell the House why the request to Sir James was framed in this way?

Sir James is understood to have volunteered that he found the argument of one particular lawyer advising the Government

"considerably easier to follow and more convincing".

The lawyer in question had said that it would be "very difficult" for the UK to argue that it was not "breaching international law".

It is a matter of fundamental import to this House that Members are being told by the Government that the content of a Bill is not in breach of international law when that assertion is based on information that is incomplete, and apparently intentionally so.

The Government have put First Treasury Counsel in an almost impossible situation. We are fortunate indeed that he has been willing to take his professional duties more seriously than those who sought his legal advice. We know the position about the publication of Government legal advice, but that relies on Governments acting in good faith and their legal advisers being free to give the best advice that their professional skills allow. That full advice must be published for the Bill.

James Cleverly: The Government are confident that our actions are lawful under international law, and in line with a long-standing convention we do not set out internal legal deliberations.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I make it clear to my right hon. Friend that I voted for the withdrawal agreement and the protocol against my better judgment, and so it has proved. If the Government bring forward a Bill that does not hold out the serious prospect of the restoration of power sharing in Northern Ireland and the restoration of the Good Friday agreement, I will vote against it. Will he undertake to make sure that his right hon. and hon. Friends understand that those voting for such a Bill would be voting to wreck the Good Friday agreement?

James Cleverly: My colleagues on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point that my hon. Friend made; obviously, the question is narrowly focused on legal advice. As I said, we are confident that our position is legal but we do not discuss the details of legal advice to Government.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. Britain at its best is a country that adheres to the rule of law, sticks to its word and is trusted around the world, but under this Government the rule of law is being treated with disdain—whether it is law-breaking parties in No. 10, or the treaties they signed up to just a couple of years ago.

The Prime Minister knew that the Brexit deal he negotiated would create trade barriers in the Irish sea, which have stoked political tensions in Northern Ireland and placed strain on the Good Friday agreement. Rather than seeking workable solutions, the Government are threatening to rip up the agreement, with no concern for international law or for what is best for the people of Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK.

We are calling on both sides to find a solution. Both the UK Government and the EU must get round the table and do everything possible to solve this. Solutions exist, and must be found. Media reports suggest that the Government have not only been careless, but that the First Treasury Counsel, the Government's independent barrister on nationally important legal issues, was not asked to give his opinion on whether imminent plans to overhaul the Northern Ireland protocol would break international law.

It would be unprecedented for the First Treasury Counsel not to be consulted on an issue of this importance. This is the issue that runs to the heart of whether this Government can be trusted to follow the rule of law. Can the Minister confirm—yes or no—did the Government ask the First Treasury Council for a specific legal opinion on whether their plans around the protocol would breach international law? Yes or no?

James Cleverly: The Government are confident that our plans abide by international law. The Government will be setting out their legal position in due course, and in accordance with the long-standing convention we do not discuss legal advice given to Government.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He well knows, as a former

[*Sir Robert Buckland*]

Minister, that the Law Officers' convention is very clear about the disclosure or non-disclosure of legal advice that might be tendered to the Government. I will say this to him in all respect: it is important that lawyers advising the Government do so in privileged circumstances. The real question here is, why on earth are leaks happening time and time again about important legal advice? I want to see the legal position published when the Bill is published.

James Cleverly: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an incredibly strong point. I am conscious that I may get a reputation for repetitiveness at the Dispatch Box, but he is right that the Government's position is that our actions are legal in international law. It is a long-standing convention that we do not disclose the legal advice given to the Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On 16 June 2020, the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster told the House that the Government were "faithfully implementing" the withdrawal agreement, including the Northern Ireland protocol. We know there are no surprises in the withdrawal agreement because we spent long enough debating it in this place, so either it was signed in bad faith, knowing the inevitable outcome, or the Government really did not understand what they were doing. Either way, it is a very bad look for this Government.

If it is true that the Government have not sought full legal advice on the legality of their protocol plan, and if they have given themselves the green light to go rogue, does the Minister agree that breaching international law in this way will only increase the UK's reputation for being a bad-faith actor in the international community?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making those points. I cannot see how they relate to the urgent question, but I say again that the Government are confident that we are acting within international law. It is a long-standing convention of this House that we do not disclose the legal advice given to the Government.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

In response to the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), the reality is that until the Bill is published—in other words, finalised—it is almost impossible for the Law Officers to give an absolute finding on whether or not it is in breach of international law. When the Bill is published, I have no doubt that the Attorney General, whose responsibility it is as an independent adviser to the Government, will say whether it complies with international law. Does the Minister agree that those who criticise the process should recognise the simple point that the Good Friday agreement is itself an international agreement and should function as a priority above all else?

James Cleverly: As so often, my right hon. Friend speaks with great authority and makes an important point. He is right that the Government take the Good Friday agreement and peace and security in Northern Ireland incredibly seriously.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Is it the Government's intention to invoke article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol alongside the publication of the Bill?

James Cleverly: Obviously, article 16 exists for a reason. I will not pre-empt the work of my right hon. and hon. Friends, but the Northern Ireland protocol needs to be fixed and that is our intention.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Act of Union is also an international agreement? Will he ensure that any legislation we pass strengthens rather than diminishes that Act?

James Cleverly: Preservation of the Union will always be a priority for a Conservative Government, and my hon. Friend is right that it is something we should all hold dear.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is it not a disgrace that hon. Members cried for years that Northern Ireland should not be used as a pawn and that the Belfast agreement should be protected and applauded but, at their very first opportunity to Boris bash, they use Northern Ireland as a pawn to thinly veil their attacks on the Government? Northern Ireland needs support from every party in this House.

Is it not also the case that the UK's proposals to remove trade friction between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, are in keeping with international trade law, and it is the EU, under the terms of the 2014 trade facilitation agreement, that is in breach of its international obligations to reduce trade friction between co-signees, which include both the EU and the UK? The fact is that the protocol is the worst example of a European Government or Governments trying to use red tape to destroy commerce in the United Kingdom.

James Cleverly: Her Majesty's Government are committed to ensuring that north-south trade and east-west trade are free flowing and beneficial to all communities in the UK and Ireland. The hon. Gentleman speaks with great authority on the importance of protecting the Good Friday agreement.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): There is a lot of talk about integrity, but what could be more important than the integrity of the United Kingdom? Why has this Bill not yet been published? When will it be published? Can he prevent the Government from bickering in public on this issue and just get on with it?

James Cleverly: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker!

The integrity of the UK will always be an incredibly high priority for Conservative Governments, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we should work to protect it. I have been looking forward to using this phrase: the Bill will be published in due course.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Newspaper reports suggest that the First Treasury Counsel was asked to give only very selective advice. I am not asking the Minister to say what was in that advice, for the

reasons set out by the former Lord Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland). However, given the concerns that have surfaced, can the Minister assure the House that the First Treasury Counsel was not constrained in any way from giving whatever advice he thought appropriate about the lawfulness of the plans that the Government have?

James Cleverly: The Government are confident that our actions are in accordance and consistent with international law. In accordance with a long-standing convention in this House, we do not discuss the content or nature of legal advice to Government.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Following on from the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), will the Minister confirm that any actions the Government take will maintain the supremacy of the Good Friday agreement? The maintenance of that international treaty is the central issue here; without that, we do not have peace, prosperity and a functioning withdrawal agreement. Will he express some disappointment about the fact, or agree with me, that people in this Chamber use the phrase “breach of international law” when they have no idea whether there has been a breach of international law? That is a decision that will come out when the Bill is published.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The Good Friday agreement is the foundation stone of peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. We applaud the courageous peacemakers who were instrumental in bringing it into existence. We are coming towards its 25th anniversary, and this Government will absolutely ensure that it is protected.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Penblwydd hapus—happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Did the Minister see the report in the *Financial Times* this week on the impact of the protocol? It showed that Northern Ireland, which remains in the EU single market because of the protocol agreement, is the only part of the UK other than London to have bounced back economically above pre-pandemic levels. The report says that Wales has “regained the ground” lost during the past two years, but all other regions are still producing “much less” than they did “before the health emergency”. So why are the Government trashing our international reputation for keeping our word? People on their side of the House used to say, “My word is my bond.” Why are we trashing our international reputation in order to unpick an agreement that is bringing clear and easily identifiable economic benefits to Northern Ireland?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that the Northern Ireland Executive has not been reformed, and it is an important part of the institutions created under the Good Friday agreement. As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), this Government take the Good Friday agreement incredibly seriously. I can assure the hon. Gentleman, as I have assured right hon. and hon. Members from around the House, that the Government are confident that our actions are in accordance with international law. As I say, it is a long-standing convention of this House that we do not disclose the legal advice given to Government.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Clearly, a negotiated solution to the problems of the protocol is preferable, in the interests of everyone on the island of Ireland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one lesson from the last Parliament is that attempts by this House to circumscribe our negotiating position end up weakening it and we are not able to deliver for our citizens?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We enjoy a good working relationship with capitals around Europe and indeed with the institutions of the EU, and we do of course want a negotiated settlement. But we do have to fix the Northern Ireland protocol, and the legislation that we will bring forward is intended to do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman knows that this is an issue of vital, fundamental constitutional gravity. I believe that he is responsible, accountable and honourable, but there is something pretty dishonourable going on over this. The fact is that we have a Prime Minister who is a serial offender in getting his own way despite what the rules or international laws tell him to do. The Minister knows that is the truth, I know that is the truth, and the whole House knows that is the truth. When will he stand up and be counted?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman knows that I always listen carefully when he speaks, whether it is in this Chamber or elsewhere. The simple truth is that this Government are confident that our actions are in accordance with international law. We will be bringing forward legislation based on that in due course.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right not to break the conventions of this House on discussing legal advice. However, does he agree that those who still seek to use legal acrobatics to take the side of the EU rather than that of our country are forgetting section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, which makes this House—this Parliament—sovereign to do whatever it takes to protect the Good Friday agreement and to protect the integrity of our whole United Kingdom?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The priority of this Government is to ensure the ongoing success of the Good Friday agreement and the ongoing integrity of this Union—this United Kingdom—and our actions will always be guided by those two principles.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): When the Government put forward the withdrawal agreement, including the protocol, they went in with their eyes open, knowing that Northern Ireland was effectively a pawn. This Bill risks further antagonising the EU—the very body with which we need to negotiate to help resolve this. Will the Minister tell the House, hand on heart, whether he is genuinely a negotiator, or whether he really believes in this tactic of throwing up sand and being bombastic in international negotiations? When I had the privilege of performing such a role for three years in the Home Office, this was not the way that we operated, and I do not believe that this is the way that he wants to operate, so will he be straight with the House?

James Cleverly: Article 13(8) exists for a reason. Article 16 exists for a reason. This is why we have been negotiating with the European Union to ensure that the Northern Ireland protocol, which we regard as an incredibly important document that we want to succeed, is effective. Those articles exist for a reason, but, as I said in response to the question from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the Northern Ireland Executive is not currently up and running and the provisions of the Good Friday agreement are not being discharged fully in Northern Ireland. We want to see those institutions up and running and we want to see the protocol working. Our actions are in accordance with international law.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I congratulate both Ministers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), on their efforts in trying to facilitate the restoration of Executive government in Northern Ireland and untangle the difficulties and disagreements over the Northern Ireland protocol. I know that my parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West, has been in the United States recently in an attempt to keep the US on board. Are there any changes to the Northern Ireland protocol that come with America's blessing, as it is, after all, a guarantor to the Good Friday agreement?

James Cleverly: We are taking action in a way that keeps our good friends internationally informed of both what we are doing and why we are doing it. I have had conversations recently with Foreign Ministers and ambassadors in European capital cities, and yesterday I discussed these very issues with the newly appointed ambassador from the US to the Court of St James's. We take our responsibilities as codified in the Good Friday agreement incredibly seriously, and our international friends and partners know that we do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is, this was all so predictable, was it not? In fact, it was predicted by many people in the House with different views about Brexit. I am sure the Minister will be absolutely furious when he discovers who actually signed the Northern Ireland protocol. Can he tell us whether the Bill will be published before the summer recess? Once it is published, if there is a legal contest, which tribunal or court will be adjudicating on whether it is within international law?

James Cleverly: It will be a British Bill, brought forward by Her Majesty's Government. The Government's position is that our course of action is lawful under international law.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I apologise for being a little late at the beginning of the statement, Mr Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that it is by no means unknown for independent advice to be taken from a range of senior counsel, particularly where novel or highly specialised areas of law are concerned, and that that is done without any prejudice to the position or independence of the senior Treasury counsel and does not of itself constrain them? Does he also accept that it is important to remember that partial leaks of

illegal advice are all the more unhelpful in circumstances such as this, not only because of the breach of the convention, but because an assessment on the necessity test, which may be relevant in international law, can be made only on the totality of the legal advice and the totality of the evidence, which must be then weighed against that advice, and we are not in a position yet to do that?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a strong and important point. He knows that, both professionally and personally, I listen carefully when he speaks, as do all those on the Treasury Bench. On issues such as this, leaks are incredibly unhelpful for exactly the reasons he gave. Important decisions need to be taken with the totality of evidence, not partial fragments of such, and he is right to highlight that.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): If there is a problem with the Northern Ireland protocol, that is down to the Prime Minister. He wrote it, he negotiated it; he should own it and he should honour it. The Minister is doing an excellent impersonation of Geoffrey Boycott at the crease, stonewalling all attack, but my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) is right. If the Minister says that it is the Government's belief that they are acting in accordance with international law, is that not only because the questions they have asked their counsel are so narrow and specific that they get the answers they are looking for?

James Cleverly: The Northern Ireland protocol has articles in it that envisage the need for amendments. That is why article 13(8) and article 16 exist. We are confident that we are acting in accordance with international law in what we are doing and, as I have said to a number of right hon. and hon. colleagues across the House, it is a long-standing convention of Governments of all political persuasions that we do not discuss the content of legal advice given to Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses. In another example this week of the damage caused by the Northern Ireland protocol, a photo framing business in my constituency coming to my office on Tuesday past told me that its supplier will no longer sell to it, as the time spent on paperwork outweighs the profit margin. With local businesses in Northern Ireland unable to access the VAT breaks for the UK and tensions within communities in Northern Ireland at boiling point, I find the desire of some to delay further action being taken to be parliamentarily unsound and physically potentially dangerous. Will the Minister assure us today that the Government will hold to their word, present a workable solution, and stop asking people from every part of Northern Ireland to grin and bear it, swallow the cost and watch their business crumble to pacify remainers in this Chamber, who will not accept democracy and are prepared to sacrifice peace in Northern Ireland just to play their own dangerous game?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman, as always, speaks with clarity and passion. Voices from across the political divide in the United Kingdom and outside it have recognised that the Northern Ireland protocol is not working for all communities and businesses in Northern

Ireland and Great Britain. It needs to do that. That is why we are taking steps to fix the Northern Ireland protocol, and in doing so we absolutely intend to abide by international law. As I have said at a number of points, we maintain the long-standing convention of not disclosing the nature of legal advice given to Government.

Business of the House

10.58 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): It will be a pleasure. The business for the week commencing 13 June will include:

MONDAY 13 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

TUESDAY 14 JUNE—Opposition day (2nd allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 15 JUNE—Second Reading of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill.

THURSDAY 16 JUNE—General debate on the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, followed by general debate on abuse of short-term letting and the sharing economy. The subjects for these dates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 17 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 20 June will include:

MONDAY 20 JUNE—Second Reading of a Bill.

TUESDAY 21 JUNE—Opposition day (3rd allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

Right hon. and hon. Members may also wish to note that a motion for the House to agree this Session's sitting Fridays has been tabled for the remaining Orders.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Splendid!

Thangam Debbonaire: It is good hear the hon. Member's delight at the scheduling of private Members' Bills.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business, but I have to say: what has happened to the Government's Queen's Speech? Have they lost it down the back of a sofa? Where are all those Bills we were promised? While I am on it, can the Leader of the House tell me why the Public Advocate Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) was not even mentioned in the Queen's Speech; and why, a year after the collapse of the criminal trials, there is still no Government response to the 2017 report on the lessons learned from the Hillsborough disaster?

Whether it is cancer waiting times, long waits for passports and driving licences or queues at airports, we are in backlog Britain, and the Leader of the House's statement does nothing to deal with that either. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister seems to be once again embarking on yet another attempt to reset his premiership. But there are only so many times you can try turning something off and then on again, only to find it is still broken and you just need to get rid. Tory MPs have made their choice, though.

At the start of so-called health week, the Culture Secretary admitted what Labour has known all along—that underfunding and Tory mismanagement left the health service “wanting” and “inadequate” as we went into the pandemic. When asked about this yesterday, the Prime Minister did not deny it. With so many lives lost, Members

[Thangam Debbonaire]

must be given the chance to question the Secretary of State on the lessons learned. Will the Leader of the House ask the Health Secretary to make a statement clarifying this?

Yesterday, the report on health and social care leadership was published. In his statement to the House, the Health Secretary did not seem to have any idea of whether or when the Government would implement the report's recommendations. Too often, this Government commission a review and then drag their feet when it comes to implementation. Could the Leader of the House give us a firm date for when the Government will publish their plan to sort this out?

On Tuesday, Labour's Opposition day motion gave the Government the chance to start putting right months of Tory sleaze. Our motion backed the crucial reforms put forward by the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life. But not a single Tory MP bothered to turn up. The Government have clearly given up on listening to Parliament because Ministers do not like the outcome when they do. Picking and choosing which votes they will respect and which they will ignore is no way to run a Government, and it is disrespectful to this House and our constituents. After Labour's success in winning that vote, will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will now introduce these vital proposals on standards in public life?

Meanwhile, the recommendations of the Standards Committee, so ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), on strengthening the code of conduct for MPs are a very welcome step. The Leader of the House is nodding. So will he allow time, in Government time, for these recommendations to be debated as soon as possible? Labour has long called for transparency of Members' interests and for a ban on paid consultancy work, but we would like the Government to go further. There is a clear need for stronger enforcement of the rules. Will the Leader of the House bring forward the time for that debate but also support Labour's proposals for the establishment of an integrity and ethics commission?

Backlog Britain is evident even in the Government's own Departments. I know that the Leader of the House is sympathetic to this: it is about the late, tardy or even no responses to ministerial letters and written parliamentary questions. Pressure from Labour means that new data has been published, and some response times are improving, but unfortunately some are not improving or getting worse. The Department of Health responded to only a third of correspondence on time. Even timely responses from the Government's flagship Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Department have plummeted. We know from our staff, mine in Bristol West and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the huge amount of time that is being wasted on hold—there are the phone bills as well—to Government hotlines, or standing, sitting or whatever in slow queues in Portcullis House, lasting for hours, for the Home Office hub. Please, does the Leader of the House have a plan for dealing with backlog Britain in Parliament?

The Government argue that we must move on from partygate and from 148 of their MPs voting against their own leader, but it is evident that this Conservative party cannot govern, has no answers to backlog Britain,

and has no plan to deal with the Tory cost of living crisis, whereas Labour does have a plan to get money back in people's pockets, to bring down bills, to deliver a new generation of well-paid jobs right across the country, and to get the economy firing on all cylinders. Frankly, it cannot come too soon.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her series of questions. Of course, Mr Speaker, I should apologise for not announcing a significant political event taking place tomorrow: your birthday. I am sure the whole House will celebrate as you reach another significant milestone in your way through life. I trust you will have a good day.

The Queen's Speech is rammed full of Bills, and they are coming forward. We have some time to deliver on them, so the hon. Lady should be patient. I am sure we will munch our way through that huge legislative agenda. We have already begun, with a number of Bills having started their journey through Parliament, and it is an ambitious programme, which we will deliver on behalf of the British people.

The Government recognise the challenges the health service is facing. That is why, coming out of the global pandemic, we introduced the health and social care levy to support the health service as it tries to deal with those challenges. That is a huge cash investment in our health service, and I am sorry that the hon. Lady found herself incapable of voting for and supporting it. If she compares how the health service is run in England and in Wales, she will see that there are significant advantages to being poorly in England. The health service here will diagnose people quicker, put them back on their feet quicker and get them back to their lives quicker.

Of course standards in public life are important. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the Privileges Committee for the work they have done. The Government are considering the Committee's report. I think it is important that we reflect and take our time giving this big and important report our full consideration, and that we move forward on a cross-party basis.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Before the summer recess?

Mark Spencer: We are looking at it. We will come back in due course on how we deliver and give the House the opportunity to debate and vote on it.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) knows I am sympathetic to the plight of Back Benchers when it comes to written questions, but to use health service and Department of Health and Social Care data from the period of covid—[*Interruption.*] We are not in the period of covid today, but the statistics she quoted were from that period. It is easy to comprehend that at that time the Department was busy and focused on dealing with covid rather than other things. Now that we are out of that period, I expect the next set of statistics to prove that the Department is responding more quickly, and I will do all I can to make sure that Departments respond as quickly as possible.

I admire the hon. Lady. We do not agree on everything, but every week she comes here and presents her case with enthusiasm and supports her constituents. I can only imagine her frustration that the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Levelling-Up Secretary did

not mention the unions that are about to cause misery to our constituents up and down the country. In fact, the shadow Levelling-Up Secretary, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said that she is on the side of the unions. They are going to cause misery for commuters trying to get to work and students to their exams; they are risking empty shelves and chaos for the Great British public. We on this side of the House are on the side of commuters and hard-working people, not on the side of the big unions and their paymasters.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The 5p reduction in fuel duty was very welcome, but a coach operator in my constituency contacted me yesterday to say that it has seen a 10p a litre increase this week, which makes their weekly fuel bill £3,500 more than in January. Can we have an urgent debate to ensure that this House has fully explored the impact on business of the unacceptably high proportion of tax on a tank of fuel, and look at ways to alleviate it?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that the global fight against inflation is causing huge challenges for our constituents, which is why at the spring statement, the Government cut fuel duty by 5p for 12 months—the largest ever cash-terms cut of fuel duty rates. Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco have all committed to passing on that tax cut. All taxes, including fuel duty, remain under review and I expect the Chancellor of the Exchequer to continue his enormous level of support for people as we battle global inflation.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It has been an interesting week, and certainly bumpy at the start, not just for the Leader of the House. There was much to-ing and fro-ing, pushing and pulling—and that was just the tug of war on Tuesday night. I congratulate him on his expert coaching of the men's MP team in their success over the lords at the annual Macmillan tug of war. I also congratulate the women's MP team on their success over the baronesses. Such events are often a bit of fun, but they give us an opportunity to support and highlight the extremely important work that groups such as Macmillan Cancer Support do and to do our wee bit to help with that.

I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). After weeks of hold-ups and delays, we have constituents who are desperate to secure their passports but who are coming up against brick wall after brick wall. Members and their staff are doing everything they can to try to help and support them, including sitting in queues in Portcullis House for days on end to try to get answers. That is not good enough. We are quickly approaching the school holidays, which are only three weeks away in Scotland, and we expect demand for such things to be exceptionally high. Can we please have a further statement on what more can be done to address those delays? Folk have been waiting for years to get away and have a break. It is not too much to ask that they should be able to do that in a sensible way.

I agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) about the urgent need for further action to address the cost of living crisis. Prices are going in

only one direction. I recognise that the Government have taken some action, but a lot more clearly needs to be done.

Finally, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Allyson Dobson of Dalkeith High School, who was named headteacher of the year 2022 this week at the Scottish Education Awards? That is brilliant recognition of her work. Teachers across the board play such an important role in all our lives, as we grow up and beyond, so it is brilliant to see such recognition and I congratulate Allyson on that achievement.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support in the tug of war team; he is certainly a huge part of that team. *[Interruption.]* As am I, I hasten to add. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) says that he was sacked from the team, but other weighty individuals were available in his stead. As the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) said, it was important to support Macmillan Cancer Support. It was a cross-party event and it was great fun, as well as being for a very good cause.

The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about passports, which is another important issue. I understand that people are stressing about the summer holidays. They have a right to a summer holiday; we are coming out of covid and people want to get away. That is why we have employed 650 additional staff since April, with 550 more arriving by the summer. The good news is that the vast majority of passport applications—91.2%—are being processed within six weeks or less, but that does leave some people waiting. If he has individual cases that he needs me to highlight with the Home Office, of course I will do that.

The hon. Gentleman went on to mention that the Government have, I think he said, given some support to people with the cost of living challenge. I think £37 billion is some support, and I hope he would recognise that that is a huge package, brought forward by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to support people. We are in a global fight against inflation, following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and we will continue to wrap our arms around and support people through the challenges we face.

Finally, of course I join the hon. Gentleman in supporting his headteacher, Allyson Dobson. I pay tribute not only to her, but to teachers up and down the country who are doing great work to educate the next generation.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend make time for a debate to both celebrate and highlight the incredible work of community groups and the voluntary sector throughout the country? Individuals such as Gem, Sherridan and Liz of the Fishpool, Goshen, Redvales and Springs community hub are changing people's lives every day. There is a debate to be had in this House about how the state can support individuals such as Gem, Sherridan and Liz, and many others in my constituency and throughout the country, to continue with their brilliant work.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and of course I join him in celebrating all that those in the voluntary sector do and his constituents who are assisting. I think a series of Governments have worked

[Mark Spencer]

well with the voluntary sector. It does enormous amounts of work, and we should always take the opportunity to praise it whenever we can.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Can I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debates for 16 June?

Mr Speaker, can I wish you a very happy birthday for tomorrow? As I can testify, being born in 1957 makes you no age whatsoever.

Mr Speaker, you may not have noticed, not coming from the north-east, but today is 9 June, which is a day of celebration for the Geordie nation, as Geordies across the world celebrate Blaydon Races Day. This year is the 160th anniversary of that event famed in tune:

“Aa went to Blaydon Races, ’twas on the ninth of Joon,

Eiteen hundred an’ sixty-two, on a summer’s afternoon;

Aa tyuk the ‘bus frae Balmbra’s, an’ she wis heavy laden,

Away we went ‘lang Collin’wood Street, that’s on the road to Blaydon.”

So happy Blaydon Races Day to the entire Geordie nation.

Mark Spencer: I think I understood most of that. I am the beneficiary of having a Geordie in the office, who keeps me informed of all matters that are pro-Geordie and anti-Mackem. We are grateful that the hon. Member’s Backbench Business Committee continues to do the work it is doing. He raises important topics every week. I know that colleagues across the House appreciate the efforts of his Committee and will continue to support him.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): A constituent of mine who is a park home owner has asked for clarification about the £400 that he is entitled to under the Government energy bills support scheme. As a park home owner, he pays the park site owner for the electricity and does not have a personal account with an electricity provider, the organisation tasked with making that available. The explainer from the Government says this area of policy is being developed, but to provide comfort to my constituent and the 180,000 other park home owners, many of whom are pensioners in need of this support, might we have a statement?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and of course he is right to highlight that topic. I know that people will be concerned. That is why we are working to make the energy bills support scheme as robust as possible. The issue of households that do not receive electricity through a domestic electricity supply contract, such as residents of park homes, was covered in the Government’s technical consultation, which concluded on 23 May. The Government’s response to that consultation will be issued later this summer, but we are exploring options and other ways in which we can support households that might receive similar support.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This week is Volunteers Week, and I would like to say a huge thank you to the many volunteers working across my Blaydon constituency who play such a huge part in supporting our community.

But to continue a theme—“Ah me lads”—today is 9 June, the day of the famous Blaydon race. I will not be home in time to see them

“Gannin’ along the Scotswood Road”,

but I would like to say a special thank you to all those volunteers who make the race possible. Can we have a debate in Government time on the involvement of volunteers in community sports, please?

Mark Spencer: That would make an excellent Backbench Business debate and I am sure the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee may be sympathetic to a debate on such a topic. I pay tribute to all the volunteers across the hon. Lady’s constituency and others who do all that work. As we continue to debate Geordie culture, I can feel a question or two coming from Sunderland at some point in the future.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Can we have a debate on the positive impact that angling has on participants’ mental health and wellbeing and, during that debate, can we celebrate those enlightened wildlife trusts that promote angling and can we call out those such as the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust, which states on its website that it has a long-standing policy of not allowing angling on any land for which it holds the angling rights? That recently brought it into conflict with the Nottinghamshire Anglers Association, which last week was banned from the Attenborough nature reserve. Anglers like me love our rivers and streams as much as football fans love their clubs. It is a visceral relationship and wildlife trusts should not get in between it.

Mark Spencer: I am disappointed to hear that Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust is taking that approach towards the angling community. Angling is one of the largest participation sports in the country and anglers have a self-interest in making sure our rivers and fish are healthy and plentiful. I hope that the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust will reflect on that. On my hon. Friend’s behalf, I will certainly pursue the matter directly with my hon. Friends the Members for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) and for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), whose constituencies border Attenborough nature reserve.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Some 85,000 households in England live in park homes. In Bath, residents in Quarry Rock Gardens are worried about soaring costs. These residents face minimum protections from sky-high pitch fees and rogue site owners because pitch fees are linked to the retail price index, rather than the lower consumer price index. The Government have committed to reforming pitch fees so they increase with that index, but after four years they have still done nothing. Can we have a statement from the relevant Department on when these changes will come forward?

Mark Spencer: I am wondering which Department that may fall to and whether it is the local government Department or the Treasury directly. I will make sure, however, that I discover which Department is responsible for that. I know it is an important issue up and down the country. I certainly have residents in park homes who share the concerns the hon. Member has raised. I will make sure the right Department responds in due course.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Could we have a debate on the Mayor of London's plans to extend the ultra low emission zone to the Greater London boundary and introduce pay-per-mile driving charges, because I am deeply worried about the impact of these new charges on my constituents at a time of rising inflation?

Mark Spencer: It almost feels like the Mayor of London is launching a war against commuters. Extending ULEZ to the boundary and working with the union bosses to cause misery through tube strikes is going to cause commuters coming in and out of London huge challenges. He should be supporting people coming in and out of this great city to work, not making their lives more difficult.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Could we have an urgent statement from the Home Secretary regarding the general competence level of the Home Office, especially in relation to Homes for Ukraine? Youngsters are missing out on the education they could be receiving here through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Families are desperate to accept these youngsters, but there is a problem around their travelling not with a parent but with a legal guardian, and there is enormous delay. Please will the Leader of the House urgently communicate that to the Home Office?

Mark Spencer: Home Office questions are on 20 June and I hope the hon. Lady will be in her place to challenge the Home Secretary directly, but I should say that we have already granted 120,000 visas through the two uncapped humanitarian routes, and 65,000 Ukrainians have already arrived. The UK is making huge efforts and is opening its arms to thousands of Ukrainians. I am sure we can improve that system and the Home Secretary is committed to doing so. I hope the hon. Lady will be in her place on 20 June to ask the Home Secretary about this directly.

Mr Bone: Parliament decides the laws. The court interprets them. I understand that the flights to Rwanda with economic migrants, which were passed as lawful by this House, are being challenged in the court. Can I ask the Leader of the House an actual business question? If the court decides that, somewhere, the legislation is wrong, will he immediately introduce new legislation to fix it, so that we can end the people smuggling across the English channel?

Mark Spencer: Of course, my hon. Friend is right that we have to wait until there is an interpretation by those courts that are looking at that. He will be reassured by the Home Secretary's commitment to ensuring that we stop the exploitation of people being ferried across the channel. He will have the opportunity on 20 June at Home Office questions to ask her about that directly, and on 5 July at Justice questions to make sure he gets the reassurance he requires.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): One of my constituents should have been off on a cruise today, but he is missing his holiday because his new passport has not been issued. Another young constituent has already waited 13 weeks for her new passport. I am grateful to the Passport Office staff here in Parliament,

but she and her parents now face an anxious week waiting for a promised phone call 24 to 48 hours before their holiday to tell them that they can make the 110-mile round trip to Peterborough to collect her passport. It is wholly unacceptable. Can the Leader of the House please clarify how many of the staff being belatedly recruited will be processing applications and not just trying to respond to anxious phone calls from my constituents and my staff?

Mark Spencer: As I said, another 550 staff are going to arrive before the summer, but we have already recruited another 650; they are now in place and have come in since April 2021. As I said, I understand that more than 90% of cases now are being processed within six weeks, but that leaves the 9% that are not. I understand that there are challenges there. But if the hon. Member wants to pass those specific cases to me, I will pursue the Home Secretary on her behalf.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): We subsidised the rail industry to the tune of £16 billion during the pandemic because people had stopped using the trains. I represent a commuter belt constituency and, while I am very angry that the upcoming train strikes will cause yet more misery to my commuters, I am particularly angry that this is not good for rail workers. Disrupting train services will reduce train revenues and ultimately lead to job losses and reduced pay for those rail workers. Can we have a debate on this important issue?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is of course right to raise that. We will have Transport questions on 30 June and I am sure that she will be in her place to ask the Secretary of State for Transport about that. She is right that commuters and taxpayers have the right to know that their money is being invested and looked after properly, and the unions should reflect long and hard before they make commuters' lives miserable and stop them getting to and from work.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to congratulate Michael Dunlop on his 20th Isle of Man TT victory, putting him in the top three racers ever to perform on the Isle of Man?

I turn the Leader of the House's attention to another island: the island of Rathlin in my constituency, which has a wonderful puffin sanctuary. On 20 June, it will be cutting a sod for 10 new housing units, showing that the population of that little island is expanding wonderfully. However, I notice five words that interest me in the business for 20 June: Second Reading of a Bill. Should I be in my place here on 20 June? Will that Bill be relevant to Northern Ireland, or should I visit Rathlin island that day?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member should be leading the TT with three questions. Come on.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is always relevant to parliamentary debates, and he should most definitely be in his place to contribute on whatever Bill comes forward on that day. As I said, there are 38 Bills in the Queen's Speech and we will decide and announce in the usual way from the Dispatch Box.

[Mark Spencer]

I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Michael Dunlop. I took the trouble to watch some of the footage of the TT racers and the speed and professionalism of those motorcyclists is awe-inspiring.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware of the Prime Minister's leading and significant role in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, but this is an ever-evolving situation that changes daily and there is a need to constantly review and always do as much as we possibly can, with our western allies, to support Ukraine. Will he agree to a debate on Ukraine, in which we can also consider how to best access grain, because of the potential catastrophic consequences for global food supplies if we do not manage to get access?

Mark Spencer: There will be an opportunity at Defence questions next week to continue to ask the Secretary of State for Defence what support we are offering to the Ukraine Government. There has been a huge amount of opportunity to debate Ukraine in the Chamber. Already, we have had 11 oral statements, seven urgent questions, three Opposition debates, three general debates, a general debate on NATO, a Backbench Business debate on Russia and China, a debate on Russian sanctions, and departmental oral questions on top of that, so we have debated this issue a huge amount. With the support of colleagues, such as my right hon. Friend, we will continue to ensure the Government are doing all they can to support the Ukrainian people.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My constituent Clare-Anna Mitchell has worked tirelessly to provide vital medicines to be sent to Ukraine through fundraising from my generous constituents in Gower and Swansea. The latest delivery she arranged arrived at the depot in Dnipro just 20 minutes after the compound was bombed. Ten people died in that attack and all the medical supplies in the stores were destroyed. Had the Welsh delivery drivers arrived any earlier, they too may have lost their lives. Will the Government put aside time to discuss this issue, and can the right hon. Gentleman give me and my constituent, Clare-Anna Mitchell, any advice on what Government resources are available so she can continue to provide this vital medical aid to Ukraine?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's constituents and to people up and down the country who are putting in an enormous effort to support people in Ukraine. Defence questions are next week, so she should be in her place to ask the Secretary of State for Defence what we can do to support people who go to Ukraine. I will, of course, link up and make sure she gets the right information, so that her constituents can be supported and as safe as possible when putting themselves in harm's way to support what is a desperate situation. Of course, the only person who can actually resolve this challenge is President Putin. He could withdraw his troops from Ukraine, stop bombing innocent people and return the borders of Ukraine to what was internationally agreed.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): May we have a debate please on local banking services? In the last two weeks alone, both NatWest and Barclays have announced

that they are closing their doors in Leigh-on-Sea, causing great distress to businesses, charities and people, especially the elderly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must champion and support the excellent post office community banking hub model across the country?

Mark Spencer: Such a debate would receive a lot of support across the House, so I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a Westminster Hall debate or even a Backbench Business debate. This issue certainly affects rural constituencies a great deal. I also take the opportunity to celebrate all that is the post office. The post office is a great public service in which people can access cash. I encourage her and her constituents to make use of our post offices, so they remain buoyant for the future.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I, too, extend my birthday greetings to you, Mr Speaker. The recent support announced by the Chancellor to help with energy bills was welcome as far as it goes. However, I and my constituents are increasingly concerned that those who live in park homes, who are off grid and who rely on heating oil will not receive the same level of support provided to every other household. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out his commitment to do all he can to ensure that no one unfairly misses out on the support for their energy bills, no matter how or where they access their energy supply?

Mark Spencer: We have made the calculations on electricity prices so that those who are off-grid do not lose out. The hon. Lady makes passing reference to the support that the Government are offering. We unveiled another £15 billion of support recently, on top of the £37 billion that we are spending this year alone. That is a huge amount of taxpayer support for people. I hear what she says about those in park homes, and I referred to that issue in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). The Government are looking at that and I will make sure that the relevant Minister responds to her directly.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I wish you a very happy birthday for tomorrow, Mr Speaker. As a number of us in this House reflect on having been elected on this day 39 years ago, will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on how the role of Members of Parliament has changed in the intervening period? That would enable us to reflect on the fact that, in those days, we Members of Parliament did not spend all our time trying to chase incompetent government, because we had a competent Government with a smaller and more efficient civil service. That meant that we in this House could concentrate on issues of policy, rather than administration. I am disappointed that my right hon. Friend seems so complacent about the chaos that is affecting our constituents in relation to so many public services that are currently beyond inefficient. It is absolutely an outrage that people have to wait so long. My staff are having to wait ages on the phone or in the queue in Portcullis House, and so on. It is intolerable.

Mark Spencer: I celebrate the 39 years that my hon. Friend has been sitting there holding the Government to account. I and the Government recognise the huge challenges—as we come out of a global pandemic, post-covid—in the NHS and other Departments that

we are catching up with. I hear what my hon. Friend says. That is why the Government are focused on getting rid of those backlogs, are up for the challenge and are delivering.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituents, Mr Emmerson and Mr Kimber, receive oxygen deliveries through Dolby Vivisol, which has been given a contract with the NHS. Deliveries are not coming or they are coming late, or the order is short, or the cylinders simply do not work. I am sure that the Leader of the House will understand that being unable to breathe can be terrifying. Can we have an urgent debate about why the Government continually allow private profit to come before patient healthcare?

Mark Spencer: I do not accept the premise of what the hon. Lady suggests, but I am sympathetic to her constituents, who deserve a level of service from the Department of Health and Social Care. If they are not getting that, she will have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at Health questions next week. However, if she writes to me directly about that case, I will personally raise it with him.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): However much the band in Speaker's Court cost you this week, Mr Speaker—I do not know whether it related to your birthday—it was well worth it.

Traditionally, we always stand up and ask the Leader of the House for debates, and I am happy to have debates—I want a debate on clean air next week because it will be Clean Air Day, and I want an urgent debate on the Amazonian rainforest. However, our real job is accountability. The economy is in freefall, there is a war in Europe and we will go into recess. What will we do to make sure that we can hold Ministers to account week by week, day by day, when we go on the long recess?

Mark Spencer: The recess dates have been announced, but, of course, the Government do not stop functioning during those recesses while the hon. Member is working hard in Huddersfield. The Government continue to work very hard to deal with the challenges that we face. Requesting debates is an important way of holding Government to account and scrutinising what we do. That is how our democracy works. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured, however, that while he is working hard in Huddersfield for his constituents, the Government continue to drive the agenda very hard.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Because no one responsible for the 97 unlawful killings at Hillsborough has ever been held to account, the same slurs used by South Yorkshire police to deflect blame from their criminal incompetence in 1989 are now being adopted by the French Government and UEFA to deflect blame from their responsibility for the chaos in Paris at the champions league final. As the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), pointed out, we have still not had a Government response to Bishop James Jones's 2017 report on the lessons to be learned from Hillsborough, despite the criminal cases collapsing almost a year ago. When will we get a response? Can we please have a debate about how the Government will ensure that blameless Liverpool fans are protected from

being wrongly traduced by UEFA and French authorities? The authorities are seeking to deflect their own responsibility, but what they are actually doing is bringing back traumatic memories of Hillsborough for thousands of people in Liverpool and Liverpool fans.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the work that the hon. Lady has done over a number of years to support victims of the Hillsborough disaster. At the other end of the ground were Nottingham Forest, a club that I am associated with. It was clearly a very traumatic event. I think UEFA has apologised this week for its miscalling, and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has condemned the way in which Liverpool fans were treated. Home Office questions are on 20 June; I hope that the hon. Lady will take the opportunity to question the Home Secretary on when the Hillsborough report will come forward.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the loss of the hundreds of skilled and dedicated British Council staff who face compulsory redundancy as a result of the programme of cuts, closures and outsourcing? With PCS members set to take a further three days of industrial action next week in opposition to those plans, will he urge the Foreign Secretary to urgently renegotiate the repayment terms on the loan that her Department made to the British Council so that skills and expertise vital to its success can be maintained into the future?

Mark Spencer: Foreign Office questions are on 21 June, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be in his place to question the Foreign Secretary. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who is not in his place today, has raised the same topic. It is important that the UK taxpayer is given a service overseas that is efficient and delivers for UK trade and UK interests; I know that the Foreign Secretary is committed to that, and I am sure that on 21 June she will be able to give the hon. Gentleman the answers that he requires.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Failures in the Passport Office are having a huge impact on my constituents and those of Members across the House. Many cannot get through on the phone or get cut off when they do. The office lost my constituent's old passport and then told them that their application would be closed unless they submitted it. The link sent to another constituent to confirm their identity did not work; their application was closed due to inactivity. I listened to what the Leader of the House said to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), but it is simply unacceptable. Can we please have a statement from the Home Secretary on what the Government are doing to address the shambles in the Passport Office?

Mark Spencer: The Home Secretary will be at the Dispatch Box on 20 June, but the hon. Lady can rest assured that in 91% of cases there is now a rapid and improved response. [HON. MEMBERS: "Really?"] Those are publicly available statistics. However, I recognise, and the Home Office recognises, that that means that

[Mark Spencer]

9% of people are not getting the level of service that they should expect. There are routes through Portcullis House for hon. Members to raise individual cases, and I encourage them to do so, but if the hon. Lady writes to me with the specific case that she raises, I will write directly to the Home Secretary on her behalf.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Dom Phillips, a British journalist, has been missing in the Amazon for more than three days with his Brazilian colleague Bruno Pereira. Will the Leader of the House raise the matter with Foreign Office Ministers? Will he urge them to contact the Bolsonaro Government and urge them to act very fast to help to track him down and put every effort into finding him? Will he get them to write to all Members of the House to explain what actions they have taken to support finding Dom Phillips?

Mark Spencer: I know that the Brazilian authorities are currently trying to find the gentleman to whom the hon. Lady has referred, but I will of course raise the issue directly with the Foreign Secretary as a matter of urgency. The sooner we can find that gentleman, the better.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Even as we speak, agents of foreign Governments are seeking to influence Parliament in both the House of Lords and the House of Commons. In some instances that is perfectly legitimate, transparent and open, but in many cases it is being done on behalf of authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, and it is sometimes done in very invidious, insidious and untransparent ways. The Parliamentary Security Director is already very concerned about it and about the way in which it works through all-party parliamentary groups—as are you, Mr Speaker, and the Lord Speaker.

I hope that the Government will be able to address some of this under the foreign agent registration scheme that they want to introduce, but they have said that because the scheme is not yet ready they are going to dump the measure in the National Security Bill during its Committee stage. However, I think that it should be dealt with on the Floor of the House. Many Members on both sides of the House want to make sure that we get this right, so that we protect democracy in this country and foreign agents and espionage are dealt with properly. Will the Leader of the House undertake to ensure that that part of the Bill will be dealt with on the Floor of the House? It is a constitutional matter.

Mark Spencer: If people are indeed trying to influence our democracy, we should all take that very seriously. The Home Secretary and security services will certainly take it seriously, and you, Mr Speaker, have taken action on it directly.

As for the Bill that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, there will in any case be an opportunity to debate these matters on Report, but I hear what he says and I shall pass his comments directly to the Minister in charge of the Bill.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Almost every Member will have a constituent who has been affected by the contaminated blood scandal.

It is several years since we have had an opportunity to debate the issue or to question Ministers about the Government's approach, and Members who entered the House in 2019 have had no opportunity at all. On Tuesday a written ministerial statement was laid, so again there was no opportunity to question the Government on the work of Sir Robert Francis, whose compensation study will inform the Government's approach to the findings of the infected blood inquiry, due next year.

Might the Leader of the House find time for a statement in the House so that we can question a Minister on what is actually happening and on the Government's approach, especially given that two people affected by the contaminated blood scandal are dying every week? We need this to be debated on the Floor of the House, quickly.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the work that the right hon. Lady has done on this matter for a number of years; her pursuit on behalf of victims of the scandal can only be admired. Sir Robert will present his evidence to the public inquiry in, I believe, mid-July. The Government have published their response to his framework, which has just been announced. I think that once he has presented his evidence directly to the inquiry, the Government will be in a position to comment.

Dame Diana Johnson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We cannot have points of order now.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May we have a statement from the Health Secretary on when the go-ahead will be given for the construction of the new Leeds children's hospital and adult hospital buildings? The Government have repeatedly expressed support for the project, the site will be cleared by the end of the month, and Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust is raring to go with a project that will bring not only world-class health facilities to my constituents, but wider economic benefits in the form of jobs for the city.

Mark Spencer: I celebrate the right hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the Government's investment in the health service. I am sure that the Health Secretary will be able to respond directly to his question about the timetable during Health questions next week, but the Government are committed to building 40 new hospitals, and I am sure that Leeds is a huge part of that investment programme.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Happy birthday for tomorrow, Mr Speaker. I hope that you and the Leader of the House, and indeed the whole House, will join me in offering huge congratulations to Bradford on becoming the UK City of Culture 2025. Bradford's win offers a transformational opportunity to unlock the huge cultural and economic potential in our young and ambitious city, to begin a new chapter in our story, and to celebrate all that Bradford has to offer.

Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Bradford and thanking all those who worked so hard to put the City of Culture bid together? May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of culture?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the city of Bradford and all the Bradford MPs who supported the bid, and I commiserate with those who were not as successful as

Bradford this time. This will be a huge opportunity to celebrate all that is great about that part of West Yorkshire and I encourage people up and down the country to come and join in the celebrations that Bradford will undoubtedly lay on.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have a debate on consumer rights? I have been written to by one of my constituents who you, Mr Speaker, and other Members will know well. Her name is Ann Clwyd and she used to sit right next to me here on these Back Benches. She purchased a vehicle from the Ford motor company, a Ford Kuga, and there has been a huge fault with it in terms of leaks. She has discovered that this is a general problem and that lots of other consumers are suffering from it too. In a letter to me, she says:

“I have written to Ford on three occasions. Each time I have received a brush off and a refusal to acknowledge this is a problem with the model.”

If the Ford motor company thinks that that is the end of the matter, they obviously know nothing about Ann Clwyd. What can the Government do to give more opportunities for consumers to exercise their rights, and to stop companies such as Ford from treating customers in this way?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the former Member—*[Interruption.]* I hear cries of “Great woman” from Members on this side as well, and I sympathise with the Ford motor company over the tornado that is about to hit it. I think it would be wise to settle with the former Member as quickly as possible, but I will raise the matter with the Secretary of State for Transport on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf and make sure that he raises the matter when he meets the Ford motor company.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Covid restrictions were lifted on 24 February and many of us have gone back to near-normal living, but although living with covid is a reality for most of us, for a small number of people—the clinically vulnerable, the clinically extremely vulnerable and the immunocompromised—covid is still deadly and they are still effectively locked down.

I know that there will be Health questions next week, but can we also have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health so that all Members can challenge this Government on why they have not yet rolled out Evusheld—a drug that would be transformational for this group of people and allow them to live with covid too?

Mark Spencer: I praise the hon. Gentleman’s knowledge of the Order Paper in recognising that he will have an opportunity to ask that question directly at Health questions next week. I know that Evusheld is being looked at closely by the authorities to try to get it to licence as soon as possible. We recognise the challenge that those people who are immunosuppressed face during covid and we have not forgotten their plight.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I would like to draw the Leader of the House’s attention to early-day motion 143.

[That this House congratulates Dunoon Grammar School on being the only Scottish school shortlisted in the Community Collaboration category for the World’s Best Schools Prizes 2022; commends this remarkable achievement and recognises it as just reward for a school which has, under the leadership

of Head Teacher David Mitchell, the tremendous work of the teaching staff and the dedication of its pupils, become a cornerstone of the wider Cowal community; applauds the commitment Dunoon Grammar School has shown to working with and for the benefit of their local community and for striving so hard to produce active, responsible, caring and engaged young citizens; and wishes Dunoon Grammar School the very best of luck with the next round of the World’s Best School Prizes and thanks them sincerely for their dedication to exceptional learning and to building a better community.]

The motion was published this morning to congratulate Dunoon Grammar School in my constituency, which has just been shortlisted in the community collaboration category in the 2022 World’s Best Schools prizes. Would the Leader of the House like to join me and others in sending congratulations to the headteacher, David Mitchell, his remarkable staff and the fantastic pupils of Dunoon Grammar School on this magnificent achievement?

Mark Spencer: I should confess that I have not had the opportunity to read early-day motion 143 yet, but I will make sure I do after this session. Of course I join the hon. Gentleman in praising David Mitchell and all the teachers at the school, as well as the teachers up and down the country who work tirelessly to make sure that the next generation of people are engaged and stimulated by our education service.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Last week I visited Meet and 2 Veg in Cambuslang, which was started by my constituent Jane Bainbridge, supported by Jan Ritchie. The project reduces food waste by giving away food nearing its expiry date collected from supermarkets and other food outlets. It started in Jane’s kitchen after she was horrified at the amount of food going to landfill. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Jane and Jan on their efforts and schedule a debate in Government time on food waste?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Of course I join her in congratulating her constituents. Food waste should be avoided if at all possible, but when it does arise it should be recycled as efficiently as possible and energy recovered from it if at all possible. The hard work of her constituents and others throughout the country is highlighting that challenge, and I am sure she will continue to work with her constituents to improve food waste efficiency.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, may I, on behalf of myself and my party, offer you many happy returns for tomorrow? We are of a similar vintage. We do not count the years, but instead we make the years count, which is an important thing to do, you know? [HON. MEMBERS: “Wise words!”]

Following her visit to China, United Nations high commissioner for human rights Michelle Bachelet, disappointingly, failed to condemn human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese authorities against the Uyghurs. In light of that disappointing news, and the Chinese authorities’ continued targeting of Buddhist, Catholic, Falun Gong, Muslim, Protestant and other communities, will the Leader of the House provide time for a ministerial statement or debate on China’s human rights violations, which are legion?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for the work that he does in this area. It is Foreign Office questions on 21 June and I am sure he will be in his place to raise the matter again. The Government take very seriously the fact that so many people around the world are persecuted for their religion, and I know that there is no greater champion than the hon. Gentleman for people in such a plight.

Points of Order

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I believe the Leader of the House simply misspoke when he said that the Government had published their response to Sir Robert Francis's study. The Government had said that they would publish the study and their response but have not done so, and my understanding is that that is because of a leak to *The Sunday Times*, which resulted in their then having to publish just Sir Robert Francis's study. I wonder whether it is possible to correct the record.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the House.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): I would be more than happy; apologies to the right hon. Lady. I was trying to say that Sir Robert Francis QC delivered his compensation framework study on 14 March, and that has been published and will be considered by the inquiry on 11 and 12 July. I apologise if I misled her. I know that the Government are very keen to support people affected by infected blood. She is undoubtedly a champion of this cause. The Government are committed to working with her to resolve this matter.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. While we have the Leader of the House on the move, may I add to what I said earlier about the National Security Bill? Having a debate only on Report on 30 or 40 new clauses introduced in the middle of a Committee stage is not the same: normally in Committee stage, the Opposition have an opportunity to probe. Could you urge him to move a little bit further on this, Mr Speaker, so that we can have a proper debate on the Floor of the House? This is about the security of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I am obviously not going to extend questions, which the hon. Gentleman did very well then, but I am sure everybody has heard what he has had to say.

Social Housing and Building Safety

[Relevant documents: Seventh Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2019-21, Cladding Remediation – Follow-up, HC 1249, and Seventh Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, Session 2021-22, Building Safety: Remediation and Funding, HC 1063; and the joint Government response, CP 863. Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 16 May 2022, on Regulation of Social Housing, HC 18.]

11.58 am

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social housing and building safety.

The events of the night of 14 June 2017 were unimaginably horrific. The fate of those living in Grenfell Tower is something that none of us can ever forget. I am sure I speak for Members across the House of Commons when I say that the 72 innocent people who lost their lives—18 of them children—will forever be in our memory. Today we are approaching the fifth anniversary of that tragic night and we all, particularly those of us in government, have a chance as a House to reflect on the tragedy and the important questions that it posed. We have to be clear: what happened that night should never have occurred. Each of us has a right to be safe in our home. The situation in which the residents of Grenfell Tower were placed was unforgivable. The fact that those in the tower were not safe exposed failures that had been overlooked for too long—failures in building control and safety that it is vital we address.

As we reflect on this tragedy, we should bear in mind that there had been warnings before that night. Residents of the tower and others had warned about how the voices of those in social housing were not heeded. In reflecting on what happened, we should reflect not only on the failures in regulation and building safety but on the way in which social housing tenants had not had their rights respected or their voices heard as they should have been. We all have to do better to ensure that issues of life and death are never overlooked again, and that everyone in this country can live their life in safety and dignity, in a home that is warm, decent and safe.

I am glad that we are joined in the Public Gallery by some of those directly affected, including bereaved families, friends and survivors who, for almost five years now, have been living with the ongoing consequences of this tragedy in north Kensington. Since I was given this responsibility as Secretary of State last September, I have been genuinely humbled to hear the personal stories of those affected by the tragedy. I thank them for the vigour, energy, sincerity and determination of their campaign. It cannot have been easy—by God it cannot have been easy—to live with the memories of what happened five years ago, but the people joining us here today, and their friends, relatives and neighbours, have campaigned with dignity and resolution over the last five years to ensure that appropriate lessons are learned.

I can think of few better representatives of community spirit, few better activists for a better world, than those from Grenfell United and the other organisations

representing the next of kin, bereaved relatives and survivors. It is important the Government recognise that those voices and that activism should result in action. Again, I apologise to the bereaved, the relatives and the survivors for the fact that, over the last five years, the Government have sometimes been too slow to act and have sometimes behaved insensitively. It is important that we now translate the actions they are demanding into real and lasting change. As I hope I have done, and as I will always seek to do, that involves acknowledging what we got wrong as a Government and what went wrong more widely in our building safety system.

It is clear from the wonderful documentary work on the experience of those in Grenfell Tower that their representatives had warned before the refurbishment about some of the dangers, some of the high-handedness and some of the lack of consideration for which the tenant management organisation and others charged with tenants' welfare were responsible. Lessons need to be learned about that.

It is also the case that, in the immediate aftermath of the fire, many of the institutions upon which people in North Kensington should have been able to rely failed them. We have to be honest about that, too. There is nothing I can say from the Dispatch Box today that can make up for those failures. All we can do is seek to learn from those mistakes and make sure we work with the community to ensure that nothing like this tragedy ever happens again.

My Department has a dedicated team of civil servants who are working to make sure those lessons are learned and the community's voices are heard, and I thank all the officials who have worked with the community over the past five years, and who in many cases have become close friends of those affected, for their work. I also thank other professionals in the public sector who have worked with the community and families. I particularly want to thank those in the NHS. The health and wellbeing of many survivors of the tragedy has been impaired in a terrible way, and the commitment of NHS professionals to working with those who have been affected is admirable and worthy of our support and, certainly on my part, gratitude.

I also wish to thank two colleagues, Nick Hurd, a former Member of this House, and Baroness Sanderson, who have been advising the Prime Minister on how we can support the Grenfell families. Both of them were, of course, appointed by the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and I would like to thank her as well for the continuing close personal interest she takes in the issues that the Grenfell tragedy has brought to the forefront of all our minds.

I also want to thank the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission, and I stress that it is independent; it includes elected community representatives, and it has been working hard to ensure that we can have a permanent and appropriate memorial to honour those who lost their lives in the tragedy. I recommend to all Members of the House the commission's recent report. It makes for powerful reading and gives us all an opportunity to reflect on what the right way is to ensure that there is a fitting memorial for those who have lost their lives. The scene of that fire is both, of course, a crime scene and a sacred place, because for all those who perished that night we want to make sure that their

[*Michael Gove*]

memory is never forgotten. That is why my Department wants to work with the commission to ensure that its report is brought to fruition.

I also want to thank those who have been working with the public inquiry, under Sir Martin Moore-Bick. I know that when the inquiry was set up many representatives of the community were concerned that its work might not meet the needs of the hour, but I think that Sir Martin and his team, particularly the counsels to the inquiry—the lawyers who have been working diligently to get at the truth—have done us all a service. They have laid bare a series of mistakes that were made by those of us in government and by others, and they have exposed what I believe is wrongdoing on the part of a number of organisations. I do not want to pre-empt the conclusions of the inquiry and the steps that will necessarily need to be taken to ensure that justice is done. Sir Martin's inquiry's first report made a series of recommendations and it made uncomfortable reading for some, but it also ensured that the decision by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead to set up the inquiry has been vindicated. We now need to ensure that we take seriously all the forthcoming recommendations when the inquiry concludes.

Of course, we in government have not waited for the inquiry to conclude in order to take action. Not all of the steps that should have been taken have been taken, but in recent months we have been seeking to ensure that in respect of the direction of travel set out by the inquiry, and by others who have looked closely at the problems that underlay our regime of building safety, appropriate steps have been taken.

It should not have taken a tragedy such as the Grenfell Tower fire for us to realise that there were problems in our building safety regime and in our regulatory regime. But now that we have had an opportunity to reflect, study and look at the multiple and manifold failings, we know that a significant amount of work, which we are undertaking, requires to be completed as quickly as possible. We know that shortcuts were taken when it came to safety. We know that unforgiveable decisions were made, in the interests of financial engineering, that put lives at risk. We also know that in my Department individuals sought to speak up and to raise concerns but those voices were not heeded. That must rest on my conscience and those of Government colleagues. Many of those involved in construction, from those in the construction products industry to those directly involved in the refurbishment and remediation of buildings, just behaved in a way that was beyond reckless. That is why it is so important that the collective fight for justice that the Grenfell community have asked for results in those responsible being brought to book. In the meantime, we have been seeking to ensure that we put in place a regulatory regime that repairs some of the damage of the past and that money is made available to repair buildings in which people still find themselves in unsafe conditions.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State is being eloquent and honest in his apology for what happened—the collective failure. However, on the point that he has just addressed, he will be aware that there are cases where professional fire safety advisers have told leaseholders that the cladding on their building

is not safe and does not comply with the new rules, but when those leaseholders have made applications to the building safety fund they have been turned down. Some of them are now having to contemplate spending £70,000 to £80,000 and waiting another eight months to put the panels in combination on a rig and then set fire to them. If those tests, the BS 8414 tests, go ahead and they show that the cladding does burn and causes a risk, will he undertake that the building safety fund will look again at the applications for funding, so that those buildings get the money, enabling work to begin, and people can feel safe in their homes?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. He has been, if I may say so, a consistently clear and authoritative voice on behalf of those who have found themselves in an incredibly difficult situation. The leaseholders he has described should not be in that position. There have been problems with the building safety fund—there absolutely have. Let me promise him that I will look at the specific case that he raises and, indeed, the wider issues and see what we can do to make sure that the building safety fund, which has not been discharging funds at the rate, at the pace and in the way that it should, does better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The thoughts of myself and my party are with the families. It is hard to believe that it has been five years. Even these days, we still pray for the families who have suffered such pain and heartache.

It is quite clear that the Secretary of State is totally committed to making the changes that are necessary to ensure that this never happens again. May I ask him about sharing those changes and regulations with the other regions—the Northern Ireland Assembly, for instance? In particular, we have similar buildings in Belfast and Londonderry, and perhaps in Antrim as well, which are regulated or owned by our housing associations and councils. Is it his intention to share the recommendations with the other regions to ensure that we can all benefit from better safety?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely. The hon. Gentleman's question gives me the opportunity to say thank you to Ministers and officials in all the devolved Administrations who have been working with my Department to learn some of the lessons about building safety. We have also been discussing how some of the progress that we have made at a UK Government level in getting money from developers in order to contribute to remediation can also apply in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In particular, I thank Jayne Brady from the Northern Ireland civil service for the work that she has been doing with officials from my Department in this area. I know that the hon. Gentleman's own party and others are committed to learning appropriate lessons.

I mentioned the importance of making sure that we had a fit-for-purpose new regime and that we took the appropriate steps necessary. One other person I would like to thank is Dame Judith Hackitt. The work that she did has ensured that we could pass the Building Safety Bill into law in order to make the Building Safety Act 2022 an effective framework for regulation. We have a new building safety regulator, led by a new chief inspector of buildings, which operates within the Health and Safety Executive. We will have a new national regulator

for construction products and a new homes ombudsman to improve oversight and standards. We have new statutory duties placed on those carrying out design or building work to make sure that they have the relative competence for their roles, which means that building control will be a properly regulated profession and that all construction products marketed in the UK will be properly regulated in future. To follow on from the very good point made by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), if products are unsafe, they can be withdrawn from the market. There are also strengthened provisions in the legislation to hold industry to account.

As well as the Building Safety Act, the Fire Safety Act came into force this year, and it implements in principle the first nine of the inquiry's 15 phase 1 recommendations. Changes to regulations include the requirement that the owner and manager of every residential building, whether or not it is high rise, should be required by law to provide fire safety instructions, including instructions for evacuation. We have taken steps, as I mentioned earlier, to say to all developers that they must contribute to both remediating the buildings for which they were responsible and contributing to a fund to ensure that neither taxpayers nor leaseholders are held liable for problems that they did not create and for which they should not pay.

I should stress that, as well as introducing effective regulation, we have made it clear that many of the materials that are unsafe have been banned. It is the case that combustible materials on the external wall of any new residential building more than 18 metres high are banned, and there is a provision for sprinkler systems in all new blocks of flats that are higher than 11 metres.

We are making sure that we have the right regulatory system in place, that we get developers to pay and that the most dangerous materials are banned. All those steps are necessary, but they are not sufficient. We also need to make sure that those companies that have operated in a way that genuinely brings the system into disrepute know that we are coming after them. That is why, when it came to the particular case of Rydon Homes, one of the companies that was part of the group that was responsible for what happened in Grenfell Tower, I have been clear that they are suspended from any participation in the Government's Help to Buy scheme. I have also been clear that Kingspan, one of the organisations responsible for the material that contributed to the fire, was a wholly inappropriate partner for Mercedes-Benz when it was suggested that it should somehow seek to launder its reputation by sponsoring Mercedes-Benz's Formula 1 team. It is also the case that I will be taking steps to ensure that freeholders who at the moment are evading their responsibility to pay for and to contribute to remediation can be pursued. More will be announced by the Government in the days to come to make sure that we take all the steps necessary to deal with everyone who has responsibility in this matter.

I should also say that, as well as making sure that Government do everything they can to bring people to justice, when the inquiry concludes, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, quite properly independent organisations, will be making their own decisions about whether criminal prosecution will be necessary. I know that that is an issue of profound concern to the community. I can assure them, having talked to both the police and

the CPS, respecting, of course, their operational independence, that both have worked hard to ensure that the evidence is there for any action that they consider to be appropriate to be taken in due course.

As well as making sure that we learn the right lessons on building safety and get the new regime that tenants deserve, we also must ensure that the wider voice of social tenants everywhere is heard loud and clear. I thank the inspirational young campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa, who I know is in the House today, who has done so much working with ITV and others to draw attention to the continuing plight of social housing tenants. Kwajo's work, and the work of so many other campaigners, has underlined and redrawn to our attention the fact that there are people who are living in our capital city today—five years after Grenfell—in circumstances that are beyond squalid and inadequate. It has been the case that some housing associations and some local authorities have been heedless and neglectful of their obligations, and the steps that we need to take are clear. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), is bringing forward new legislation to give effect to the changes in social housing that are required.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate what the Secretary of State has said because, obviously, there is a job of work that needs to be done, particularly for young people, with regards to housing. I therefore encourage him to take up the offer by Órla Constant from Centrepoin to visit the work it is doing and to share the lessons learned, and the opportunities available, from those projects for young people to get them into housing and to encourage them to start a better life for themselves and their families.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I know he is passionate about helping young people, particularly those at risk of homelessness and those who need decent homes. It is thanks to him that I have had the opportunity to meet people from Centrepoin, an amazing charity that has done such good work for so long. I look forward to the opportunity to see more of the work it is doing, which he has championed, to help those who are most in need of support to have a safe and decent roof over their heads.

I mentioned the legislation we are bringing in, which of course follows on from the publication of a new vision for social housing by my late colleague James Brokenshire. I think we would all want, as we reflect on James's life and legacy, to recognise that one of the issues about which he was most passionate was making sure that the vulnerable and the voiceless had a champion in Government. It was his determination to set us on a path to stronger rights and better protections for tenants in social housing that has resulted in the legislation that my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North is bringing forward.

Under that legislation, we will ensure that tenants know that they will be safe in their home, that they will be able to hold their landlord to account and that complaints will have to be dealt with promptly. They will know that they need to be treated with respect and that those who work in housing, to whom I am enormously grateful, will have the support and the extra professional training that they need to ensure that they work effectively

[*Michael Gove*]

with tenants. We also want to ensure that, in those circumstances—I hope they become progressively rarer—where there are real and genuine problems and an urgent need for action, there are new powers for rapid inspection and for unlimited fines, to ensure that appropriate steps are taken.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the Bills he is bringing forward. He talks about bringing in legislation to improve safety for social rent tenants, which is good—but is that in parallel with the safety that leaseholders and private sector tenants in similar kinds of blocks also expect? Will everybody who lives in or owns a flat that is safety compromised be as safe as his legislation seeks to make social rent tenants?

Michael Gove: Yes, that is our intention. The hon. Lady's question gives me an opportunity to restate and underline one or two things, to make them perhaps a little more clear than I had hitherto. To my mind, and this is very much the theme of this debate, there are two big issues that the Grenfell tragedy threw into the starkest relief, which we should have addressed beforehand and which the tragedy makes it imperative that we do not forget.

The first issue is building safety. We have a compromised and weak regime that needs to change. We need to improve regulation, ensure that those buildings that are unsafe are made safe, and ensure that the people in those buildings do not pay for it, but that it is those who were contributors either to the system overall or to the state of those buildings who pay. That is one important set of issues.

There is another parallel and related set of issues. We know, because we can hear on tape the voices of those who were in that tower saying beforehand that they were not being listened to, at a time when changes were being made to their own home, that they were not paid attention to. That symbolises a wider problem of too many people in social housing not having their voices heard or their interests and lives protected. Of course, the two come together.

The tragedy raises other issues, on which I, my Department and others have reflected, and which I hope this House will return to as well. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) rightly says, people in the private rented sector need their rights protected. We have some legislation that we will be debating in this House in due course that is intended to better protect the rights of those in the private rented sector by, for example, getting rid of section 21 evictions. I know the very close interest she takes in housing, so I hope we will have an opportunity to look at that Bill; if she has thoughts about how we can ensure that we do an even better job for those in the private rented sector, I look forward to working with her.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I appreciate my right hon. Friend's response to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). Not today, but will he and his colleagues turn their minds to how to provide greater security and fairness to the quarter of a million park home residents and the 6 million private

leaseholders who are affected both by fire safety and by other unfairnesses, where the Government have proposals from the Law Commission to enact?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the Father of the House. I have received hundreds, if not thousands, of letters and postcards highlighting the plight of park home residents and referencing the work that he has led. There is much more that can be done there; I will not say more from the Dispatch Box today, but I look forward to working with him on that.

On the question of enfranchising leaseholders, the Father of the House is right, and so is the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), my shadow, that we need to legislate to enfranchise them. We are going to do so in the next parliamentary Session—within this year, as it were. It is important that we do. That is a commitment we must uphold. There are urgent measures, which we debated yesterday, about housing supply, but it is absolutely right that we end the absurd, feudal system of leasehold, which restricts people's rights in a way that is indefensible in the 21st century.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I apologise to the House for being late to the debate; I have been chairing a meeting of the House of Commons Members' Fund, which I gave prior notice of. The Secretary of State rightly talks about help for leaseholders and others living in blocks that have been affected by Grenfell-style cladding, other cladding and other building safety defects. That is an important issue, but coming back to social housing, he is aware that there is still a problem: apart from ACM cladding, there is no automatic right to funds for social housing landlords. Ministers have said before that that is still under consideration. If it is not provided, there will be a massive black hole, particularly in housing association funding, which means they will build fewer houses than we want them to.

Michael Gove: The Chairman of the Select Committee is right to draw attention to that issue. One of the important questions is making sure that, even as we crack down on those social landlords who may not be fulfilling their responsibilities, we also understand that the overwhelming majority of people who work for and in housing associations are striving every day to provide a quality service and to ensure that more people can have a safe roof over their head. We must make sure that they have the resources required, including the resources necessary to meet their building safety obligations. I look forward to working with the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing to see what more we can do to help them in that area, and in others.

I know we only have three hours or so for this debate and there are a number of other hon. Members who want to speak, so I will conclude by saying thank you, again, to the bereaved, the relatives and the survivors of this tragedy for the immense forbearance, dignity and courage they have shown. I hope we will have an opportunity at least every year to report back to this House on the progress we are making on the issues for which they have fought. I am sure I speak for everyone across the House when I say that on the 14th all of us will pause, reflect and honour everything through which they have been. Our commitment to ensure that a tragedy like that never happens again is universal across this House.

12.28 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): On 14 June 2017, every single person in this country watched in horror as a blaze in London became, within hours, one of the worst disasters of modern times. Some 72 people lost their lives that day and dozens more were injured. Among them, as the Secretary of State has said, were young children, GCSE students, retired couples and entire families. As the family of 78-year-old Ligaya Moore poignantly put it, it was a tragedy that turned “laughter into silence”.

I join the Secretary of State in welcoming some of those families to the Chamber today. It always feels uncomfortable, at moments such as this when we stand here and speak, that their voices are not heard and ours are, but I have heard from many of the families affected by this appalling tragedy over the past few years that what they want most is to hear from us the action we will take to honour those lives and build a fitting legacy. I am determined that we will work with the Secretary of State and with all political parties across this House in order to turn that commitment that we have all respectively made into reality.

There has rightly been much soul-searching about how such a tragedy was possible in modern Britain. The public inquiry is still under way and must be allowed to do its work without political interference. However, that must never be allowed to become an excuse for delay or for justice denied, because this was not the first fire in a block with similar cladding. The Government were aware of problems as early as 1986, well before a block of flats in Merseyside caught alight in 1991. That fire, at Knowsley Heights, was followed by similar fires spanning three decades, from Irvine in Scotland to Southwark in south London, where six people lost their lives. In those intervening decades, the alarm was raised many times. One parliamentary inquiry led by the former Member for Southend West, David Amess, who is much missed in all parts of this House, warned that it should not

“take a serious fire in which many people are killed before all reasonable steps are taken towards minimising the risks.”

This series of failures spanned all political parties and successive Governments over many decades. We should have heard that and we should have acted. I therefore join the Secretary of State in saying, on behalf of my party, that we are sorry that we did not hear it and sorry that we did not act sooner.

But how did those warnings go unheeded by so many for so long? The Government’s lawyer told the official Grenfell inquiry that

“within the construction industry there was a race to the bottom, with profits being prioritised over safety.”

It makes me angry to hear that that can be admitted with such candour now but nothing was done before. I share the Secretary of State’s passion to go after those who recklessly disregarded people’s lives and put their profits and their own interests before safety. If they broke the law, acted recklessly or acted immorally, then I will join him in going to the ends of the earth to make sure that they pay a heavy price for doing so.

We have to ask ourselves, too, standing here in the centre of power: who permitted that to happen? Over 30 years and five different Governments—Labour, coalition and Conservative—how did it come to pass that profits were allowed to matter more than people. How could

the concerns and lives of people in the centre of one of the wealthiest boroughs in the wealthiest city in one of the wealthiest countries in the world be ignored—effectively rendered invisible by decision makers only a few short miles away? The appalling tragedy suffered by the people of Grenfell is undeniable evidence of the unequal society that we live in, where lives are allowed to be weighed against profit on a balance sheet and come out the worst, and where those who lack money also lack power. When I talk to social housing tenants up and down the country, this what I hear so often—that they are not seen or heard by decision makers, and that when they raise their concerns and bang on the doors of the corridors of power, those concerns still go unheeded. One social housing tenant said to me: “We simply do not count.” This has to be the day when we stand up together and say, “This ends now.”

There are 4 million families in rented social housing in England. Every single one of them deserves a decent, safe home, and, more than that, the power to drive and shape the decisions that affect their own lives. We should be scandalised that so many homes are not up to a fit standard, not just on fire safety but in being cold, damp and in a state of disrepair that shames us all in modern Britain: homes with black mould and water running down the walls; homes that are unsafe; homes that are damp and overcrowded. I recently heard from a teacher about a child who was coming to school covered in rat bites. The school is using its pupil premium to send people round to make sure that these children are clothed, fed and protected from rats. What have we come to in Britain in the 21st century? It is an absolute disgrace.

The Secretary of State is right that we should take a zero tolerance approach to social landlords who do not live up to their obligations—who do not do everything within their power to make sure that those issues are dealt with. But I also gently say to him, in a constructive tone, given the gravity of what we are dealing with today, that the Government have to do their bit as well. That means reversing some of the cuts that have been made to councils and housing associations in recent years which mean that repair budgets are virtually non-existent in many parts of the country, and that good people have been lost and expertise has gone.

We welcome the decision to publish a social housing reform Bill to try to tackle some of these issues, although we are concerned that it has not materialised in advance of this debate. We were led to believe that we would have that Bill before we stood up to speak today. If there are problems within Government—if there are wranglings taking place behind closed doors—my offer to the Secretary of State is this: we will work with him and support him in whatever battles he has to make sure that this Bill sees the light of day, and quickly. That also goes for the renters reform Bill, which must, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, deal with the appalling standards in many private rented homes up and down this country. Some of that, I have to say to the Secretary of State, has been caused by Government policies such as the bedroom tax, which forced many people out of the secure social home that they had lived in for many years, close to friends, family and children’s schools, and into private, rented, often overcrowded and substandard accommodation that, absurdly, cost the public more than it did to house them in their own home.

[Lisa Nandy]

We welcome some of the measures that the Secretary of State has proposed, particularly the promise to beef up the role of the regulator. This is a welcome step forward giving it the power to inspect, to order emergency repairs, to issue limitless fines, and to intervene in badly managed organisations. But we have to do more to tilt the balance of power back towards tenants to give them not just a voice but real power to shape and drive the decisions that affect their lives, their homes, their families and their communities. The measures on tenant satisfaction and a residents' panel that meets Ministers three times a year are welcome, but well short of a dedicated tenants' organisation that is put on a statutory footing and exists to be a voice to champion their interests. Such a body existed under the last Labour Government but was scrapped by the Secretary of State's Government in 2010. I ask him please not to close his mind to perhaps revisiting previous methods that worked. Let us work together with tenants to get this right once and for all.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the body—the Tenant Services Authority—that used to exist and was in place to do that. Let me return to the point that I made to the Secretary of State in an intervention: this is about resources. Councils and housing associations are short of resources. They cannot bring their homes up to a proper standard—the new decent homes standard—build new homes, and do all the necessary building safety and other works with the money they have. Will my hon. Friend join me in pressing the Secretary of State—hopefully he is listening, as he said he was—to make sure that social housing landlords have the same access to funds to deal with safety works that are now, quite rightly, available to the private sector?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would add to the many challenges currently facing councils and housing associations the challenge of decarbonisation and the goal of net zero. These things are keeping well-meaning, good people who work in our councils and housing associations awake at night trying to work out how they are going to square the circle, and they deserve more support from their Government.

Nor is it acceptable that the measures are silent on how many new social housing properties will be built. We have a chronic shortage of affordable rented homes, with some of the challenges that my hon. Friend outlined. It is really concerning that today the Prime Minister said that the big idea to solve this is to allow people to use benefits to get a mortgage—not because we disagree with the principle of extending home ownership much more widely to those who want to grasp it, but because he seems to have forgotten to talk to the lenders. The Secretary of State will know that this has been the problem with previous announcements that have aimed in similar ways to help people to get mortgages. If mortgage lenders are not on board, they simply will not do it. The Prime Minister may not have reached out to mortgage lenders, but I am sure the Secretary of State will. When he does, will he talk to them about the very real difficulties of people on universal credit—all of whom, by definition, have savings of less than £16,000, with most having very little in savings, if anything at all—and about how they get a mortgage without any kind of deposit, and whether that is indeed viable? The

Prime Minister appears to have forgotten to talk to mortgage lenders; I think it is possible that he also forgot to talk to the Secretary of State before he made the announcement. I do not envy the Secretary of State the task of trying to sort this out, but I am sure that he will go at it with his characteristic tenacity, and I wish him well in the endeavour.

I also wish the right hon. Gentleman well in realising the ambition he set out today: that when the Government extend the right to buy on a voluntary basis to housing association tenants, they will ensure that the homes are replaced, like for like and one for one. I was pleased to hear him say that he had secured that commitment, because Government figures suggest that while just over 2,500 council homes were built in 2010, over 11,000 were sold off under the right to buy; and, as he knows, in the Government pilots of the extended scheme, only half of the homes were replaced and the replacements were more expensive and inferior in standard to the ones that were sold. So how is the Secretary of State able to give this commitment today? What is the estimate of the cost of doing that, and where will the money be found? He knows better than anyone how squeezed his existing budget is. Given that full replacement of right-to-buy homes has never been achieved, how does he intend to pull that off this time? Surely, with 1 million people stuck on social housing waiting lists and a shortage of 1.5 million homes, he is not going to pursue measures that make the situation worse for most families?

Mr Betts: There are two important questions here. First, will participation by housing associations be voluntary? They are independent organisations, not part of the public sector. Secondly, replacing one for one, like for like, a family home for a family home, is not just about the Treasury making up the discount. Talk to housing associations: the cost of building a replacement is often greater than the market value of the home sold. There is another gap, which the Government have to fill.

Lisa Nandy: I think my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, is making the Secretary of State's day. We can add that to the very long list of problems. I think his question was more for the Secretary of State than for me, and I am sure he will ensure that it is addressed in the winding-up speeches, but I add my voice to his in saying that one of the reasons we were very concerned about the scheme is that it reaches only a very small number at a very high price.

We have a housing crisis in Britain and, as the Secretary of State knows, it manifests in a multitude of ways—in people who have been mis-sold leasehold properties, people who face soaring rents and are crippled by housing costs and the cost of living, and people in totally unsuitable exempt accommodation. Those loopholes have still not been closed while people continue to milk the system and claim housing benefit while allowing communities to fall into rack and ruin.

As the Secretary of State acknowledged, five full years after the Grenfell tragedy thousands of people remain stranded in homes covered in similar cladding, facing ruinous costs because of a scandal that was not of their making. The right hon. Gentleman is right that developers, not leaseholders, should pay. He has pushed that further than any of his predecessors and he has my full support in doing so. As long as he continues down

that road, we will support him in the fight. However, I understand that so far 45 homebuilders have paid £2 billion to fix fire-related safety defects, which is roughly half of what he told the House would be needed. Where will the other £2 billion come from? What assurances and guarantees does he have that the developers who have agreed to pay cannot backtrack on any of the agreements?

The Government's plans are missing several elements that need to be addressed and added to existing measures in the Building Safety Act 2022. The Secretary of State will be aware of those. There is still far too little support for the significant number of leaseholders who face huge bills to fix non-cladding defects.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On the point she just addressed, there are leaseholders living in buildings who have looked to what the Secretary of State says about wanting to make those responsible pay but who still do not know who was involved. Often there is a network of companies; some may have disappeared or taken new names but still have the same directors and so on. Would it not be helpful if the Government were to write to the leaseholders in all those buildings setting out what information they currently have about the willingness of those involved in the construction of the building to cough up for the unsafe flats they constructed?

Lisa Nandy: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good suggestion, which I hope the Government will take up. It is not just the huge costs that are causing such damage to people; it is the uncertainty and anxiety that they have to live with every single day. Anything the Government can do to alleviate that anxiety—to send a signal to the leaseholders who are now trapped in their homes that they are not on their own—would be extremely welcome.

Will the Secretary of State look specifically at those who are seeking to sell or remortgage their properties? For such people, this wait is agonising and unbearable; their lives are on hold and they simply cannot move on. I have to say to him that it is quite wrong of the Government to rule out retrospective help for those who have already paid. Many people felt pressured or bullied into paying these enormous bills, yet no help is coming for them. That is not justice. Nor is there help for the countless leaseholders who are mired in mortgage chaos. Government funding so far is available for buildings over 11 metres, but shorter buildings may contain more vulnerable residents, be coated in more cladding and have more serious fire safety issues. What more does the Secretary of State plan to do to ensure that priority funding is allocated according to risk?

At the current pace, it will take until 2026 to remove cladding on all social housing blocks, and until 2024 for private blocks. When does the Secretary of State expect remediation of all dangerous buildings to have been completed? Can he give us some reassurance on that?

It would be wrong of me to stand here and say that the problems facing leaseholders began and end with Grenfell. A group of local residents who have been caught up in this scandal came to see me and told me a familiar story. They have been hit with huge charges, but when they challenged the charges with their management company, they did not even get a response.

They have written again and again and have been completely and utterly ignored. It is totally unacceptable, and it is not new.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is not in his place right now, but he has fought this battle for years, as I well remember. Many years ago, in 2001, I worked for the then Member of Parliament for Walthamstow as the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill—later the 2002 Act—was going through this place. These debates were happening here in this place at that time, a full decade before I was elected to Parliament. They were happening when I was working for Centrepoint, the fantastic organisation to which Members have paid tribute today. Parliament was debating how too many people were being ignored and overlooked, and these arcane and archaic, feudal models of tenure were still being defended by some, even though they had clearly and completely outlived their usefulness.

Almost every country in the world apart from Britain has either reformed or abolished this archaic, feudal model. I believe there is now cross-party consensus on the need to do something about it. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State acknowledge that we are right to say that we must have legislation to deal with this, but I say gently to him: where is it? He says legislation will be forthcoming in this parliamentary Session, but it was not in the Queen's Speech. There are five Bills from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in the Queen's Speech; surely time can be found to ensure that we deal with this problem once and for all.

We need new legislation to end the sale of new private leasehold houses, effective immediately after Royal Assent is given; new legislation to replace private leasehold flats with commonhold; and new powers for residents over the management of their own homes, with rights for flat owners to form residents' associations and simplification of the right to manage. Why do the Government not hand leaseholders the right to extend the lease to 990 years with zero ground rent at any time or to cap ground rents when extending a lease to 0.1% of the freehold value up to a maximum of £250 a year? The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) chairs, has done incredible work on that. The proposals are there and ready to go.

Where are the Law Commission's proposals to reform the process of enfranchisement valuation for leaseholders, including on marriage value and prescribing rates for the calculations of the premium? Surely, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, it is a no-brainer to crack down on unfair fees and contract terms by publishing a reference list of reasonable charges, by requiring transparency on service charges, and by giving leaseholders the right to challenge rip-off fees and conditions or poor performance from service companies.

I started by saying that a group of people were rendered invisible to decision makers only a few miles away, which is completely unacceptable in modern Britain. How can we accept that these rip-off companies, on behalf of owners who we often do not know and do not have the right to find out about, are allowed to tell people whether they can change the doorbell on their own home or make minor changes that would make a big difference to their lives? How on earth is it right that we are siding with those rip-off management companies

[Lisa Nandy]

and opaque owners over people who live in their own homes, have a stake in this country and their communities, and deserve the right to something better?

If the Secretary of State can secure time for the second part of the leasehold reform Bill that was promised, we could end these arcane rules and give power and a voice back to people in their own homes and communities. Was levelling up not intended to answer that clamour for more control and agency, and give people who have a stake in the outcome a greater ability to make decisions about their own lives? That is the legacy that we should seek to build in honour of those who lost their lives in Grenfell: everybody everywhere in the UK, regardless of the type of tenure that they happen to end up with, has the right to a decent, secure, safe home—full stop. We will make sure that that is delivered.

The Grenfell community has steadfastly campaigned not just for justice but for change, and it is humbling to welcome some of the relatives to the Gallery. I share the Secretary of State's view that that has come too slowly and that their long fight for justice has for too long been paved with broken promises. Those lives mattered, and if we believe and mean what we say when we honour them, we must build a better system in the wake of that appalling tragedy. His Department has five Bills in the Queen's Speech, which is five chances for us to get it right. We will move heaven and earth to help him do that, but let us not waste them.

12.52 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Tuesday is the five-year anniversary of the Grenfell tragedy and I start by paying tribute to my constituents—the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives in such appalling circumstances. I also pay tribute to the bereaved, the survivors, the residents and the broader community in north Kensington and Kensington, who have borne so much with so much dignity. I welcome the families and residents to the Gallery; it is an honour to have them here.

We need a lasting legacy to come out of the Grenfell fire tragedy, which must be that everyone has a right to be safe in their homes, that all residents' and tenants' voices need to be heard, and that communities need to be involved in decision making when it comes to their communities. In the two and a half years since I was elected, I have said in this Chamber on a number of occasions that I have been frustrated by the length of time it has taken for some of the changes to building, fire safety and cladding remediation to be implemented. I say again that it is incumbent on all of us to have a sense of urgency when we go about this task.

I am glad to say that we have made substantial progress in the last few months. In April, we enacted the Building Safety Act 2022, which is a landmark piece of legislation. As part of that Act, we extended to intermediate buildings the statutory protection for leaseholders such that they will not have to pay for cladding remediation, which I welcome. I also welcome the establishment of a regulator for construction products. I have been shocked and horrified by some of the revelations that have come out of the Grenfell inquiry about the building products sector, so I am glad that that regulator has been put in place.

I thank the Secretary of State for his efforts with building developers and owners. It is good that 45 of the largest building developers have signed up to the new regime to provide at least £2 billion of funding for buildings in whose development they were involved. It is also positive that we now have the building safety levy, which will raise £3 billion-plus for buildings that have been orphaned. That is all good progress.

My constituents and I were pleased to see the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill in the Queen's Speech, for which activists in my constituency have been calling for a long time. It is very important that social housing tenants' voices are heard and respected, and that the regulator is given tougher enforcement powers. I am glad that there can be unlimited fines and that, for the big social housing providers, there will be regular inspections along the lines of Ofsted inspections.

We are making progress, but there is more to be done. In my constituency, there are buildings where the remediation is still in progress. We need a sense of urgency in addressing every single building in the country that has fire safety defects. Every building needs to be properly assessed. It is important that we are proportionate in that fire risk assessment—it needs to be accurate and to reflect the real risks—but once we have it, we need to get on with the job of remediating the defects. I understand that, in London, approximately 1,100 buildings would require simultaneous evacuation, and we need to get on with the job of remediating them.

It is also important to address the broader picture—not only the remediation, but the other attendant issues. I talked to a constituent this morning who lives in a building that does not require remediation, but the insurance companies believe there is sufficient risk for them to have put up the insurance premiums multiple times. That broader context needs to be looked at. We need to ensure that the recommendations of the first phase of the Grenfell inquiry are implemented. I understand that 21 of the 46 have been, but we need to ensure that the rest are implemented urgently.

We have made substantial progress, particularly in the last few months, but there is a lot more to be done. This needs to be a collective endeavour on both sides of the House, because we owe it to the Grenfell families and the Grenfell community that such a tragedy never be allowed to happen again. We as the legislators need to ensure that.

1.59 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I join all Members in this House in sending our condolences to the people from Grenfell Tower in the Gallery and to all the family and friends of those they have lost.

My day today began well: I got a phone call from Merton Council housing department to tell me that Miss S's case would go into band A on the housing register and she would be the highest medical priority. Miss S lives in a one-bedroom flat that is rodent infested and covered in condensation, which she shares with her three children, two of whom have autism. They are now in band A—great! Only it is not so great, because I calculate that she will be 37th in the three-bedroom category in band A on Merton's housing register, and I know the other 36 because I fought to get them there. Last year, Merton Council had 32 three-bedroom properties to offer to the entire housing register. At that rate,

I calculate that Miss S probably has another six or seven years before she will ever successfully bid for a property. That is the reality we face.

The word “crisis” is overused in this Chamber, but when it comes to housing it could not possibly be more justified. Every Friday at my weekly advice surgery, I meet family after family on Merton’s 10,000-strong housing waiting list to whom I struggle to offer any hope that they will ever get a place to call home. I reflect on how I deal with their cases: do I tell them the truth and explain the system, or do I try to leave them with some hope to make them feel better? I would welcome anybody’s advice, because I have become the citizens advice or housing advice authority giving the news to people that they do not want to hear, but I believe it is my obligation to give that advice in the best way I can.

When I bring those cases to Parliament, I cannot help but question the priority the Government give this issue, given that the average tenure for a Housing Minister over the last 12 years has been slightly less than a year. Maybe I am dreaming, but finally it sounds as though it is time for some housing policy—who knew Sue Gray’s partygate report would have such far-reaching consequences?—but, as ever, the proof is in the pudding, and the pudding costs money.

Let us start on a positive note. I am delighted finally to see progress for social housing tenants living in properties in disrepair and battling endless hurdles in their fight for a safe, habitable place to live. This would simply not have happened without the determination of my constituent—I am proud to say that—Kwajo Tweneboa, who is here today, and Daniel Hewitt of ITV News in shining a light on the appalling conditions in which Kwajo, his neighbours and thousands of social housing tenants are living. Disrepair is the biggest issue in my inbox, thanks in part to a complaints process so rigorous and so tilted in favour of the landlord that my office now holds a weekly meeting with Clarion Housing Association to go through cases one by one.

I say to the Minister that, if I had rain pouring through my roof, I really do not think my patience would withstand a call centre with nobody responsible for my complaint, a two-stage written process, an eight-week wait to begin a complaint to the ombudsman, who looks only at whether correct processes have been followed, and a regulator who signposts me back to the ombudsman. So a truly strengthened regulator would be unreservedly welcome, finally giving a voice to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. But we must be under no illusion: this would not build a single new home. There were just 5,955 new social rented homes last year—one of the lowest numbers on record—and at that rate, it would take 192 years to house everyone on the waiting list.

As I have always said, it is people’s real-life examples that bring this stuff home, and I would like to give two more examples. The first is Mr and Mrs B and their three children. Their eldest son has muscular dystrophy. He cannot walk or use a bathroom independently, but he lives in a house in which his bathroom and toilet are downstairs and his bedroom is upstairs. Each day, his tiny, diminutive mum puts him on her back and climbs the stairs to his bedroom. At night, she carries him downstairs on her back for him to be able to use the bathroom. She is in band A—the ubiquitous band A—on the register. Because I was so distressed at explaining

the situation to her, I visited her home with the head of the Merton housing department, Mr Brunton, and together we tried to explain why she could not be helped. That is not something I would want to do too often. She is at the top of the list, but she will go no further.

There is Miss T, who lives with her three children in a combined living room-kitchen while her former partner, who is the tenant of the flat and has multiple sclerosis, is in the bedroom. Of those three children, one is severely autistic. Miss T herself has a neurological brain disorder. She is in band A on the housing register, but there are 32 families in front of her. Her wait has to be put into perspective: last year, Merton had 32 three-bedroom properties to offer to all the bands. Even though Miss T is at the top of the list, it will take until her children are teenagers before she is likely to be successful, so she and her three children will be sleeping in the living room until then.

How does the Minister intend to increase supply? One ambition appears to be reopening up current supply, with the Secretary of State vowing this morning to end the “scourge” of unoccupied second homes. If only rhetoric matched reality I would be dancing on the rooftops. Earlier this week, the Chancellor confirmed that he is handing out multiple energy bill discounts to those who own multiple homes. Aside from costing hundreds of millions to the taxpayer, does the Minister really think that this will discourage second home ownership?

Another suggestion is to give housing association tenants the right to buy, a proposal that categorically requires Government funding. However, the findings of the Government’s trial run in the midlands were indisputable: the number of replacement homes did not match the number of sales housing associations said they would likely need to be able to put their own resources into a part-funded replacement scheme, and the replacement homes were smaller and more expensive. Don’t get me wrong: I am a fan of home ownership. I am one of few on the Opposition Benches who regularly speak in favour of the right to buy. I know how liberating it is for people to own their home, and I know how it gives them independence and choice. As the daughter of a woman whose proudest achievement was not getting one daughter into the House of Commons or her younger daughter into the House of Lords, but owning her own home, I will never be a person who objects to home ownership. However, what we really need is the absolute copper-bottomed guarantee that there will be like-for-like replacement of every single property that is sold.

Finally, the Secretary of State heralded an ambition to return to a Macmillan era of housing—an era when 300,000 new homes were built a year. That is the very same target that the very same Secretary of State scrapped last month. Is it not about time that we stopped playing the hokey-cokey with the most fundamental human right—a secure place to live and bring up your children?

1.9 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I, too, pay tribute to the families and survivors of the Grenfell tragedy, and I think all of us who served in Government at any time before that tragedy would join both Front Benches in the apology that is offered to them; there was a systemic failure that let them and many others down.

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

As the shadow Secretary of State generously said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has shown real energy in seeking to address these matters now, and I pay tribute to him for that. We have therefore seen marked progress, which I welcome, but I also want to put on record some areas in which I know the Minister currently on the Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), will be keen to press for yet further progress.

The first of them relates to cladding. We have come a long way, and my constituents are very grateful for that. We have had campaigns, which I have raised in this House, for the residents of Northpoint in my constituency, and others are affected in other buildings, too: Iconia House and Azzura House in Homesdale Road; and William House and Henry House in Ringers Road. They happen all to be in the centre of Bromley, so this is not purely an inner-London issue; it affects town centres and suburban centres across the country. It is therefore all the more important that we get it right.

Eventually, after a very long campaign, the remediation work is starting at Northpoint, but it will take perhaps a year or so to complete. The landlord of the occupiers of Northpoint was a property company that was an offshoot of the Tchenguiz family trust, not an organisation noted for its generosity towards its tenants. It stood upon its legal rights and insisted upon the flat owners—the leaseholders—covering the costs, for example of a waking watch.

It is certainly to be welcomed that future costs of waking watches and remediation will be picked up, but these leaseholders are out of pocket to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds for the waking watch that they installed because the London Fire Brigade, in exercise of its duty, issued a notice saying that without it the property would not be habitable. They were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: what else were they to do but acquire that waking watch? Otherwise their homes would have been unsafe, which would have been unfair on them. The mental and health pressures on some of these people was immense. Their landlord was remote and frankly not possible to go after. It was not signed up to the scheme that the Secretary of State has worked so hard on and responsible developers have joined. The occupiers of Northpoint therefore had to dip into their own pockets when most of them already had mortgages, especially as many of them were first-time buyers, and when the flats were unmortgageable—they could not increase the mortgage on them because nobody would lend on them—and until this work was done they were effectively uninsurable too.

So these people had been left in a hopeless situation, and while it is right that the Government seek to recover every penny they can from developers and builders who fail to come up to the standards, where there has ultimately been a failure of governance in the broadest sense over a period of many years it is legitimate for the state to stand behind those who have lost out. Where there is such a corporate failure, the state must pick up the ultimate responsibility. So I hope the Minister will look again at means of coming to the aid of such people for retrospective costs where it is clearly not realistic to pursue the builder or developer. There will be a number of such cases. In this instance the freehold had been sold on many times. There will also be cases where developers who may be at fault will no longer be in

business; they may have wound up or amalgamated. In those circumstances, the moral and corporate responsibility must fall on the state.

There are also areas where there has been progress but there is more to do. Members have referred to building insurance. There has been a marked increase in premiums across the board. People have had major—threefold or fourfold—increases in their premiums. Again, these people are often in flats that are unmortgageable and unsellable, and now, on top of their service cost charges to pay for steps such as a waking watch, they are facing massive increases in their insurance premiums. The question has to be raised—many of my constituents have done so—whether the market is operating effectively. How genuinely competitive is the market in these areas? There is a real concern that at the very least there is an excessive risk-averseness now: having gone from having too lax an approach in the past perhaps, now the insurers' approach is too risk-averse, resulting in unrealistically and unfairly high premiums for many flat owners. That, too, is an area where it is legitimate for the Government and regulators to step in.

Mr Betts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Robert Neill: Of course; I happily give way to the Chairman of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Betts: We raised the issue of insurers at the Select Committee. Premiums have gone up by ridiculous amounts, often for buildings that are now safer than before the premium increases. The Association of British Insurers could not tell us how much more the insurance companies have paid out in the last three or four years on high-rise blocks, so we have no idea how much has been paid out, but we do know there have been massive premium increases. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should encourage Ministers to take further action with the ABI and others to start sorting out these unreasonable premium increases?

Sir Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I hope Ministers will do that. Again, the Secretary of State—who I am delighted to see back in his place—and his colleagues have shown real energy on this, but we need to keep the pressure on; that is key.

I am grateful to Lord Greenhalgh, who has been in correspondence with me a good deal on these matters. He pointed out that back in January the Financial Conduct Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority had been called upon

“to conduct a review of the buildings insurance market for medium and high-rise blocks of flats to get to the bottom”

of this concern. That is good of course, and the wider issue was recognised by Lord Greenhalgh, who wrote:

“Where the risk has demonstrably decreased, so should the premium.”

But that is not happening at the moment. While we want that review to be thorough, it must also be implemented in a timely fashion. I was advised by Lord Greenhalgh that the Department expects the FCA and the CMA

“to provide advice and recommendations within the next six months.”

He wrote that in a letter sent last month. I hope we can keep the pressure on so that it happens well within six months, rather than at the far end of that period.

The risk, of course, is that some of the stakeholders in the industry will not have the greatest of incentives to move swiftly on this matter, so the duty therefore falls on the Government to do that. I know the Secretary of State has been more than willing to flex muscle with the sector when necessary to get movement, and I hope he will do so on this. I also hope that the Minister will confirm in winding up the debate that once the advice and recommendations from the CMA and FCA have been received, there will be prompt and urgent action to implement them in whatever form is necessary to address this genuine problem.

There is a related matter on the operation of EWS1 forms. In my constituency there is a firm called the Frankham Group. Steve Frankham MBE, a constituent of mine, has done a great deal of work in this field and has been recognised for his service in the industry and charitable works around these matters. His firm is anxious to do the right thing but it, and many others in the sector who have contacted me, are concerned about the real difficulty they are finding, as responsible contractors employed by the registered social landlord sector or the private sector to carry out the EWS1 surveys, in getting both accreditation and professional indemnity insurance.

At the beginning of the year, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors set up accreditation for technicians and surveyors who will be carrying out the scheme. Despite firms such as Frankham having participated in meetings and sent in assessment forms as required, nothing as yet has been forthcoming from RICS to set the scheme properly in place. At the same time, insurance premiums have increased exponentially, which is, in some cases, making large contracts less viable than would otherwise be the case.

The last thing we want is for rogue operators to come into the market and undercut the responsible contractors who carry out this essential work, so we need both a realistic and fair insurance market operating in the sphere and, in parallel, a proper accreditation scheme in place. Otherwise, the temptation for the cowboys to undercut responsible people will be the greater. We need urgent action on that. I will happily share with the Minister and the Secretary of State the correspondence that I have had from my constituents, with the technical detail that they set out on what they have been doing to try to get the scheme working. I had a look at an EWS1 form myself, and it is quite complicated. We could not expect a group of residents to deal with it—they need professional advice to do it properly—but we must ensure that the professionals are accredited and insured properly to be able to undertake the work. I hope that we can flag that up, because I am not sure that enough attention has been given to it.

The other matter that relates to specific building safety issues is the position of small landlords, who are sometimes referred to as portfolio landlords. I appreciate that there has been movement to improve the number of landlords included in the Government's support schemes for remediation, but the current definition for those who can come into the scheme is those who have their own property but own only one other property, which they do not live in. Constituents have contacted me about that.

Let us say that a retired couple have bought four small flats, as many people may have done, all in their joint names. In retrospect, I suppose they could have put them in their sole names and had two each, but,

perfectly straightforwardly, they chose to put them in joint names. Had they bought two larger flats, they might well have fallen within the scheme. As it is, because they happened to invest in that type of property, they fall outside the scheme's scope. I wonder whether the Secretary of State could think again about the definition of a portfolio landlord. Most of us might think they are someone with 20, 30 or 40 flats for whom that is their principal business and think, "Well, they will have to take the commercial risk on that." They are not the large-scale landlord chains that we see, either. They are generally small investors, often moving into semi-retirement, who are not in anything like the same position to bear the costs. The principle behind the scheme is admirable, and it would be a shame if the ship was spoiled for a ha'porth of tar, meaning that entirely straightforward people who were caught out are left bearing a cost when someone with a slightly different configuration of their retirement investment would be able to benefit.

Finally, I turn to a broad point that echoes one made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). As well as dealing with the building safety situation, we need to look at the maintenance of much of our social housing estate. Constituents have been in touch with me repeatedly about the difficulty they have in particular with some of the large RSLs. They have also been in touch with the Secretary of State's Department in relation to the largest RSL in my area, Clarion. I deal with Clarion, and I see that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), has come across it as well. We have also recently seen it in the press. It is one of the largest social landlords in the country, but, I am sorry to say that, despite sometimes having had constructive dealings with it, many of my constituents who are its tenants do not find it constructive to deal with. There is a continual issue of poor maintenance, with contractors who simply do not do the job properly and have to revisit time and again. In one estate in Mottingham in my constituency, we have had problems getting things done, which have been running for about four years—they are only partially done, then revisited and more is done. Clarion is quick to send removal notices for pot plants and garden sheds that may have been put in place without permission. It is sharp in doing that. It is also quite quick to serve statutory notices for the costs of significant capital works such as renewing roofs and other matters, but I am sorry to say that it is remarkably slow to sort out basic repairs, never mind some of the more serious issues such as when damp gets in.

That makes me wonder whether some of our RSLs have not in fact become too big to be accountable. The stock in Bromley was originally transferred by Bromley Council to an RSL called Broomleigh. Actually, it was one of the first RSLs, and that was one of the first stock transfers to take place. The whole point of Broomleigh was that it was locally based, with local directors and local offices. What we have seen over a period of time is a series of RSL mergers, so they have become much larger.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the hon. Member agree that the drive for merger is directly due to housing associations' funding, their lack of capital funding, their greater reliance on the equity in their own stock and their ability to borrow? We have the housing associations that our legislation and funding deserve.

Sir Robert Neill: I think that we must look at the funding model for RSLs. There is no doubt that the ability to leverage more capital is a significant driver in mergers, and we must be aware of that. The hon. Lady is quite right that it is a bit odd that organisations that started off as charities now operate, in effect, in the same way as large-scale commercial developers, but actually without some of the shareholder and other comeback that those in the commercial sector might have. We do need to look at that. The concept of RSLs can be excellent and they can do much good work, so the reverse can also be true. I have some very good, local, small RSLs in my constituency, much closer to the original intention, who do brilliant work. I therefore agree that it is time to look across the piece at the RSL market.

This is an important debate, and I am grateful to have taken part in it. The Secretary of State is an effective Minister and has shown real energy and determination throughout all of this, and my constituents have reason to be grateful to him for interventions in our area in the past. I am sure that he will take those points on board, because we have done a lot, but a few extra bits and an extra push could do so much more. We also need that bigger-picture look at our social housing market.

1.27 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I welcome the reflections made by the Secretary of State in his opening remarks on the Grenfell tragedy and, along with Members across the House, I welcome the bereaved family members who are here to witness the debate. It is a reflection of the horror we all felt five years ago in seeing those pictures on our television screens that we are here, five years later, still debating in a thoughtful and cross-party way what more can be done. I welcome the progress already made and value the commitments made by all parties, including the Liberal Democrats, to further change. I hope that that will be the legacy of that awful day. It is a reflection of how profoundly it affected us all that we are working together thoughtfully, much against the prevailing wind of political debate in the Chamber. We are all committed to fixing some of the problems revealed.

We welcome the progress made, but I want to mention the amendment tabled to the Building Safety Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) that would have made social landlords exempt from the financial burden of the building safety levy. That levy, which is being charged to fund the cladding remediation work, is burdening social landlords and having the direct impact of disincentivising new house building. Some providers are reducing their development pipelines by between 20% and 40%. My hon. Friend tabled an amendment to exempt social landlords, which I believe was welcomed by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Local Government Association. The Secretary of State and the Department have said they will consult on providing an exemption. I therefore press him to give us an update on progress. It is very important that, while we attempt to fix the problems with cladding that we have identified, we do not create new problems. We know there is a housing supply crisis. That was articulated in a heartfelt speech by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and I think we all identify with that—as

a fellow south-west London MP, I very much identify with some of the problems she raised—but we must not allow an attempt to solve the remediation problem to create problems in the building pipeline.

I was struck by the weight the Secretary of State put, in his opening remarks, on the need to listen to residents and on how key that is to avoiding a repeat of Grenfell. When I reflect on the housing issues I experience as a constituency MP, they fall into two camps. I will confine my remarks to social housing and my social housing tenants, but I just want to take a moment to reflect on what the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said about private leasehold. That is a huge issue—a huge issue—in my constituency, too. I welcome any moves to try to address those issues and I very much look forward to hearing more about that.

For my social housing tenants, the biggest issue—it was referred to by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill)—relates to conditions and maintenance. We have talked a lot about the huge tragedy of Grenfell, but for many of my social housing tenants it is the everyday misery of living with mould, drafts and leaks and living in conditions that, frankly, they should not have to endure. I am glad the Secretary of State highlighted the work of ITV News and Kwajo Tweneboa. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden also mentioned their work. I have seen some of their content on Twitter. It is very, very disturbing. I would not wish for anyone to have to look at it, but I am very glad to hear that the Secretary of State is paying attention to it. It really does highlight this issue, which as I say is, above all else, the issue for my constituents in social housing. We also have issues with asbestos.

As a constituency MP, I talk to my colleagues on Richmond Council. They experience the same issue when talking to our residents and constituents about their housing issues: how hard it is to speak to housing associations, how hard it is to get them to act and how difficult it can be just to even get basic communication going. It really bothers me that, as their elected representatives, we cannot make housing associations more accountable to us. I welcome attempts to strengthen residents' groups, but I am slightly resentful on behalf of my residents that it is up to them to organise, pressurise and push for change for something that they ought to be able to expect as a right. They should just be able to pick up the phone and get somebody to come and fix their issue. For me, it is that lack of accountability that is the issue.

I want more local authority involvement in housing associations. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned the housing association in his area. We have something similar in Richmond, where we have the Richmond Housing Partnership. There is a good relationship between councillors and the housing association, but so much depends on that good relationship. There are no levers. There is no formal process by which councillors can make representations. There is no way for us to put pressure on housing associations or require them to deal with even the worst examples of mould, damp and asbestos. We have no lever by which we can require a housing association to take action, so I would like much more to be done on that.

In days gone by, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, we had councillors sitting on the boards of housing associations. However, now we

have huge housing associations. PA Housing also provides housing in Richmond. It provides housing across 19 local authorities, so it is simply not feasible for individual councillors from all those local authorities to be able to provide leverage. There needs to be some way social housing tenants can—either through themselves, their properly convened and officially supported residents' groups, or their local representatives—put effective pressure on housing associations to fix the issue of maintenance.

I want to briefly mention energy efficiency. Net zero targets, and how they are another pressure on housing, were touched on very briefly. When I talk about maintenance, I want a lot more investment in energy efficiency, particularly in our social housing and particularly for those on low incomes. It could make all the difference in the world right now as we see ever-rising fuel bills. A real commitment to improving the energy efficiency of our social housing stock is something the Government could invest in to achieve real results and really deliver for some of our most vulnerable and low-income families.

On fuel bills, I want to highlight a number of socially rented homes in my constituency in Kingston Borough which are directly owned by the council. Back in 1991, the properties were valued for council tax purposes. They are in a relatively wealthy area. Despite the fact that they do not have a market value because they are socially owned, they were assigned the market value of the privately sold homes around them. As a result, they now have a council tax band, in 2022, that is too high to qualify for the Chancellor's council tax rebate for fuel bills. The houses have some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in my constituency, yet they are missing out on this crucial fuel rebate. I have written to the Department on this issue and I would like the Government to look at it again. It is a massive issue in constituencies like mine that generally have very high housing values, but also low-income households.

In conclusion, I welcome the progress made on building safety in response to Grenfell, the continuing energy from everyone across the House to ensure we get these issues right, and the work of the Grenfell inquiry to ensure that all decision making is well informed. The Liberal Democrats look forward to playing their part.

1.37 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): As others have reminded us, next week will mark five years since the Grenfell fire which claimed 72 lives. I want to add to the tributes to the residents and campaigners for the work they have been doing to keep the issue alive and call all of us involved to account.

Despite progress to some extent since the Secretary of State has been in post, we should not be under any illusion that the building safety crisis has somehow been fixed. Years before the Grenfell fire, the coroner's recommendations relating to the Lakanal fire were not acted on by the Government, regulators or the building industry. The Lakanal inquiry report was one of many, many warnings that went unheeded. The building safety crisis triggered by the Grenfell fire has had a huge impact, not least on so many of my constituents living in buildings that would be safe and secure had those warnings been acted on. Instead, they are living in fear.

The worst incident in my constituency relating to the building safety crisis is that experienced by the shared owner leaseholders and students of the Paragon building

in Brentford. They had to be evacuated, with a week's notice, in October 2020. The cladding had already been removed but the inspections revealed fundamental flaws in the system-built housing blocks. Hard-working leaseholders and students just starting university were cast out. As shared owners, the hard-working leaseholders struggled to get back on the housing ladder, as the Notting Hill housing partnership could not afford to give them the current value for something they would be buying now. They were given only the deemed value of their property at the time, and it was too low to buy another property as a shared owner in west London. Their salaries had not increased significantly, but the values of alternative properties had. Meanwhile, all the costs of the compensation, the legal and organisational costs, had to be covered by Notting Hill housing partnership from its building and maintenance budget.

That was the most severe example, but I have had hundreds of emails in the past five years from other constituents. Leaseholders have had to pay for replacement cladding and waking watch and they may not get recompensed, depending on the situation. Residents were told that they needed a completed EWS1 form to sell their home, yet only about 300 trained professionals across the country could do those checks, so constituents had to put their lives on hold while they waited for a survey. Once the surveys took place, many residents in blocks across my constituency—in Hounslow, Isleworth, Brentford and Chiswick, and indeed, across the country—found that other major problems were apparent in their flats, such as inadequate fire breaks, incorrect insulation and more. In Richmond House in south London, a fire ripped through a small four-storey block of 32 flats. There was no flammable cladding but it was built wholly inadequately. Luckily, no lives were lost. That fire took hold in 11 minutes.

The consequences of all that mean that my constituents face life-changing bills, which can ruin them, and the uncertainty of having to put their lives on hold. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), refused to act. At least this Secretary of State acknowledges that the Government have some responsibility and that the response of Government since Grenfell has—I think his words were—"occasionally been insensitive". I thank him for being honest enough to acknowledge that at the Dispatch Box today.

After months, we finally saw the Government taking action, but it is still too little, too late; and, as Members have said, what support there is applies only to certain defects and not to many others, including structural defects, fire breaks and non-fire defects. We have seen only the tip of the iceberg in regard to defects, thanks to systematic failures across the construction and regulatory sector. Meanwhile, my constituents still face bills for non-cladding defects. There is no help for those mired in the mortgage crisis and unable to sell their homes, and building insurance charges are skyrocketing. One of my constituents saw a 500% increase this year.

Furthermore, social rent landlords were not recompensed for the cost of the building safety crisis imposed on them in places where they house social rent tenants. They have had to dip into their capital budgets, further undoing any growth in the number of social rent homes that we need and adding to the irrelevance of the Prime Minister's announcement today.

[Ruth Cadbury]

To me, the announcement that personal emergency evacuation plans will not be mandatory in buildings at risk was particularly shocking. The plans are crucial for residents with disabilities and their families to ensure that they can escape buildings during a fire. That was a recommendation from the first report of the Grenfell inquiry. I recently spoke to a constituent whose husband needs a PEEP. In this case, he needs a special chair to ensure that they can get him out of their flat and down the stairs. My constituent rightly said that the Government's position is "woeful and discriminatory". It is outrageous that the Government refuse to ensure that residents with disabilities are given the support that they need to escape during a fire. As we know from the past decade, if this is left to the invisible hand of the market and private companies in the sector are relied on to do the right thing, they will not do so.

I will finish by touching on social housing, particularly after the Prime Minister's announcement. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her graphic and emotional descriptions of the plight of her constituents in housing need in band A. I have many similar stories—I wish they were just stories, but they are lives.

After 12 years of Conservative Government failure to fix the housing market, Ministers are recycling and reheating old pilot programmes, with no new funding and no real plan. The Government know what they need to do: support councils such as Hounslow that are building more council homes and homes for social rent. The Government need to do far more. Hounslow is doing what it can with the resources that it has available. In the past three or four years, it has built more than 1,000 new council homes. It has also bought 500 homes, brought them into council ownership and allocated 20 of those to local care leavers. That was done with the help of the Mayor of London. Labour-led councils and Mayor Sadiq Khan are doing the right thing. If only we had a Government with the same commitment, they could do so much more.

With those 1,500 new homes, Hounslow Council is finally, after 10 years, achieving only level pegging on social rent and council housing numbers. Since the Conservative Government reinstated the 70% price discount for right to buy more than 10 years ago, Hounslow has steadily lost far more social rent homes than have been delivered. Nationally, as the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said, only 2,500 new social rent homes were built and 11,000 were sold. The gap is massive and growing. Most of the homes that have been sold through right to buy are now owned by private landlords, who are charging tenants three times the rent paid by the council tenant living next door. With many of those tenants on housing benefit to meet the gap between their salary and rent levels, that is a massive bonanza for private landlords, at a cost to the taxpayer.

Although I welcome proposals to give more of a voice and more rights to social rent tenants, in my view that only covers one set of people. Council tenants often feel frustrated. They are not always happy, but at least they have elected councillors who can support them with management and maintenance issues. Also, management, maintenance and investment decisions

are taken by the council in public, but that is not true for housing association tenants. Many of my constituents are tenants of the larger registered social landlords. They are distant and opaque and often do not even respond to me and my caseworkers, let alone to their tenants. Legislating is therefore the right thing to do, but it has to be done properly. And what about private tenants? Too often, they are bullied and even evicted by rogue landlords, rather than listened to and supported. There is very little to actually improve the voice of leaseholders in private blocks. And there is, of course, the other subset: shared owners.

After 12 long years in power, it is clear that the Government still have no real plan to fix the housing crisis, no plan to end the injustice facing leaseholders and no plan to ensure that we build the good, high-quality, truly affordable homes that families in my constituency want and need.

1.48 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I begin by joining others in expressing my condolences to the families who are here—and others who are not—whose loved ones died in the Grenfell fire. Their pain is never, ever going to go away. The very least we can do, and the essential first step, is to apologise for the failures. We heard that from the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who spoke for the Opposition.

Looking back, it is incredible that combinations of materials were allowed on the outside of buildings as cladding and were declared safe when no one had ever set fire to them to see what would happen. It is extraordinary that that transpired, and it is incredible that so many buildings were not constructed in accordance with the building regulations in force at the time. As the Secretary of State will know, as cladding has been inspected, people have peeled stuff off, peered inside and said, "Uh-oh—where are the fire breaks?" It is also shameful that the people responsible for this generation of jerry-built blocks thought that they could get away with it. That is what we are confronting.

There is no doubt at all—I join hon. Members on both sides of the House in saying this—that the Secretary of State has applied great determination and energy to the task that confronted him when he came into the post. However, he will be acutely conscious that thousands of leaseholders still do not know what will happen to their block. With each passing day, they remain trapped: trapped in their life, trapped in their building, which they are told is a fire risk, and paying additional costs. They do not know when it will all be brought to an end.

I have raised with the Secretary of State the particular case of the Gateway building in the centre of Leeds. Three types of cladding were submitted to the building safety fund. The fund said that it would pay for the render, but that the two types of zinc cladding—zinc applied to battens with various other materials—were not eligible for funding, even though the specialist fire safety adviser to the managing agents and the freeholder has said that in their professional opinion such cladding does not comply. The leaseholders are currently debating whether to spend £70,000 or £80,000 and another eight months on it. There is a great waiting list—after a generation or two of failure to set fire to materials to see whether they were safe, there is now a long queue for the

small number of institutions that can make up a particular combination made up at height and set fire to it to see what happens.

I raise the case because one of the considerations that my constituents and the managing agents are weighing up is that if the material is not found to burn in a way that breaches the regulations, a fire safety adviser will be able to issue an EWS1 certificate in respect of the building. But what if the material does burn in a dangerous way? Is it all worth doing unless they are sure that if they provide incontrovertible evidence, the building safety fund will say, “Okay, we will now cough up for a replacement”? That is a very important question. It may relate to a relatively small number of blocks, but they deserve reassurance that if they provide the evidence, they will get a change in the building safety fund’s decision.

The problem is immensely complex, as the Secretary of State and his officials, who have been working so hard, know better than anybody. Also complex is the liability waterfall that he has created to deal with it, but leaseholders are still not sure how the waterfall will work. To extend the analogy, I suppose they hope and pray that the water will never fall on them because others higher up the chain will have taken on the work and the liability.

I have great sympathy for the managing agents, some of which are quite small. They have dealt with lift contracts and ground maintenance. They never thought that the task of being a managing agent would mean being asked to manage a multimillion-pound contract to, in effect, pick off the outside of a building and rebuild it to be safe. They are sitting with leaseholders and trying to work out where the funding will come from, out of multiple sources. It is a very difficult process.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) raised a point about buy-to-let landlords. Apart from the unfairness of saying to people who have bought flats in good faith that somehow they are not entitled to the same protection as leaseholders, there is a practical problem. I can think of blocks in my constituency in which a goodly proportion of the flats are owned by buy-to-let landlords. If they cannot come up with the money to contribute to fixing the problem, that will affect all the leaseholders living in flats that they have bought in the same block, because the work will never get done. There is a pragmatic reason for ensuring that that does not come to pass.

This debate has not touched on the alternative approach of having a building works agency, rather like what has happened in Australia, where a central body has taken on this complex task but then gone after the people who should pay. With hindsight, that would have been a better approach. Of course, costs are rising all the time.

Before I come on to social housing, I want to make one other point to the Secretary of State. I do not know whether he has taken this up—I apologise if he has—but I wrote to one of his predecessors to propose convening a standing roundtable, if that is not a contradiction in terms, made up of representatives of leaseholders, managing agents, fire services, fire surveyors, insurance companies and mortgage lenders. The Minister and his team and officials may be having conversations with each of those bodies individually, but such a roundtable would be a place where individual problems that may be happening elsewhere could be worked through in aid of a speedier outcome.

The real test, as with the debt of obligation that we owe to the Grenfell families who are here today, will be how soon the day will arrive when all my constituents and every other hon. Member’s constituents can finally breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that the problem has been sorted, and can get on with the rest of their lives.

I have a brief point to make about the social housing crisis. I listened with great interest to what my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said. In the 1980s, Leeds City Council had about 94,000 council properties; today, it has 54,000. The big fall in the numbers of new council houses being built across the country, along with the sale of council houses, means that the stock available to let to people in need is falling at a rate of about 600 a year. Many other councils around the country will see the same picture. What is more, turnover is falling because people are thinking, “I think I’ll hang on to the council property I’ve got at the moment,” and demand is ever rising. In Leeds, 26,500 people are on the housing register, 6,500 of whom are in band A.

The maths is really terribly simple. There is growing demand, with people living in overcrowded accommodation—increasing numbers of people are coming to me and telling me, as their Member of Parliament, about the difficulties that they are experiencing in overcrowded, unsuitable accommodation with medical and other needs. They are chasing a diminishing number of properties. In one case, when new council houses were advertised—Leeds is doing its best to build them and has a choice-based lettings system—more than 1,000 people applied for one new council property. Anyone who is not absolutely at the top of the priority banding does not have a hope in hell of getting a property.

I listened with interest to the recent announcement about the right to buy. In all honesty, I have to say to the Secretary of State that we have heard about one-for-one replacement time and again, but it has never happened. That is why Leeds City Council’s housing stock has gone from more than 90,000 to just over 50,000. We have ended up in the absurd position that in an effort to increase the number of council houses for rent, councils including Leeds are buying back council houses that they originally built but which were sold. So they are paying twice over for one property, and that does not make sense.

I do not know whether the Government would ever consider this, but one approach would be to say, “I support the right to buy, but if the person who has bought the house then wants to sell it on to someone else, shouldn’t the council have the right of first refusal to take the property back?” We know what has happened: as has already been pointed out, many of those houses, as they have been sold down the chain, have ended up in the hands of private landlords charging—as we heard a moment ago from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury)—rents that are way in excess of those that applied when they were council houses. It is an absurd system, at a time when we know that there is such basic housing need.

It is not as if new homes had not been built; loads of new homes have been built in the centre of Leeds. However, they are mainly one or two-bedroom flats—some of them in the blocks that are currently affected by the cladding crisis—whereas, in Leeds as in many other places, as families grow the need is for three and four-bedroom housing. There has been a terrible mismatch.

[Hilary Benn]

It is not as if there were no space in which to build, and it is not as if there had been no resources with which to build. The problem is that the wrong types of properties are being built, and the people in the greatest need are unable to get their hands on the properties that would enable them and their families to look forward to a better future.

The time has come for this acute housing crisis, which is causing great suffering to people, to be addressed by the Government.

2.1 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker. I did apologise for being late for the beginning of the debate, for reasons that I explained.

Let me first welcome the Grenfell residents who are with us today. We must never forget those who died, those who were injured, and those who were bereaved by that tragedy. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee has done a great deal of work and produced a great many reports about building safety since Grenfell, and indeed we carried out pre-legislative scrutiny of the Building Safety Bill, now the 2022 Act. That, I think, shows the strength of Parliament working together, with the Government presenting legislation and Select Committees scrutinising and trying to improve it. However, Grenfell did not just highlight problems relating to building safety; it highlighted fundamental attitudes towards social housing.

Essentially, social housing was believed, by some in positions of authority, to be poor housing for poor people, and that was an attitude that stuck. I remind the Secretary of State that there was a time when the Government's approach was to sell off high-value council housing, because if it was high-value the presumption was that it was too good for council tenants to live in. I hope that we have moved on since then, but there are lessons to be learned. As the Grenfell residents have told us time and again, when they approached their landlords with problems and concerns, they were ignored—because they were just council tenants, and they would not know what they were talking about, would they? Unfortunately, that attitude is still present to some extent among social housing landlords, whether they be councils or housing associations: it is a case of “We will do things to you, as tenants; we will not do things for you and with you.” That attitude needs to change fundamentally.

We have made some progress. Hopefully some of the moves towards ensuring that tenants' voices are heard, both locally and nationally, will bear fruit. This is not a new development. When I was chair of housing in Sheffield in the 1980s, there were a number of widespread tenants associations and a tenants federation. Sheffield still has the unique system whereby tenants pay a levy on their rents, voluntarily, towards the funding of their tenants associations. They are not reliant on the council's benevolence: they are entitled to that money to run their own associations, and I think that that is a good approach that might be looked at more widely.

We have clearly made progress on making buildings safer throughout, and the Secretary of State has made further changes. However, when the Select Committee looks at the numbers, we will see gaps in the legislation

whereby some properties are not covered by it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out, lower-level properties are still not covered. There is also the question of the speed of our progress. Are we really achieving the speed that is necessary to make people safe in their homes? They have been under such pressure over the last few months. This is not just about the buildings; it is about the people who live in those buildings and the mental stress and strain that they are experiencing, not knowing whether their home is safe and whether they can afford to make it safe. Those matters ought to be of fundamental concern to us all.

Let me return to the point that I made earlier about social housing and the need to find the necessary resources. If we really believe that social housing tenants are as entitled to good homes as anyone else, we must recognise that they are entitled as anyone in the private sector to receive Government help, and help from those who were responsible for the problems in the first place, to make their homes safe; or else the landlords should pay for the work by diverting money from other sources. The tenants should not have to pay for it out of their rents.

If we want to ensure that social housing tenants have safe homes, we must also ensure that they have good-quality homes. We heard some appalling stories from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) about her problems with housing associations in her constituency, and the Select Committee has heard from Dan Hewitt from ITV News and from tenants about the conditions in which people are having to live, which are completely unacceptable. We need to make buildings safe and more energy-efficient; we need housing associations and councils to ensure that they are fit in live in; and we will need to address the decent homes standard when it is introduced; but the money simply is not there to do enable all those things to be done, and it is certainly not there to pay for building safety work on top of that.

The Committee heard from Placeshapers, a group of middle-ranking housing associations that are more locally based in their communities, but none of them can afford to make their buildings into zero-carbon homes by 2050. They do not have the budgets; the money simply is not there. We have to listen and learn from that. We have heard from the National Housing Federation that it will cost at least £10 billion to deal with fire safety building work. That money will have to come from somewhere in the budgets unless the Government find it. All those challenges, which social housing providers will have to meet, will not be met by the current budgets. Once again, social housing tenants are being treated as second-class, second-rate citizens, which is simply not acceptable.

Then there is the issue of new housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden described the devastating position in which so many of her constituents find themselves, but we are all seeing those circumstances. People who are in desperate need of housing cannot get a home to live in from their councils or housing associations. It was interesting to hear the council house figures from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central. We are seeing exactly the same in Sheffield. When I was housing chair in the 1980s we had more than 90,000 council houses, but the number is now down to 45,000. By and large, it is the nice family homes in the suburbs that have been sold under the

right to buy; not many inner-city flats have been sold. When I was housing chair, we would not let a flat to a family with children and ask parents to lug prams up the stairs to a second or third-floor flat or maisonette; they would be given a family home. That is not possible now. People come to me and say, “Mr Betts, we have a family and we need a house with a garden”, and the answer is “There are not any to let.”

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made this point. In the London borough of Barnet and other London boroughs, there are no three-bedroom houses. So many people come to me, and to other Members of Parliament, seeking such houses, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, only flats are available. Sometimes councils, including the previous Conservative council in Barnet, were accused of social cleansing, but the reality is that people were encouraged to go to other parts of the country because there was no stock available in Barnet.

Mr Betts: It is a problem that is replicated nowadays. At one stage it was just a London problem, but it is now a problem in many other places as well.

Although Sheffield Council has an ambitious programme to build 3,000 council homes, which was pioneered, eventually, by my good friend and colleague Councillor Paul Wood, the cabinet member for housing, that will not address the problem quickly. More money needs to be provided, and more needs to be done.

We did another report in the Select Committee in which we said we needed to build at least 90,000 social houses a year in this country, but that to do that, the Government would need to put in funding of £10 billion a year, which is much more than they are currently putting in. That is the reality. Unless we build those 90,000 homes a year in the social sector, we are not going to hit the 300,000 target nationally, because the private sector is not going to build anything like 300,000; historically, it has not done so. So there is a challenge on these issues as well.

I want to say one or two words about the right to buy. I have mentioned the consequences of the right to buy in the past. If the Government want to go ahead, and if they genuinely feel that it provides the best value for the Government’s money to subsidise discounts for housing association tenants to buy their homes, I would like to see the impact statement that goes with that. I would like to see where that Government money is going to come from. Will it be diverted from existing housing budgets? If so, instead of the extra money for social housing that I am arguing for, are we going to get less money in those budgets? Will the Government provide a replacement for the discounts given to housing tenants when they buy their homes, and will they also make the money available for the full cost of replacing each home sold? Talking to many housing associations, I understand that the cost of replacing is greater than the market value of the homes when they are sold. That point is often lost. I am not sure where those assurances will come from, but hopefully we will get them.

Are housing associations going to be allowed to say no to this? They are private organisations—some of them are charities—and they have to meet particular requirements. In the past, there was a voluntary agreement with the National Housing Federation when the pilot

scheme was introduced. Is it going to be a voluntary agreement again? I am not aware that NHF has been consulted about this scheme or its details. I assume that those conversations are going to happen, but it will be interesting to see what the approach actually is.

I would like to make one completely separate, important point. It goes back to Dame Judith Hackitt’s report on the Grenfell disaster. One of the things she said was absolutely fundamental: she talked about the golden thread running through all housing developments and construction and said that there had to be absolute transparency. The Select Committee has had a disagreement with the Government about building control. We believe that building control inspectors should be independently appointed and not appointed by the developer. The Government have conceded that point—or, I think, proposed it—in relation to the highest-rise, most vulnerable buildings, for which the new building safety regulator will be responsible for appointing building control officers, but not for the rest of the sites.

I have a problem in my constituency at a development called Owlthorpe Fields, about which I have challenged the Housing Minister before in relation to non-compliance with planning conditions. Some residents were concerned about the way the foundations were going in, so I asked the National House Building Council, the appointed building control organisation, whether it could give me some information about the number of visits it had made, the number of inspections it had carried out and the history of its work on the site. The answer I got from the NHBC stated:

“I am sorry to inform you that NHBC is not able to provide this information. The information we hold in respect of Owlthorpe Fields is not a matter of public record and cannot be released without prior approval from Avant Homes.”

Avant Homes is the developer. In other words, everything is secret unless the developer decides to make it transparent.

That is not acceptable. If we are in favour of transparency, as I believe the Secretary of State and the Housing Minister are, this issue needs addressing. If something goes wrong in the future, everyone will ask why, and the answer will be that no one was allowed to see what was happening in the process. I am just raising that as an issue. Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This has been a very thoughtful debate. I come back to the point that we need to start treating social housing and social housing tenants as a priority for investment in order to build more of the decent homes that they ought to be able to live in.

2.14 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a privilege to be able to wind up this important debate on behalf of the Opposition, and I commend the Government for their willingness to facilitate it. I also commend the tone that Members have adopted throughout; I agree that it has been a good debate. Before I respond to some of the issues that have been raised, I want to echo what others have said in welcoming those in the Gallery and in putting on record once again our admiration for the survivors and the bereaved of the Grenfell Tower fire and for the wider Grenfell community.

As I have said before from this Dispatch Box, the horror of that dreadful June night nearly five years ago was the product not only of pernicious industry practice

[Matthew Pennycook]

but of state failure: the failure of successive Governments in presiding over a regulatory regime that was deficient and in ignoring repeated warnings about the potential legal implications of that fact. Having suffered the awful consequences and having to live with the trauma forever, the fact that those who survived, those who were bereaved and those residents of the wider community continue not only to seek justice for their families and neighbours but to campaign for wider change commands enormous respect. I know that that sentiment will be shared across the House.

Week in, week out, the Grenfell Tower inquiry continues to expose a catalogue of malpractice and negligence in relation to building safety regulations, but, as others have said, it has also shone a light on attitudes to social housing more generally, and on how tenants with a social landlord are treated. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—who is currently not in her place, having had to leave the debate for personal reasons—made it clear in her incredibly powerful contribution that far too many people still live in cold, damp, leaky and fundamentally unsafe homes, that they wait months, if not years, for repairs to take place, if they do at all, and that their concerns are routinely ignored or dismissed by their landlords. Those landlords frequently write them off, as Simon Lawrence, the individual who led the work on Grenfell Tower for the contractor Rydon, did, as “rebel residents” who want to make unfounded complaints at the drop of a hat. I pay tribute to the many individuals and organisations who have sought to draw attention to the plight of social tenants across the country over many years, and I would like to highlight the contribution of the campaigners Kwajo Tweneboa and ITV’s Daniel Hewitt, who have done so much to that end recently.

As this debate has highlighted, there are genuine points of disagreement between those of us on the Opposition Benches and the Government when it comes to social homes. As several of my hon. Friends have pointed out, we believe that successive Conservative-led Governments have not only singularly failed to build the social homes we need over the past 12 years but have overseen their loss on an unprecedented scale. A staggering 134,483 social homes for rent were either sold or demolished without direct replacement between 2010 and 2021. That is an average net loss of over 12,000 desperately needed, genuinely affordable homes a year. That is a trend that the measures announced this morning on extending the right to buy would almost certainly exacerbate, in the unlikely case that they are ever implemented, because we know that only 5% of all social homes that have been sold under the right to buy have been replaced. We also know that, while there are many social landlords who routinely fall well short when it comes to repairs and maintenance and could do better, social landlords do not operate in a vacuum. Years of swingeing funding cuts to local authority budgets, as well as the four years during which a Conservative Government imposed a 1% social rent cut on them, have inevitably taken their toll, and covid has hit housing revenue accounts hard too.

However, the debate has highlighted that we are in broad agreement on the objective of driving up standards in what social housing stock remains, and on ensuring

that tenants’ concerns are heard and acted upon. That is why we welcome the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, which I understand has been published while this debate has been taking place. It is good to see that Ministers are on their toes in responding to these concerns in such short order. However, we regret that what is essentially a narrow and largely uncontroversial piece of legislation took so long to materialise. We will support the measures in the Bill, but given the scale of the problem that we know exists, we will press the Government to go further in key respects, so that standards in social housing markedly and rapidly improve and tenants are able to seek redress effectively in practice.

For example, it is almost certainly the case that the social housing regulator will be unable to act on the volume of individual tenant complaints it will receive, and that it will be inadequately resourced to perform its new inspections role. So why not allow it to retain the proceeds of any fines levied to help fund its work? Why not look to give it more teeth than presently proposed, for example by giving it the power to order compensation to tenants? Why not do more to enable tenants to enforce repairs themselves, so that the regulator is not the sole effective means of redress? And why not allow the resident panel, the establishment of which the Government have finally conceded, to be put on a firmer footing, with its agenda and its terms worked up with a direct input from tenants, rather than just by Ministers? We will be pressing the Government to answer those and other vital questions over the coming months as the Bill makes its way through the House, because tenants deserve the most robust piece of legislation that this House can possibly deliver.

I turn now to the other subject under consideration today, namely building safety. The House will know that the Opposition welcomed the Secretary of State’s decision in January 2022 to abandon the failed approach of his predecessors and to ensure that industry pays its fair share to resolve the crisis. Hon. Members will also know that while we tried our utmost to amend it to ensure that all leaseholders were fully protected from the costs of remediation, irrespective of circumstance, we supported the passage of the Building Safety Act. Yet despite the change of approach and the fact that the legislation comes into force imminently, as others have said the nightmare that so many affected leaseholders have endured over recent years appears far from over.

It is true that significant numbers of large developers have now pledged to remediate “life critical fire safety works” in buildings over 11 metres that they played a role in developing or refurbishing. Yet I have to tell Ministers that there are a growing number of examples of developers seeking to reassess affected buildings as less dangerous than previously reported, or to evade the commitment they made altogether to avoid paying.

That is not the only outstanding problem. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) both made the point about leaseholders living in buildings where there is no developer or freeholder who can pay, and the fact that leaseholders in those buildings still have really no idea how their non-cladding remediation works will be funded. The Act presumes that litigation will play a role but redress by that means, even if it comes, would entail significant costs and take many years.

Similarly, those leaseholders who own the freehold of their building still have no idea what, if any, support they will receive from Government. They have no protections whatsoever under the Act, as Ministers acknowledged during its passage; and the promised consultation on enfranchised buildings clearly will not now occur before it comes into force, so they have been left in an extremely difficult position.

Then, as the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, said, there is the issue of the overall pace of remediation, which is still agonisingly slow. There remain serious problems in relation to the time it is taking to process building safety fund applications; and the Department's own data, released in April, makes it clear that there still exist, nearly five years on from the Grenfell tragedy, 58 residential buildings with Grenfell-style ACM cladding on them, 16 of which have not even begun to remove or replace it. Leaseholders across the country are still receiving invoices to fix historic cladding and non-cladding defects and they are still being hit with exorbitant secondary costs.

To take just one example, which has featured prominently in the debate: soaring buildings insurance premiums continue to push countless blameless leaseholders toward financial ruin. Hon. Members from across the House have pleaded ad nauseum with Ministers, over many years, to address this issue and still nothing has been done. We are told repeatedly by Ministers that they are talking to both insurers and mortgage lenders with a view to finding a solution, but it feels as far away as ever. In short, when it comes to many of these issues, there is what feels like a shocking lack of urgency, and these are issues that must be addressed at pace because they are blighting the lives of those caught up in this scandal.

Finally, there remain a range of wider fire safety issues that are entirely unresolved. And far from making progress toward doing so, the Government appear content to leave them as such. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) mentioned the Government's shameful decision to reject the Grenfell inquiry phase 1 recommendation that it be a requirement to produce personal emergency evacuation plans for disabled people in high-rise buildings. I think that is shameful.

The fire at Grenfell Tower was an unspeakable horror and one that rightly exposed systemic failings in our country's building safety regime and how we treat social housing tenants. The Government have a duty to comprehensively address those failings and it is right that we continue to debate progress towards that goal. All of us acknowledge the need for deep-seated change, but despite the steps that have been taken we still have a very long way to go, and we need to get there much, much faster.

2.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): We have heard many powerful, heartfelt and emotional contributions from hon. Members in today's debate. There is an understanding that Governments of all persuasions have been at fault over the years, and that we should now work together, and I greatly welcome the comments to that end by Opposition Members and those on the Opposition Front Bench. The contributions reflect the

seriousness and significance of this five-year anniversary—not least for the bereaved and the survivors whose courage and dignity continues to inspire us all. From my meetings with them and the wider Grenfell community, I have been humbled by their tireless patience and dedication in the pursuit of justice and truth. They have bravely given testimony at the Grenfell Tower inquiry and they have diligently listened to the testimony given by others—forced to relive their harrowing experiences each time. They have engaged with Government every day to challenge us and make sure that we reform the system that so badly failed them and the 72 people who sadly died in the tragedy.

We in this House can only hope that, as individuals, we would have acted with the same compassion and dignity as the Grenfell community has over the previous five years. There is not a shadow of a doubt in my mind that much of the progress we have made on building safety, on fire safety and on strengthening tenants' rights in the social housing sector is owed to their heroic efforts. We are forever in their debt.

Let there be no doubt: industry must pay to fix the building safety problems that they themselves create, and signatories to our building safety pledge have undertaken to give us, within a month of signing, their proposals for contacting the owners and leaseholders of buildings with a clear plan on next steps. Where building owners are failing to make acceptable progress, we will not hesitate to take further action, including naming and shaming developers who are dragging their feet, along with tougher enforcement action by both councils and fire and rescue services.

Hon. Members may also be aware that we have also established a joint inspection team to help councils clamp down on building owners who hold up vital remedial works.

Dr Offord: On that point, I have many constituents in a newly constructed property at Mar House in Colindale who have not only paid for a very costly fire alarm system, but are now being subjected to demands for a waking watch because it is alleged by the managing agents that it is a requirement of the fire service. It is not appropriate for a Minister to intervene in what the fire service decides or not, but it appears to be a random request, and it is imposing a disproportionate charge on my constituents to address an issue that they did not create. Would the Government fund that waking watch for my constituents in Mar House?

Eddie Hughes: The Government have committed to £62 million of funding for the installation of fire alarms with regard to waking watch. I think it would be best if we exchange correspondence; would my hon. Friend be good enough to write to me? I fully accept that it is not the Government's job to intervene, but it is certainly our job to consider and assist.

I can also reassure hon. Members and ministerial colleagues that we have not shied away from calling in developers, alongside local authorities, to discuss individual cases and ensure that remediation works begin without delay.

I just wanted to consider some of the points that have been raised today. The hon. member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) suggested that the voices of tenants had not been heard. This is one of the things that emerged most starkly out of the Grenfell inquiry for me—that a number

[*Eddie Hughes*]

of problems were raised time and again and yet seemed to be ignored. We have heard contributions from Members across the Chamber who have reflected similar circumstances. The expression I have been using is that we are turning up the volume on the tenants' voice. We are making sure that they will be heard in a number of ways.

I fully appreciate the comments that have been made with regard to our putting our resident panel on a statutory footing. We can talk about that and see ways collectively, across the House, to improve the Government's legislation in the future, but we have advertised that panel and over 1,000 people have applied. We are currently assessing them to make sure that the 250 people we identify give a broad demographic and geographical representation to make sure that they have a direct line to speak to Ministers. We have a commitment to reduce the number of non-decent properties by 50% by 2030, and we are working on that commitment across both the social and private rented sectors. Our private rented sector Bill will address that.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Wigan welcomes the powers we are giving to the regulator to make sure it has the teeth to act. I commend the work of the housing ombudsman, whose paper on damp and mould is so important in ensuring that social housing providers do not start from the premise that problems with damp are caused by how the property is occupied. That is a dreadful position to take, and providers should consider each case on its merits.

Lisa Nandy: May I press the Minister on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) about the regulator potentially keeping the proceeds of any fines so that it can continue funding the work and to ensure that the service is not too limited for the scale of the need?

Eddie Hughes: The best commitment I can make is that the regulator will be properly funded to discharge its duties. We can discuss what mechanism will be used to arrive at that position, but we are determined to make sure it has the staff and resources to deal with the problems it faces.

There has been considerable discussion of the voluntary right to buy. I insert the word "voluntary" because I understand that is how it would have to operate given that the Government do not own or control the housing associations. I fully appreciate some of the points that have been raised, but the pilot was in the west midlands and I have spoken to a number of my constituents who took the opportunity to buy their property. Home ownership is a significant aspiration for people across the country, and we should not shy away from the idea of considering any and all mechanisms to make it work.

Mr Betts *rose*—

Eddie Hughes: I see that the Chair of the Select Committee is desperate to discuss this further.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for always being courteous in giving way. Is it not true that in the pilot there was nothing like a one-for-one, let alone a like-for-like, replacement of the property sold? That is one of the reasons why the pilot was stopped, is it not?

Eddie Hughes: Far be it from me to heap praise on my boss, the Secretary of State, but given that he has years of experience of sitting at the Cabinet table and is well known for making things happen where others before him could not, I think the Chair of the Select Committee should have faith and wait to see how the scheme develops. I am sure he and I, perhaps in the Tea Room or at the Select Committee, will discuss this further as we develop the proposal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) has been a tremendous support to me as I have increased my engagement with the Grenfell community, and I have nothing but admiration for the great work she has done since her election. I look forward to continuing to work with her. She spoke about tenants' voices being heard. Again, she is an active campaigner on behalf of those tenants, and she is determined to make sure they have the opportunity to have their voices heard in their own right.

I have tremendous respect for the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). I am a housing enthusiast so, before I became a Minister, I crossed paths with many of the Members who have contributed to this debate because of our shared concerns. I respect and admire the hon. Lady's work, and I have already met her all-party parliamentary group on temporary accommodation. I will continue to work with her.

The Secretary of State has signalled his intention to consider how we can build not just more social housing but more housing for social rent, which I particularly welcome as the Minister with responsibility for rough sleeping. I look forward to working with him on that.

It is good to hear that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden supports the right to buy, although I fully accept some of her reservations. Hopefully we will get to a point where she feels we are delivering an appropriate scheme with the expected level of replacement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) is delighted that remediation has already started. We need to see more remediation work, and we need it to continue at pace. On waking watch, as I have mentioned previously, the Government are providing £62 million to install fire alarms in all buildings with a waking watch, regardless of their height. We are trying to remove the need for waking watches wherever possible.

On the EWS1 form, we are setting up a professional indemnity scheme, and I understand the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors is running an EWS1 training course. We need to make sure that as many people as possible are competent to operate that scheme.

Sir Robert Neill: Is my hon. Friend prepared to meet me and representatives of the industry to discuss some of the practical issues in operating and bringing forward the EWS1 form?

Eddie Hughes: I am delighted to make that commitment. My hon. Friend mentioned the complexity of the EWS1 form and, as a civil engineer and a member of the Chartered Institute of Building, I am a keen enthusiast for such technical detail. I look forward to that discussion.

It was good to hear the valuable observation from the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) that Members in all parts of the House are committed to tackling these problems together. She is right that we

often do not have consensus, so it is welcome that we have it here. I will continue to consult on and consider remediation costs, and I will make sure we have discussions with social housing providers to come to an appropriate conclusion on how those costs can be covered.

The hon. Lady referred to the work of Kwajo Tweneboa and ITV. To a degree it is sad that we need people outside the House to highlight these points to us, but I am grateful to them for doing so. A number of housing providers are ahead of our legislation and are already upping their game. Many housing providers provide excellent service and high-level accommodation in safe and secure properties for their tenants, but just one case such as we have seen highlighted by Kwajo Tweneboa or ITV is one too many. We need to address that so nobody feels it is appropriate to provide poor-quality accommodation.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) mentioned PEEPs. The Government have now committed to undertake a new consultation. This will include a proposal called “emergency evacuation information sharing,” which would require persons responsible for high-risk buildings to assess the needs of their most vulnerable residents and to consider what might reasonably be done to mitigate any fire safety risks.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned problems experienced by residents in the Gateway building, which I understand has made a successful application to the building safety fund.

Hilary Benn: As I tried to explain, there were applications for three different cladding systems. The building has been funded for one and rejected for two. That is the issue.

Eddie Hughes: Rather than attempting to discuss that across the Chamber, it would be good to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss the specifics of his case in more detail.

The Secretary of State is keen to see more social housing supply generally. I fully appreciate that the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) says the direction of travel has not been positive, and we need collectively to turn that around.

I will finish on a positive note. The hon. Gentleman welcomes the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, but he says he will push us further and faster. It will be good to

work with Members from all parties to discuss how we can enhance that Bill and where there are opportunities for us to go further. We need to take this opportunity to make sure we get it right and to make long-lasting changes.

As a Parliament and as a nation, we must never forget what happened on 14 June 2017. To that end, I echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in thanking the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission for its tireless work on determining a fitting and lasting memorial at the Grenfell Tower site. But we must also continue to honour and respect the memory of those who were lost by ensuring that this country has one of the most rigorous and robust building safety regimes in the world.

Working with colleagues from across this House and with campaigners throughout the country, we have already come a long way together. Our Building Safety Act 2022 created a tough new regulator and an even tougher regulatory regime to match, with an “accountable person” held responsible for a building’s safety and the residents who live in it. The Fire Safety Act 2021 has strengthened assessments and improved safety standards across the board. And our charter for social housing residents, developed in close consultation with the Grenfell community, has empowered social housing tenants everywhere, ensuring that they are listened to and treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

We know that we still have a long way to go, but, as my right hon. Friend stated in his opening remarks, we are now doubling down on our efforts to finish the job we started, by forcing the industry to take collective responsibility for the safety defects it created, and through a new Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, which places tenants’ concerns at the heart of everything that landlords do. We will be judged not by our words, but by our actions to fix this broken system for good and to make sure that everyone in our society lives somewhere that is safe and secure, and that they are truly proud to call home. Let that be Grenfell’s enduring legacy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered social housing and building safety.

Backbench Business

Ofwat: Strategic Priorities

[Relevant documents: Environmental Audit Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2021-22, Water Quality in Rivers, HC 74, and the Government response, HC 164. Letter from the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, dated 21 October 2021, concerning the consultation on the draft Strategic Priority Statement for Ofwat.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before we start the next Backbench business, may I remind everybody that anybody who wishes to take part in this debate, and indeed in any debate, should be here for the opening speeches, for a substantial part of the debate itself and for the entirety of the wind-ups? If you cannot do that, please come to see me in the Chair to have your name taken off the list, and then just intervene.

2.42 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government's strategic priorities for Ofwat.

I wish to begin my remarks by placing on the record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this opportunity to hold an important debate and in particular for its tolerance. The interventions of the Easter recess, the Prorogation and the recent Whitsun and jubilee mean that it is some two months since my fellow signatories, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), and I first submitted our application for this debate. I am pleased to see them both in their places today, and I hope that they will have an opportunity to contribute.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I thought the Environmental Audit Committee's report was a model of its kind. I noted in particular that it created this context of identifying a "chemical cocktail" of sewage, slurry and plastic. Does my right hon. Friend feel that the Government's response adequately addressed that issue—both on the sewage side and on the wider phosphates issue?

Philip Dunne: My right hon. Friend tempts me to rewrite my speech from scratch. First, I thank him for his comments about our report, which was a significant body of work and the first such report of consequence for a number of years. The Government response to our 55 recommendations was one of the most positive responses to any of the reports that our Committee has prepared in the time I have served on it. We made 55 recommendations and I believe only five were rejected by the Government; the others were either accepted in whole or in part. So I think the Government have moved quite a long way in addressing these concerns, but my right hon. Friend will recognise that solving this problem is going to take decades, not days. I know that the Minister will address that in her remarks.

I was just going to thank my colleagues on the EAC for embracing and sharing my passion for the issue of improving water quality as we conducted our inquiry. We published the report in January and it made specific

recommendations for the strategic policy statement on Ofwat, which provides the context for today's debate. I will discuss that shortly.

Having been tempted by my right hon. Friend to praise the Government, or potentially not to do so, I would like to take this moment, while I am in a generous mood, to thank the Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I am pleased to see her in her place, responding to this debate, and I thank her for her personal commitment to this vital issue of improving water quality over the past two years. In particular, I thank her for driving her officials to work with me to amend the Environment Act 2021 and put into law many of the core elements of my private Member's Bill, which the pandemic prevented from being debated. I am very grateful to her and I would like the House to be aware, from me, that she has moved the Government a very considerable distance on this issue.

There is no doubt that over the past two years there has been a massive awakening of public interest in the state of our rivers. The introduction under this and the previous Conservative Government of event duration monitors at water treatment plants and storm overflows and the annual publication of their findings since March 2020, has brought to public attention the appalling degree of sewage routinely spilled into our waterways by all water companies involved in the treatment side of the business.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend for his extraordinary campaigning on this issue, which has changed the entire debate. Although I recognise that the Government are spending £3 billion on schemes to prevent sewage overflows, does he know that in my constituency, in the River Wey, we have had nine overflows in one village and 12 in Godalming, that in Bramley we have had overflows and that we have had 76 in Chiddingfold? Does he agree that this is totally unacceptable and that much more needs to be done?

Philip Dunne: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for introducing the next comment in my speech, which was to highlight precisely the volume of spillages that these monitors have revealed—not just in his local river, but right across the country, in all catchments. All water treatment plants are obliged now to have event duration monitors. They are obliged to have them but not all have installed them—or at least not on all the storm overflows. I believe there are about 22,000 overflows and about 20,000 have the monitors on them, so this number will continue to increase until they are all being monitored; I will come on to discuss that in a moment.

My right hon. Friend has described the particular challenge in his river system, but he will be aware that the aggregate number showed that there were 372,533 spill events, lasting 2,667,452 hours, during 2021. Every Member of this House will have access to those figures and can look them up. I commend to them The Rivers Trust website, as it has made this information very accessible. It is very easy to find where a facility is being monitored and what spillage events have occurred in the previous year.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Not many in the House will have been able to attend the reception for World Oceans Day, where I congratulated

Surfers Against Sewage on their 32 years of work trying to make sure that our seas are safe as well. Our seas and rivers are intimately connected.

Philip Dunne: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am rather concerned that my speech has been leaked to other Members of the House, because the Father of the House has just pre-empted my next sentence. He is absolutely right: it is appropriate that we are having this debate on the day after World Oceans Day. Of course, the devastating effect of the spillages impacts the receiving waterway, and gradually impacts the oceans as the rivers flow into the seas around us. This has a differing effect depending on the severity of the spillage, but the effect is routine, not exceptional.

Water companies were allowed to spill discharges so that they did not back up through the drainage system into people's houses and on to our streets. The whole purpose of the licences was to allow such an opportunity in exceptional circumstances. What is so apparent from all this information is that it is routine spillages that are causing so much damage to our rivers and our oceans.

Jesse Norman: Sewage discharges, at least in the River Wye, on which my right hon. Friend's report brilliantly focused, are only 25% of the problem. Phosphate leaching from fields is more like 65%. Does he feel that the Government have set an adequately ambitious target in saying that 80% of this phosphate should be reduced by 2037? I wonder whether we should go faster than that.

Philip Dunne: My right hon. Friend is right to refer to other polluters. If we take a look across the country as a whole, we will see that it is roughly evenly balanced between pollution from water treatment plants and storm overflows and pollution from agriculture. In the Wye, pollution is particularly prone to come from agriculture. As he knows, I am one of his parliamentary neighbours and our waterways along the whole of the Wye and the Lugg catchment are very affected by intensive poultry farming and the phosphates that it generates through spreading litter on the fields.

The Government need to join up their support mechanisms for agriculture. Now that we have left the EU, we have the opportunity through the environmental land management scheme to redirect support in a way that meets not only the objectives to ensure viable agriculture in this country, but other objectives of the same Department—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

I would like to see a more joined-up approach, so that we can use the mechanisms that exist, such as the sustainable farming incentive, the environmental land management scheme system and the farming rules for water to ensure that we are not only helping farmers to generate and maintain a viable business—I should declare an interest as a farmer and a recipient of the basic payment scheme at the moment—but improving our waterways. My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to raise that issue.

Sewage discharges at the scale that I have mentioned must stop. Campaigning groups up and down the country, with which I have been working, have recognised that for some time—from national organisations such as the Rivers Trust, which I have mentioned, the Angling Trust and Surfers Against Sewage, which was mentioned

by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), to individual catchment campaign groups such as Windrush Against Sewage Pollution, which gave powerful evidence to our Committee. All have been focused on raising awareness and urging the Government to take action to compel change in the behaviour and performance of water companies, and they are right to do so.

This is why the strategic policy statement for Ofwat is so critical: it is the primary mechanism through which the Government, via the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, are able to influence the economic regulator, Ofwat, to refocus the prioritisation of capital expenditure for the next five-year pricing period—from 2025 to 2029—of the water companies in England, which are responsible for the treatment of sewage and other waste water.

The latest strategic priority statement for Ofwat was published on 28 March, when we had originally sought to hold this debate, having previously been laid before the House in draft for the statutory 40 days. This document is therefore the critical point of influence and the device through which we in this place can persuade the Government to reprioritise Ofwat to compel water companies to act to reduce pollution of our waterways for which they are responsible.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend's point about Ofwat, but there is also another issue here relating to the planning system. We find that some of the water companies are not statutory consultees for large-scale new residential developments, and those residential developments can have a vast impact on the amount of surface water run-off at times of heavy rainfall. Moreover, new developments can impact on existing sewerage networks, which, historically, can often be very inadequate. How important would he consider that to be as a part of tackling this issue of sewage discharge into rivers?

Philip Dunne: Again, my hon. Friend has made a point that I was intending to make in my speech. In fact, it is my final point. I have something specifically to address that in a request to the Minister when we get there. He is absolutely right: development puts pressure on the water treatment works without requiring developers to contribute to improving that infrastructure.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Dunne, could you please face the front of the House, so that your wonderful voice can be picked up by the microphone and your words everlastingly put into *Hansard*?

Philip Dunne: I do apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will address you, as I should do.

I was just saying how heartened I have been to be involved in a campaign over the past two years with so many people from across society and the political spectrum who are engaged in trying to restore our rivers to a healthy and natural state. Some people have called for the issue to be solved overnight; of course, in an ideal world we would all like that to be the case, but it is simply not deliverable.

We need to introduce a degree of realism into the debate, because otherwise we find people out there in the wider community believing some of the very unfortunate

[Philip Dunne]

propaganda that has been used for party political reasons on this debate—not today, but during the course of these discussions—to try to make out that, for example, Conservatives are voting in favour of sewage pollution. That is completely inappropriate and a disgraceful slur, given the work that has been done by Conservatives, with others.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is not my intention to go into a party debate, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a real need to ensure that Ofwat accounts for its actions? Does he agree with the suggestion that some have made that there should be annual reports against the priorities for Ofwat to his Committee?

Philip Dunne: I would like to say to the hon. Lady that my remarks about people misinterpreting what is being done do not apply to her. She has been a doughty champion on this issue; she has led debates in this House and we have had good cross-party discussions. She makes an interesting point: there are already five-yearly reviews, but whether that should be done more frequently is an interesting question, and maybe the Minister might like to respond to it in her winding-up speech.

Moving on, the pressures on the drainage systems have been developing over six decades, as investment in water treatment infrastructure and drainage systems underground has not kept pace with development above ground, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) has pointed out. It is also exacerbated by pollution caused by others—both farming practices, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire described, and run-off from highways and other hard standing—so I accept that it is not exclusively the responsibility of water companies.

As the Secretary of State himself acknowledged before our Select Committee, the solution ultimately may require separation of surface and foul water drainage systems, and I believe the Department is currently trying to get a harder estimate of the cost of such a massive exercise. It will take enormous capital expenditure to correct the problem for good, and the work will take decades to complete, but a start needs to be made now. The SPS provides that opportunity.

I will focus my remarks now on what Ofwat should consider in its negotiations with water companies to encourage them to identify and quantify solutions. It inevitably takes time to progress solutions through the planning process before the required infrastructure construction can begin, whether through nature-based solutions or traditional mechanical and chemical systems. Much of that involves installing monitoring equipment to increase public awareness of the quality of receiving waters in real time. That was a key transparency recommendation of my private Member's Bill and our Committee report, and it is now required to be introduced under the Environment Act. However, it merely establishes the baseline; the real spend will be incurred in the corrective measures required.

In my own constituency, Severn Trent Water has announced plans to invest £4.5 million to achieve bathing water quality status along some 15 miles of the River Teme between Knighton and Ludlow as part of their

“Get River Positive” investment plan. That is obviously very welcome. The Thames Tideway tunnel will make a remarkable difference to water quality here in London. It illustrates well both the high cost and the length of time involved in delivering a transformational project to improve water quality, namely £4.9 billion and 11 years from securing planning to becoming operational respectively.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's mention of the Tideway tunnel. It is an enormously expensive project and collects a lot of the sewage from London, but not from any sewage treatment works above Hammersmith—by which I mean specifically Mogden sewage treatment works. Every time it rains more than a drizzle, Mogden and Thames Water discharge dilute sewage into the River Thames, and the Thames Tideway tunnel can do nothing about that.

Philip Dunne: I bow to the hon. Lady's knowledge of her constituency and the area around it. I am informed that the tideway tunnel will take 37 million tonnes of the 39 million tonnes of sewage currently discharged annually into the Thames out of the river, so it may not affect every single treatment plant, and it is primarily coping with the north of the Thames rather than the south of the Thames, as I understand it. I will touch on how it is being paid for in a moment.

Given Ofwat's unique opportunity to approve capital investment, it needs to focus not only on the economic impact of household bills but on the environmental impact that water companies have. With the rising cost of living, none of us wishes to see bills rising sharply, but equally, if water rates are set so low as to preclude necessary capital investment in water quality, we will simply kick the can down the road for another five years and the problem will be harder to solve and more expensive to fix.

Given that the current cost of capital is still at historically low interest rates, over a multi-decade investment cycle water companies remain well placed to fund significant capital investment. For example, the tideway tunnel, the biggest current project, is due to add only £19 per annum to household bills in London. I believe that a balance can be found as regards Ofwat's new priority for water companies to improve treatment in addition to the necessity to secure adequate drinking supply and have low bills.

Liz Twist: I recently hosted a meeting with the Consumer Council for Water, which is looking at the introduction of a social tariff. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that an important part of this equation for people is that everyone should be able to afford their bills but that we have to get the work done that we need?

Philip Dunne: Indeed. The Consumer Council for Water is a statutory consultee with Ofwat, so it will be able to make that case as part of the determination process once Ofwat is following its instructions under the SPS.

It was clear from our inquiry that there had been a lack of political will from successive previous Administrations to empower regulators to tackle pollution and improve water quality. This had not been included

as a priority in previous strategic policy statements. Evidence suggested that Ofwat's price review process had hitherto focused on the twin primary objectives of securing clean water supply and keeping bills down. There was virtually no emphasis on facilitating the investment necessary to ensure that the sewerage system is fit for the 21st century. Anglian Water, for example, told the Committee that in 2017 the Government's last strategic policy statement, which sets the objectives for Ofwat, "ducked the hard choices".

So in October last year we wrote to the Secretary of State to contribute to the consultation on the draft SPS. We were concerned that the draft that had been published for consultation by the Government was imprecise in its expectations, with no indication of what specific outcomes were expected and by when. We called for the next SPS to make it unambiguously clear to Ofwat that a step change in regulatory action and water company investment is urgently required to upgrade the sewerage network, improve the parlous state of water quality in English rivers, and restore freshwater biodiversity.

In February, we were pleased when the Government published the final SPS, which had been significantly strengthened following our recommendations. We had made five specific recommendations that the Government accepted and have now been incorporated in the SPS guidance. They are, first and foremost, the very welcome prioritisation of investment over lowering bills to ensure that the sewerage system is fit for the future; secondly, challenging water companies to meet a target of zero serious pollution incidents by 2030; thirdly, amending the previous wording on the use of storm overflows from being used in "exceptional" circumstances to "only in cases of unusually heavy rainfall";

fourthly, prioritising overflows that do the most harm to sensitive environments; and finally, requiring that water companies should significantly increase their use of nature-based and catchment-based solutions. That is all new, and our Committee can justly take some credit for it.

What has become clear is that water companies now know that they need to act and they must start to do so immediately. Some are already acting ahead of the measures set out in the Environment Act to produce drainage and sewage management plans. I have been sent plans from four companies—Northumbrian Water, Severn Trent Water, Thames Water and Wessex Water—and I am quite sure that others have also prepared plans setting out what they are committing to do under the current and the next water industry national environment programme as part of their plans for capital investment.

I have a couple of frank questions for the Minister about whether our water company regulators are fit for purpose. With the work that I and my Committee have done, there is no doubt that both the Environment Agency, through poor monitoring, and Ofwat, through poor enforcement, have not met the standard we expect of our regulators to protect the environment of our waterways. Self-monitoring by water companies, permitted by the Environment Agency since 2010, has allowed them to discharge sewage more or less at will. The proof is that it took water companies revealing during the course of our inquiry that they might be in breach of their permits for the Environment Agency and Ofwat to announce major investigations into potentially widespread

non-compliance by water and sewerage companies at sewage treatment works. Those investigations continue, so I cannot discuss them.

Where the Environment Agency has prosecuted companies for persistent breaches, judges have started to impose more meaningful fines, but even though these fines might start to capture the attention of water company boards rather than being seen as an inconvenient cost of doing business, as previously low fines appear to have been, fines paid by water companies for breaching environmental standards go directly to the general Treasury account; they do not contribute to solving the problem. I urge the Minister, therefore, to work with Treasury colleagues to enable water company fines to be ringfenced for water quality improvement. There could be a stand-alone fund managed by DEFRA or an arm's length body with an independent chair, or it could be left to water companies to administer based on the environmental priorities of the river or coastal system they have been found to have polluted. Instead of allowing water companies to hand back a tiny rebate to individual ratepayers, potentially hundreds of millions of pounds could be put back into environmental protection. Although we all hope that no such fines will be necessary, we must deal with the world as we find it, and we think that would be a practical step toward solving the problem.

I have another suggestion for the Government. We know that more houses must be built to meet the UK population's needs. When development consents are granted, developers are obliged to contribute to the additional infrastructure required—roads, schools, medical facilities, or other basic infrastructure—but, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, water companies are not statutory consultees and local authorities have no power to require developers to contribute to any necessary water infrastructure. Indeed, the infamous right to connect explicitly removes such costs from developers. I urge the Minister to work with me on using the opportunity presented by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which had its Second Reading last night, to put this right and to empower local authorities to require developers to contribute to meeting the cost of the infrastructure required for water and waste water connectivity of new developments, which are contributing to the pressure.

I commend the motion to the House.

3.8 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I congratulate and thank the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for all his campaigning on this issue. I am pleased to have supported a number of his initiatives in this place. That said, it is extraordinary that we are still having to debate this subject—that we are having to talk about measures to prevent and reduce the discharge of raw untreated sewage into our rivers, our lakes and our chalkstreams and on to our beaches. This is just so obviously wrong and it is extraordinary that we are still having to talk about it.

Let me start with a stark contrast. England's water company bosses have awarded themselves almost £27 million in bonuses over the past two years, despite those companies pumping out raw sewage into waterways 1,000 times a day. That, too, is obviously wrong. Liberal Democrats have demanded a sewage bonus ban to ban future bonuses until sewage dumps stop. We want to stop water company executives being paid a penny in

[Daisy Cooper]

bonuses until waterways are protected from these outrageous sewage dumps, and those bosses should be made to hand back the millions of pounds that they have already received in bonuses until they clean up the mess.

What is the scale of the problem that we are dealing with? In 2020, water companies discharged raw sewage into waterways 400,000 times, which amounts to more than 3 million hours of discharge. The longest discharges lasted for more than 8,000 hours. Just 14% of the UK's waterways are in a good ecological condition and more than half of England's rivers failed to pass the cleanliness tests. We have a duty to protect our natural environment, but water companies, Ofwat and, I am afraid, the Government have failed to hold water companies accountable for dumping sewage into waterways.

New analysis of Environment Agency data has revealed some shocking statistics. In the south-west, South West Water dumped sewage into local rivers for a staggering 19,095 hours last year. Across the region, it released sewage into rivers and on to beach fronts 43,484 times and for more than 350,000 hours. The data reveals that that includes raw sewage being discharged for more than 3,700 hours into the River Otter, more than 1,800 hours into the River Exe, and more than 1,400 hours into the River Axe.

The situation is not much better in the east of England in Hertfordshire. My constituency of St Albans is home to the River Ver, which is a rare and precious chalk stream. It should run clear, but last year, the volunteers of the Ver Valley Society and the river wardens took photographs at the source of the river that showed sewage, sewage fungus and plastic tampon applicators—all at the source of our beautiful river.

Shocking data revealed by the Rivers Trust shows that the sewer storm overflow at Markyate waste water treatment works, operated by Thames Water, discharged untreated raw sewage into the River Ver as many as 139 times for a total of 2,642 hours during 2021. Another wastewater treatment works at Harpenden, just up the road from St Albans, also run by Thames Water, recorded 13 spills for a total of 120 hours into the River Lea.

Where on earth is Ofwat? I think it has now been called "Ofwhere" by some environmental charities. It is sitting on its hands and simply missing in action. It has fallen to an environmental group called Wild Justice to take it to court to try to encourage it to use the powers that it already has to regulate sewage discharge.

I am disappointed that the Government have not taken on more of Opposition Members' ideas. For example, during the passage of the Environment Act, Liberal Democrats supported an amendment to make it harder for sewage dumps to happen and to ensure that DEFRA produced a storm overflow discharge reduction plan. It is disappointing that the Government whipped against that amendment. During the passage of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, Liberal Democrats tabled an amendment to name and shame the water companies found to dump sewage in rivers, which leads to animals being killed. Again, it is disappointing that the Government actively whipped against that amendment. My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has introduced a Sewage Discharges Bill to end the sewage scandal in rivers and protect animals, and I urge the Government to support it.

As I said at the beginning, it is deeply disappointing that we even have to have this debate. Our lakes, beaches, chalk streams and rivers are utterly vital to our British ecosystems, and all of us must do everything to protect them. Despite discharges of untreated waste only being permitted in so-called exceptional circumstances—for example, after extreme rainfall—these releases from water treatment companies are becoming routine.

Water companies must work to minimise sewage discharges into our rivers and lakes, so I call on the Minister to consider a number of things. I would like the Government to set meaningful targets and deadlines for water companies to end sewage discharge. I would like the Government to introduce a sewage tax on water company profits to fund the clean-up of our waterways. I would like the Government to reduce the number of licences given to water companies permitting them to discharge sewage into our rivers.

Jesse Norman: Does the hon. Lady share my view that one of the things the Government should closely consider is the idea of a national rivers recovery fund so that fines that have been paid can be used to remedy all of the pollution that has created them? At the moment, small fines go back into redress for pollution, but large ones go to the Treasury. My former colleagues will not thank me for it, but there is a case for a wider national recovery fund for rivers.

Daisy Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention, and I think that is an exceptionally good idea. I am certainly open to any idea that effectively makes these water companies cough up to clean up the mess they have made. I would happily have a conversation with him to see how we can advance such a suggestion.

In addition, I would like the Government to add members of local environmental groups to water company boards. Some of our river volunteers, certainly in St Albans, are themselves experts—they know these rivers inside out—and they should have a voice and a role on water company boards.

I would like to see Ofwat using its existing powers to tackle the discharge of raw sewage, but I also want Ofwat's powers to be strengthened, and I will give two or three quick examples. I do think that the Government could give Ofwat the power to force water companies to make repairs and investments to reduce sewage discharge. Ofwat could have the power to ban companies from giving bonuses to their executives until this mess has been cleaned up, and Ofwat should have the power to force companies to publish the number of sewage discharges more regularly than just once a year.

Philip Dunne: The hon. Member may not be as familiar with the Environment Act as I am, but it is made very clear in the Act that the monitoring devices that water companies are going to be obliged to install will make information on water quality available within 15 minutes or in near real time.

Daisy Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. I was not aware of that, and I am grateful to him for informing me. On the River Ver in St Albans, a number of our river wardens have taken part in a citizen science project in which they are regularly involved

in testing the quality of the water, so I am sure many of them would be keen to take part and observe that particular set of data.

Finally, I am pleased that we have had this debate today, but I am shocked that we are still having to have it.

3.18 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for everything he has done. I say that as one of his parliamentary colleagues, but also as a passionate angler for the past 51 years of my 54-year life; and the other three were wasted. I am chairman of the all-party group on angling and I am chairman-elect of the Angling Trust, a position I will take over in September this year.

I agree with my right hon. Friend: I am sick and tired of water companies, and the slurry spreaders and egg farmers, pumping sewage into our rivers and watercourses. I am familiar with the Wye valley, and I share the sense of outrage of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) at what has happened to that river and what continues to happen to that river. Ofwat needs to get with the programme. Yes, consumers want to have water priced at a level they can afford, but consumers now also want to protect the environment that they enjoy.

There was an article in Monday's *Times* which said that 98% of the swimming locations in Austria—about 50 places—are of an excellent standard and meet the highest levels of quality. We would be lucky to find one place in England where it is safe to swim; in fact, there is only one place.

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is so familiar with Herefordshire and the angling there that he needs no encouragement from me, but may I remind him that part of the problem with the Wye is that it crosses the border so there is an impunity in that Wales can avoid having regulatory involvement and leave the muck to come down to Herefordshire? Does my hon. Friend agree that an all-river strategy with some commissioners, as there have been since the 18th century on the Tweed, might be a solution to the problem?

Sir Charles Walker: My right hon. Friend demonstrates huge knowledge because the Tweed does indeed have commissioners and that works. The Tweed has its own problems but they are not on the same scale as those of the Wye and our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is currently talking to the Angling Trust and will be working with the Welsh Government to try to find a way forward.

You might not know this, Mr Deputy Speaker, but anglers are the canaries in the coalmine; they are the first to raise the alarm when there is a pollution incident. In 1948 the Anglers' Cooperative Association was established, by a visionary called John Eastwood, to take legal action against polluters. In 2009 it became Fish Legal, and it has some fantastic lawyers who go after the polluters, and that is what we need, because I am fed up as an angler. I am going to say something that might be out of order, and you might demand that I retract it, Mr Deputy Speaker: if any high net-worth individuals want to make a contribution to cleaning up our rivers and streams, they should visit the Fish Legal

website and see how they can make a donation to fund its legal work, because it does go after the polluters and it does win judgments, and those judgments go back to the angling clubs and watercourses that have been polluted.

Of course we should have a rivers restoration fund; that is what we need. It is outrageous that when a water company is fined £120 million an almost meaningless reduction is made to people's bills—one that they would not notice—with the balance of the money invariably going back to the Treasury, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire pointed out. We should use that money to clean up the rivers and watercourses that have been damaged by the pollution.

I have little more to add to this debate. I just want to say that the patience of colleagues here and of the constituents we represent has been stretched to breaking point. The Government have made progress but something needs to happen. We must go after the polluters, be they farmers or water companies; Ofwat has to get with the programme and we have to persuade them, by law through the courts through fines, to change their practices.

3.23 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many people who are passionate when it comes to talking about water. As someone who worked for South West Water a very long time ago, I say that we need more people who are passionate about water, but we need more people who are passionate not just about sewage but the other aspects of water today. Many of those present have heard me rant about sewage for quite some time from both the Front Bench and Back Benches, and I will come on to that, but first, as we correctly focus on sewage, I want to talk about some of the other issues in the Ofwat strategic policy statement that I do not want this debate to neglect.

Water matters: every drop matters, but every drop is carbon-intensive, and we must not forget that every drop we use—every drop we waste—has been pumped and purified and treated at enormous cost, not just financial but also environmental. Water companies are tightly regulated, and what goes in their business plans is what they will be doing in the next price review period. It is therefore important that the SPS guidance is not only strict, clear and ambitious but accountable so that we can see where progress has been made and put pressure on Ofwat and the water companies to up their game if they are missing those targets.

The SPS that the Minister has released has many of the right words. I have a lot of time for the Minister not only because she is a fellow south-west MP—that automatically gets her some bonus points in my mind—but because she has fought hard on it. I must say that good progress has been made. I just want to ensure that the words in the SPS have teeth and that Ofwat has the powers to ensure that they are not just good words in a document and that we will see the transformative change that we need.

I want to talk about four areas. First, there is the absence of a strategy in the SPS to decarbonise our water industry. I would like us to have a clearer sense of what that looks like. Secondly, we need to strengthen the nature restoration part of the proposals in the SPS. I have seen in previous price review negotiations how many innovative nature-based solutions—the upstream

[Luke Pollard]

thinking—have been squeezed out in those negotiations, especially for those companies who did not get their price review approved the first time round. We need to ensure that nature-based schemes are protected, encouraged and grown rather than squeezed out.

Thirdly, I agree with the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), that we need a new approach to water sector regulation. I have some proposals to pitch to the Minister. Finally, I will echo concerns from across the House on sewage. It is simply unacceptable in 2022 that water companies routinely discharge tonnes and tonnes of sewage into our water courses, our rivers and our seas. It is not just about human effluent; we must equally be concerned about plastic pollution and the chemicals contained in that.

As a south-west MP, and I think the only MP in the Chamber whose water company is South West Water, I have a specific question for the Minister. We are in a cost of living crisis, but South West Water has had the highest water bills in the country since privatisation because that part of the water industry was privatised with 3% of the population and 30% of England's coastline. That meant that 3% of the population were paying for the coastal clean-up of nearly a third of our country. The dowry given to South West Water did not pay for it, so south-west bill payers have been paying through the nose for a long time to have a cleaner environment—which we do value. The high water bills in the west country have been recognised by the Government, and that is why they provide a £50 contribution to bills in two £25 payments. However, I understand from proposals published at the last general election that the £50 payment will end during this Parliament. Will the Minister confirm whether that is still the plan? As we face a huge cost of living crisis, can we focus not only on energy bills—gas and electricity—important as they may be, but recognise how high water bills, especially in a region that has the highest water bills in the country and some of the lowest wages, are a significant accelerator of that?

Liz Twist: Has my hon. Friend considered the proposals for a social tariff to address some of those problems?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising social tariffs. We need the proper legislative framework and nationwide approach for which I think she has been arguing for some time. We must look at how social tariff versions vary between water companies, which affects people who move between different water companies. We must also ensure that water poverty is properly understood as a key part of the cost of living crisis. Far too frequently, I find that this type of poverty, which belongs to DEFRA, is separated in Government thinking and leadership from those types that belong to the Department for Work and Pensions or the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We need to ensure that the Government look at this area holistically across all Departments and do not allow a silo-based approach. There is merit in what she suggests, and I would like to see further action on it.

One of those points which, joined up, could make a big difference is on housing retrofit. The Government's record on housing retrofit is appalling—I think on both sides of the House we need Ministers to consistently go

further—but when BEIS proposed measures to insulate homes, they related only to energy and gas reduction, not reducing water usage. Every single drop of water is expensive environmentally and financially, so that is very important. I would like the next iteration of housing retrofit policy proposed by Government to include water with the gas and electricity measures.

On decarbonisation, the SPS misses a trick. It could have gone further by insisting that water is genuinely decarbonised, rather than relying on an incredibly large amount of offset to hit the 2030 net zero target. I would like the 2030 target to be more commonly adopted, but simply buying offset and loading the cost on to bill payers does not actually deliver the carbon reduction we need. I want every water company to be an energy company, using its land to install solar, onshore wind and other types of energy to reduce the energy intensity and carbon intensity of its own operations. That should have been in the SPS and it should be in business plans, but it seems to have fallen between those. Indeed, the language on pushing or challenging water companies to, as the SPS suggests, invest more in decarbonising the sector could be a bit tighter. I would like to see in the proposals what it actually means in practice.

The proposal to halve leakage by 2050 is welcome, but the problem is that 2050 is a very long time away. I would like to see how much leakage reduction will be in the next price review period and how it can be accountable to others. The target of 110 litres a day is not enough. I would like to see us aim at 100 litres a day. Water companies around the country are achieving that, but we do not have enough water to go slow and we need to achieve that.

Nature restoration needs to go further. I want the policies in the SPS to integrate with the policies proposed for environmental land management and farm management. At the moment, they do not seem to have joined up in the way we need them to. If we are to have the bolder change we need, we need a greater level of joined-up thinking on that issue.

The Environment Agency has been raised by colleagues on the Government Benches. I am not a fan of the Environment Agency. I would like to see it go further. In the middle of an environmental crisis as we are, all too frequently it is too passive, too pastel shade. I would like to see it being a bit more “Grrr”—good luck, *Hansard*, in writing that one down.

Daisy Cooper: I have had huge frustrations with the Environment Agency in my constituency of St Albans, but I was very alarmed to receive an email from it not too long ago explaining that cuts to its budget meant that it would not be responding to a number of urgent reports from residents about various environmental issues. Is the hon. Gentleman concerned about that as well?

Luke Pollard: I am indeed, and I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We need to ensure that powers go with responsibilities and that funding, which is not there, follows. I am very mindful of the time limit you suggested, Mr Deputy Speaker.

On sewage, we need stronger, bolder measures. What customers can expect in the next price review period needs to be clearer. I would like that commitment on the bills that are sent to consumers. What is the priority? What is the transparency, so people can look into that?

Without a clear timetable and a priority list for closures, I am afraid that we are not going to see the urgency we really need.

Finally, as a keen wild swimmer—I wear my wetsuit with pride when I go swimming in Plymouth Sound—we need more action on bathing water quality. Devil's Point and Firestone Bay is a brilliant area of swim water in Plymouth, but it is not currently recognised as an official bathing water. At this very moment, there are beach volunteers on Devil's Point and Firestone Bay recording how many swimmers, kayakers, paddle boarders and dog walkers we have on the beach and in the sea. That is a part of our campaign to have the water designated as official bathing water, meaning that there is water testing throughout the year, but especially in the key summer period, with the results published. That will give us a sense of what is in the water. I suspect we will have excellent bathing water, but when we have high levels of rain and raw sewage comes down the River Plym and the River Tamar, we will be able to understand what is in it. Is it human or is it agricultural? Then we can target raw sewage outlets for closure. That is the type of proactive measure I would like to see right around the country. That is why I want the SPS to go a little bit further. It is a good start, but I think there is more in there.

3.34 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Flooding is one of the most significant issues in my central London constituency. I want Ofwat to take a much more proactive and forceful role in holding the water companies to account to prevent flooding. We will never be able to completely get rid of the risk of flooding, but we need to do a lot more to minimise the risk.

Let me put the situation into context: on 12 July last year, my Kensington constituency suffered catastrophic flooding. The London Fire Brigade received 3,000 calls to its central control centre—the most that it had ever received in one day. The consequences were devastating. Multiple families are still out of their homes. My constituency has lots of basement properties, many of which were flooded all the way up to the ceiling. Had that happened in the middle of the night, there could have been even more appalling consequences and potentially even fatalities. Many of those properties are housing association properties where people lost everything that they owned, and many did not have insurance.

That was not a one-off event. Two weeks later, London suffered flooding again. My constituency flooded in 2018, 2016, 2007 and earlier in the 2000s. In 2007, after devastating flooding—I have a personal interest in that, because my house flooded badly—Thames Water said that it would put in a 5 km relief sewer at a cost of £300 million. That was approved by Ofwat in the 2015-20 cycle, but Thames Water never went ahead with the relief sewer. It was fined as a result, but Thames Water being fined does nothing to help my constituents, who were then flooded again in July last year. I have constituents who are terrified to go on a summer holiday this year in case their house or flat floods in July, August or September, when flash flooding is at its most prevalent. My constituents simply cannot live with the threat of flooding hanging over their heads, with the threat that they could be wiped out. People are selling their properties in my area because of the risk of flooding.

I want Ofwat to stand up for, defend and protect my constituents and insist that work is done, because the reality is that the drainage and sewerage system in London is simply no longer fit for purpose. It was built for Victorian times. We are all aware of the fact that climate change is likely to make flooding even worse. Population growth will make the consequences of flooding worse, as will urban densification. We need solutions, and we simply cannot sit back and wait for the next flooding event. I am sorry, but Ofwat needs to show more leadership on this, as does the Environment Agency.

It strikes me that so many different entities are involved in remediating flooding risk. We need much more co-ordination. Whether we are talking about the Environment Agency, Ofwat, the water companies or local authorities, they need to be working on a combined basis.

Let me give the House a few examples of anomalies. I understand, from the independent review of the flooding that happened in London last year, that the Thames Barrier was not closed. Closing it could have prevented a lot of the flooding, but I understand that that requires 36 hours' notice even though it takes only an hour and half. Clearly we need to address that. I also understand that the Tideway tunnel, which is incredibly welcome, will be used not as a flood alleviation measure, but simply to remedy storm overflows and water quality. We need way more joined-up thinking about alleviating flood risk.

I also want Ofwat to hold water companies to account so that they regularly assess their assets and their ability to cope with flooding. There is too much sitting back and dealing with the consequences, rather than proactively asking whether systems will cope and what to do if not.

Finally, I want Ofwat to really challenge the water companies on their customer service. As Thames Water will admit, its customer service completely failed on the night of the flooding. It could not cope with the number of inquiries, so others such as Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council and Westminster City Council had to step in and help. Ofwat is the body that holds the water companies to account, and it needs to do a better job of it.

3.41 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), for his report and for his speech. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who gave a very clear description of the flooding issues in central London, many of which my constituents have also experienced in the past couple of years, particularly in Chiswick. In previous years, flooding affected much of my constituency. Thames Water is still in the process of replacing the Victorian freshwater pipes, and when they burst because they are so old, we still get flooding; it is not as bad as it used to be, but we are not out of the woods. I thank her for raising those issues.

For many years as a councillor and for the last seven as a local MP, I have been dealing with Thames Water, particularly in relation to its management of the Mogden sewage works in Isleworth, Britain's third largest sewage treatment works. From the many emails and messages that I have received from constituents, I know that people are rightly frustrated with Thames Water and with Ofwat, which is supposed to regulate our water companies.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

The worst local impact of Mogden was the flooding of the Duke of Northumberland's river with raw undiluted sewage in January 2021. The flood occurred after a break in a brick wall separating the river, which is a freshwater stream, from the Mogden works' main incoming sewage pipe. The inlet sieve into the works was blocked with silt, and the incoming sewage pipe, which is over two metres wide, filled to the top. When the incoming foul water had nowhere else to go, a weakness in the roof of the intake burst and poured into the Duke of Northumberland's river running alongside it. That small river was subsumed by sewage that flooded into homes, gardens and two parks in Isleworth. It would have been far worse if an affected resident had not coincidentally known the holder of a key to the sluice gate into the Thames. Opening it relieved the pressure on the Duke of Northumberland's river before the fire service could get there, and long before Thames Water worked out what had happened.

The flood had a devastating impact, especially on local residents who had sewage water flowing into their back gardens and in some cases their homes. A number of people also wrote to me to rightly express their worry about the impact on the wildlife in and around the precious Duke of Northumberland's river. I was very concerned to discover that two months after the flood, there were still debris and sewage waste in and around the river and the river banks.

A small group of great volunteers work to keep the river tidy, but it is not fair or right to expect them to have to clean up afterwards. Local councillors, such as Councillor Salman Shaheen, have been persistent in pushing Thames Water to clean up the mess.

More than a year after this disaster, Thames Water has not yet started the inquiry that it promised us, although it has admitted that it still does not know the reason for the silt build-up that blocked the main inlet to the works, and I did manage to get it to admit that such a situation had not featured in its risk register; it certainly will now.

However, this is not the only recent disaster originating from Mogden. We now know, thanks to the Select Committee, that in October 2020 Thames Water pumped 2 billion litres—2 billion, not 2 million—of untreated sewage into the Thames in just two days. That is shocking, but it is part of a growing trend. In 2020, 3.5 billion litres of untreated sewage entered the Thames from Mogden—seven times as much as was dumped in 2016, just four years earlier.

As I have already pointed out, the Tideway tunnel starts downstream of Mogden, so it will not take these discharges. Not only are the discharges a gross environmental crime; they affect many people's leisure activities. In our part of west London, the Thames plays a huge part in many water sports, such as rowing, kayaking and paddleboarding. Residents walk their dogs along the Thames. Should they really be expected to do so while it is full of sewage?

I wish I could say that these were the only negative experiences that my constituents have had with Thames Water, but there are ongoing and long-running issues involving Mogden sewage treatment works. For years, residents of, in particular, Isleworth and parts of Hounslow have all too often experienced the foul pong of poo

wafting around locally, and have also had to put up with the mosquitoes that breed in the stagnant water there and then come out and bite.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that rather than new technology, new data and new mindsets, what is needed to reduce the difficulties involving waterworks is a rehaul of the system to include communities and secure their buy-in? Does she agree that that would require a financial contribution from the water companies as well?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point. I shall say more about resident engagement shortly.

To be fair to Thames Water, it has made efforts to deal with the smell and the mosquitoes. It is currently working through a programme of upgrading parts of the works, which should reduce some of the smells, and it has contracted specialists to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Neither nuisance is as bad as it has been during the time I have represented those residents. Nevertheless, councillors, residents' representatives and I feel that we have to keep up the pressure through the Mogden residents liaison group that Thames Water convenes.

Other issues, apart from Mogden, have affected my constituents. There has been localised flooding: dirty water has shot out of toilets or out of inspection covers in their gardens. In some cases Thames Water have acted quickly and responsibly, but that has not always been the case. Residents have been passed from pillar to post when trying to obtain help and support, and an acknowledgement from Thames Water.

This takes us back to the wider issue of the culture of these privatised water companies. Billions of pounds are being paid out in dividends, but I wonder whether we are seeing the investment in crucial infrastructure that is so badly needed. Between the 1990s and the 2020s, Thames Water has seen a £6 million decrease in annual investment in waste water. That underinvestment is simply not fair to our constituents, who face the impact of it at first hand.

It is not just Thames Water, however. Analysis has found that the investment in waste water management has been slashed by £520 million. Like the DEFRA Committee, I was concerned to see a proposal that Ofwat should incentivise water companies to improve their environmental performance. Surely it should be doing that anyway, because it is the right thing to do.

There is a wider issue, beyond the environmental protection of our rivers. What role will Ofwat play in ensuring that new developments have the water infrastructure they need? Additionally, the Rivers Trust has raised the importance of ensuring that Ofwat plays a role in relation to climate change and net zero, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) also helpfully explained.

My increasing fear is that as an MP I am seeing more and more examples of various regulatory bodies—whether it is Ofwat, Ofgem or the Financial Conduct Authority—that just do not seem to be acting with the urgency needed not only to protect consumers but to tackle the big issues facing our country over the next few decades. I sometimes wonder whether it is a deliberate policy of this Government to downplay the importance of regulators.

Does this stem from their libertarian wing? All of us, particularly our children, feel that the planet and ourselves and our future generations lose out when the role of regulation is downplayed.

Sir Charles Walker: I hear what the hon. Lady is saying. I have a lot of respect for the Environment Agency, but I also listened closely to what her colleague the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said. I feel that the Environment Agency does sometimes shy away from taking on the polluters and holding them to account. I hope that it will hear this debate and that when organisations or businesses are found to be polluting our rivers, they will be held to account and pay a penalty.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Member is right, and I should have included the Environment Agency in the list of regulators in my speech. As I was saying, the role of regulation is too often downplayed by this Government. Ofwat cannot and should not be a silent partner when it comes to the adequate management of sewage treatment works, the cleaning up of our rivers and waterways and the protection of residents from the after-effects of floods.

3.51 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I start by welcoming the Government's strategic policy statement for Ofwat. This is clearly an important step in the right direction. Water companies in this country desperately need to change. The current safeguards on water companies are simply not good enough. The aspect that I would like to focus on today is the real need for water companies to improve their day-to-day environmental performance and enhance water quality.

In Southend, we have seven miles of award-winning beaches. Westcliff and Chalkwell already boast blue flag, five star status and attract more than 7 million visitors every year, so having clean water off our beaches is vital for our new city to thrive and prosper. Of course, it is not just in the summer months that the water is used. It is now used all year round and we have famous groups of female swimmers such as the Bluetits Chill Swimmers.

Sadly, Anglian Water is simply not doing enough. It continues to make use of Victorian sewer systems and uses storm overflows to dump raw sewage into the estuary far too often. Last year in Southend, raw sewage was pumped into the sea 48 times for more than 251 hours. That is the equivalent of more than 10 days. That does not include the sewage dumped further upstream, which also impacts on Southend.

One storm overflow in Canvey spilled 121 times for a total of 23 days, and one in Dagenham spilled for the equivalent of an outrageous 72 days. It is shocking that 39 million tonnes of sewage are dumped into the Thames every year. That is the equivalent of 3 million London buses. This dumping of raw sewage is having a disastrous effect on our environment, with 98% of water sampled by Thames River Watch last year found to contain traces of coliform bacteria caused by the presence of faeces in the water.

For 1,000 years, Southend West has been home to a thriving fishing industry. Pumping sewage into the water could lead to *E. coli* in our shellfish, which would be absolutely devastating for the Southend cockle industry.

I welcome the fact that the Government have placed a clear duty on water companies to progressively reduce the use and impact of storm overflows; have now asked water companies to clearly demonstrate how they are going about that; and are calling for water companies to be far more transparent in reporting when discharges do occur.

In particular, I greatly welcome the fact that, under the Environment Act, water companies will now be required to monitor the water quality both upstream and downstream of storm overflows in real time, all the time—instead of just between May and September as they do at the moment. There should, obviously, be real punishments for companies that consistently fail to monitor water quality levels or meet targets.

We must completely end the use of storm overflows in this country. The Government have set a target of zero serious pollution incidents by 2030. Any use of storm overflows leading to sewage discharge should count as a serious pollution incident. There can be no excuse for pumping raw sewage into our waterways, and any company guilty of using them in that way must face real and heavy punishments.

However, we must also tackle the root causes of sewage discharges. A good place to start would be to ban non-flushable wet wipes. These block pipes, and seriously contribute to the use of storm overflows. The Conservative Environment Network is calling for all manufacturers to be obliged to follow Water UK's "Fine to Flush" standard for wipes, which means that they do not contain plastic and they break down quickly in our sewers.

Finally, punishments on water companies should not increase the cost to the consumer; they must fall instead on the company bosses. A good place to start would be to ban bonuses for company directors whose water companies do not meet their targets. It is not acceptable that last year, the chief executive officer of Anglian Water received an extraordinary £2,074,647 in pay and bonuses—up 62% on the previous year, despite the company's profits falling by 2% and the outrageous levels of sewage being pumped into our waterways.

Sir Charles Walker: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Anna Firth: I have almost finished.

Sir Charles Walker: That is fine; I will intervene now. What my hon. Friend is suggesting, I think rightly, is that those environmental targets placed on water companies should trump financial targets. If that is what she is suggesting, I think she would have the support of the House this evening.

Anna Firth: Absolutely correct. I thank my hon. Friend, but I will still conclude.

In conclusion, I welcome the steps that the Government are taking to improve our waterways. It must now be the absolute priority of the water companies to put those into practice, stop pumping sewage into our rivers and permanently improve the quality of our water.

3.58 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for securing this debate, and for all the work that he does to champion the cause of English rivers. I do not

[*Danny Kruger*]

think that anyone in our country, except possibly the Minister, has done more to preserve, enhance and defend the health of our rivers—not even the Duke of Wellington deserves our thanks in the way that my right hon. Friend does. I am pleased to have helped sponsor the debate.

I echo every point that has been made about the critical state of our rivers and the absolute imperative that we have to act, and to go further. My constituency of Devizes in Wiltshire has a number of rivers that are suffering. In particular, the Hampshire Avon site of scientific interest is suffering increasing phosphate loads every year, which is a complete disaster for the river's health and biodiversity and for the soil, but it is also a disaster for people whose health is affected and for the wider economy because it stops development.

A brake on inappropriate development in our rural areas is a good thing in many ways, and Wiltshire Council has rightly paused development permissions periodically because it has to mitigate the phosphate pouring into our rivers, but it is harmful to getting the housing we need in our area, so we have to do something. The simple fact is that the offsetting by developers is inadequate, as they cannot possibly offset enough to cope with the phosphate loads going into the rivers.

Many hon. Members have said that investment, particularly in sewage treatment works, is essential. We have to build infrastructure that can cope. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow made the point very delicately that, historically, the overriding focus of the mandate under which Ofwat operates is to bear down on the rates that people pay for their water. That focus on price is ultimately unsustainable. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is correct that this is not the moment to be anticipating or calling for price rises in people's water bills. However, in the long term, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow is right. I welcome the strategic policy statement that allows for investment in infrastructure that ultimately feeds through into prices. That is the only way to finance this work.

I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) in saying that, when companies are fined for sewage discharges, the money should not just go to the Treasury or to meaningless little reductions in bills. It needs to go into restoring the landscape, because the best sort of sewage treatment, as I have seen in Wiltshire, uses nature-based solutions not big concrete infrastructure. We need green and grey kit.

I have seen a project sponsored by Wessex Water, to its credit, on land owned by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. It is a reed bed that processes foul water, and it is very inoffensive. I would hardly call it infrastructure, because it is a field with a lot of reeds growing in it—it is a swamp. It does not smell, and it looks perfectly nice. A person walking past would hardly notice it, but the water flowing out of the reed bed and into the river on the other side is cleaner than the water flowing down the river itself. It enhances our environment when we have good nature-based infrastructure.

I end with a tribute to some people in Wiltshire who have inspired me to take up the mission of cleaning up our rivers. Anglers such as Tom Putnam, a constituent who got in touch with me, and David Bromhead are

concerned about the state of the Hampshire Avon. I thank Charlotte Hitchmough, who leads Action for the River Kennet, which is an outstanding charity—I have been out planting trees and supporting its work. And I thank Gary Mantle of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust.

This might seem a little totemic, but we have amazing volunteers on all our rivers, which is great, and we have lots of water companies, businesses, developers, councils and others. What we really need is river-based co-ordination. Rather than great national, regional or catchment-based policies, why do we not appoint some kind of river god or warden for each river? It should be a volunteer who does not work for the Government and does not necessarily have any power but who has the authority to co-ordinate the voluntary efforts along each river. People think in terms of rivers rather than counties or even water company areas. We could authorise individuals—I have some people I would nominate for the Kennet or for the two Avons—who would take that responsibility to champion the cause of the river and intermediate between power and all the other volunteers who work there locally.

I wish to end on a point I have made in speeches about rivers before. I feel a special responsibility to rivers because I represent Morgan's Hill, a beautiful spot just north of Devizes. A drop of rain that falls on Morgan's Hill could end up flowing out west along the Bristol Avon and into the Atlantic, south along the Hampshire Avon and into the English channel or east along the Kennet, into the Thames and out into the North sea. Morgan's Hill is a hydrological dividing point that waters the whole of southern England, and I feel a particular responsibility to the rivers that flow out of this district of Wiltshire.

Sir Charles Walker: May I say how lucky that drop of water is if it flows through the Hampshire Avon, one of the finest rivers in this country? It is a blessed drop of water.

Danny Kruger: It would be very lucky, except that it would get loaded with phosphate on the way, and that is the challenge we have to mitigate. Equally, the Kennet and Bristol Avon are glorious rivers, and we have a responsibility to try to clean them.

I really do pay tribute to the Minister for the work she does, as she is an indefatigable champion of water health and our rivers. I am also very pleased with the spirit of this debate. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, who could have laid into the Government, as he used to do on the Front Bench, but instead paid tribute to the Minister for her commitment on this cause. So I think we are all in the right place.

4.6 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). I want to speak in support of the strategic priorities that Ofwat has been given, as I think they are right, from protecting and enhancing our environment to using markets to better deliver for customers.

It frustrates me as a point of principle that I cannot change my water supplier. I can change my gas, electricity, broadband and mobile phone suppliers, but I cannot change my water supplier. That is a problem, because whenever we have a monopoly, the chances are that the

quality of what it does not will not be as good as when there is genuine competition. That makes regulation especially important. Regulation is important in all areas, but in a scenario in which there is only one choice for regions of the country, it is especially important, as we have heard this afternoon, that that job is not being done effectively enough. So I support what the Government have said to Ofwat: it should push water companies to be more ambitious in what they do to protect the environment; it should push them to do a better job on customer service and how they handle complaints; and it should be better promoting competition. I agree with all those things.

Thanks to the Government's Environment Act 2021, we will have annual reports on storm overflow data; we will have these companies pushed to reduce the harm of this; and by 2030 they will have to show how they are going to achieve zero serious pollution incidents. All of that is very important at the macro level of what is going on in the country as a whole.

However, like a lot of us, I will look at what is happening locally. There are three areas in which I will look at the role of Ofwat, as well as at that of the Environment Agency and others. Some of them have been touched on, because this is going on in other people's constituencies. The first is this issue of releases of sewage into the water, and Members would expect me to start there. In 2021, Thames Water released sewage into the waterways around Oxford for more than 68,000 hours. I do not represent Oxford—I am an Oxfordshire MP—but those waterways are flowing through my constituency as they are through the constituencies of every other Oxfordshire MP and plenty of other constituencies beyond that. What Thames Water did is completely unacceptable and totally against what it should be doing according to its licence. This should be a rare occurrence with very heavy rainfall, but it is anything but that.

The second, related issue is to do with housing. We have had huge numbers of houses built in my constituency. The largest towns have grown by huge percentages population-wise—the biggest one by 42% in 10 years, and the second by 59%—but the infrastructure has not improved. We want Grove station reopened, improvements on the A420 and A34, more GP appointments and so on. But as other Members have mentioned, we also have the issue of the water and waste connections that go to these new developments, some of which are huge. Thousands of people are moving in there. There are two estates in Didcot, one built and one being built, and 18,000 more people. These are big-scale developments, and, too often, what happens is that these systems are not built strongly enough in the first place, and they are easily overwhelmed. Those costs are then very often passed on by management companies to the people who have bought those homes, which is a subject for a separate debate. Again, this should not be happening, and we must get a lot better at tackling it.

My third issue is a much more local thing. I do not think that any other Member who has spoken in this debate is facing it in the same way. For 30 years, Thames Water has been proposing to build a massive reservoir in my constituency. Despite the fact that that proposal has existed for 30 years, Thames Water is still unable to show why it is needed, why it is better than the alternatives, what the environmental impact will be, and what the

cost is likely to be. We know, thanks to GARD—the Group Against Reservoir Development, the dedicated local campaign group—that some of the assumptions that Thames Water used when it tried to make the case about water demand and so on are wrong. We know from Thames Water's own website that 24% of the water that it supplies leaks, which leads to many of my constituents saying, "Well, actually, perhaps we wouldn't need this reservoir if you fixed your leakage problem."

When I think about Ofwat and its big strategic priorities, I am specifically looking at this proposal. As a stand-alone regulator, it should be holding Thames Water to account and getting it to answer the big questions that we are posing about the proposal. It should also do so through RAPID—the Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development, which is the alliance with the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, and about which we have not heard much this afternoon—to make sure that Thames Water cannot behave, as many people feel that it is behaving, as though this is an inevitability. It seems that, whether or not Thames Water can answer our questions, it will just build the thing, but there is, understandably, very strong resistance to the proposal. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. These are the right priorities for the Government to have set, but, as we have heard this afternoon, Ofwat will have to do a lot better to persuade all of us and our constituents that it is doing them to the highest standard possible.

4.13 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I sincerely thank the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for all the work that he has done on this issue. He has done so as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I, too, served, spending much of my early years here with him on the Committee—in fact, today marks the fifth anniversary since I was elected—through his private Member's Bill and through his significant campaigning on issues of sewage. He opened the debate in his typically stylish way.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate—a Committee on which I also served as a Back Bencher. I know the vital role that it plays in allowing important subjects to be aired in the House. I also thank all the Members who have taken part in this last piece of parliamentary business this week.

We have had a broad range of excellent contributions. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) is a doughty defender of anglers and the need for clean water for angling. He will be pleased to hear that I have met the Angling Trust. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), whom I was with in Plymouth just last week, called for greater accountability on the SPS and the need for more powers at Ofwat, and his points were well made. He is right about the lack of a clear plan for decarbonisation and nature restoration, and I commend him on his ambitious campaign to get Devil's Point designated an official bathing water spot. Maybe one day I will be able to bathe in it with him. *[Interruption.]* In wetsuits—I hope people will not read too much into that.

The hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) made an important contribution on flooding, which, due to climate change, will be ever more frequent unless more action is taken, especially on upland catchments.

[Alex Sobel]

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) gave an account of Mogden sewage treatment works discharging into the Duke of Northumberland's river—one of too many such horrific events.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) made a good point about the need to ban wet wipes. We already had a Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) attempted to get through the House, and hopefully we will see it come back to this place again. The hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) made a good point about nature-based solutions; I saw a similar project to the one he described on a reed bed in Norfolk by Anglian Water and Norfolk Rivers Trust, and we need to see many more of them. The hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) made a good point about new housing creating huge strain on the infrastructure dealing with sewage.

The fact is that our rivers are dirty. They have been dirty for too long, and they have got dirtier. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we need them cleaned up. The Victorian sewage system was implemented because the Thames had become so toxic that the Prime Minister of the time, Benjamin Disraeli, could no longer stand to be in the Chamber during the “Great Stink” of 1858. He said the Thames had become,

“a Stygian pool, reeking with ineffable and intolerable horrors”.

Outside Parliament now, the heirs of Bazalgette are creating the super sewer, which will reduce sewage overflow into the Thames in central and east London—although not in west London past Hammersmith, a point my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth made. However, it is the only such project in the UK. When the House passed a motion declaring an environment and climate emergency three years ago, that should have challenged the water industry and the Government to undertake radical change. We can no longer accept being the dirty man of Europe.

It is fair to say that the Government have started to move on this, although they have been brought to it reluctantly, and in no small part due to campaigning of the right hon. Member for Ludlow and the screeching public outrage when Conservative MPs were whipped to vote against an amendment calling for the end of raw sewage discharges. We need more power in the hands of consumers so that they can understand what is happening in their communities.

Let us recap the water industry numbers so that we can see where there is space in the system for solutions. The water companies in England collectively invested £1 billion less in real terms last year than they did in 1991. In the past 11 years they have added £19 billion in dividends to shareholders. That is the financial leakage.

Then there is the water leakage, with 229,000 litres in 2021 and, as we know, hundreds of thousands of sewage dumping events. In 2020, there were just shy of 400,000. In the same year, the average household in England saw £62 of their bills go as dividend. The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) made a good point about water company bosses receiving bonuses while those dumping events take place.

Philip Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is making an impressive speech and I am grateful for his kind comments about our serving on the Committee together. On the

matter of dividend payments, is he aware that many of the water companies' capital structures mean that payments made as interest on the significant loans they take out to invest in their businesses are structured by way of dividend payments to inter-company subsidiaries and accounts? Therefore, the gross amount of dividends does not actually reflect dividend payments to equity shareholders, but includes interest payments.

Alex Sobel: I think the figure I quoted was just dividends to shareholders, but I will check on that. I understand the point the right hon. Gentleman makes. We need to de-duplicate that data.

The Rivers Trust has a brilliant website with an interactive map that allows people to zoom in on where they live and see where raw sewage is being discharged. It is disturbing to see how close to many of our communities this discharge is taking place—even directly on to children's playing fields. We need a plan for raw sewage discharges that considers not only storm overflows, but a creaking sewage system. There is routine discharge of raw sewage into rivers and seas, not in the event of extreme weather from combined sewer overflows but as a result of daily discharges. The fines levied against companies include the £90 million fine for Southern Water, but we are still seeing discharges by Southern Water—for instance, in Whitstable, affecting the fishing and tourism industries. This just shows that the system is not working. I agree with comments by Members on both sides of the House about delays in prosecution. Ministers need to make sure that the Environment Agency puts real emphasis on bringing further prosecutions. The level of fines is not yet producing a change in behaviour in water companies and stopping raw sewage being routinely discharged. The word “routinely” really matters, because it means that it happens every single day. While we have been debating, the water companies have been routinely discharging raw sewage, not because of extreme weather in the past hour but because of a sewerage system that cannot cope with the level of demand being placed on it and the lack of investment in it. I will resist the temptation to slip into a speech on sustainable urban drainage, which we can pick up on another time.

The Environment Act 2021 sets out changes to the way that raw sewage will be reported on and the need for plans. It did not set out a timetable for when the scandal of raw sewage discharge would be brought to an end, nor did it set out any interim targets. The Ofwat strategic priorities also fail to give that clear direction. We need to delve into the workings of the water industry. That will influence the changes for water companies in the next pricing period, but what changes are happening right now? They know that they do not have to invest in the same way until the next pricing period, because Ofwat sets the pricing controls and the investment strategies. Although many water companies fell foul of the business plans in this period, I doubt that we will see a huge surge in action to close raw sewage outfalls and investment in the treatment period until the next price period. The challenge is what we do about it now, and that really matters. What we discharge into our rivers is not always easily seen. We need a clear plan to understand how much will be stopped, how much will be properly treated, and how much will be carefully looked after in future. Water companies discharged raw sewage into England's rivers 372,533 times last year—a slight reduction

on the previous year. Taking the past three years together, raw sewage was discharged over 1 million times for a duration of over 8 million hours.

The Government's storm overflows discharge plan has been rightly criticised for its lack of urgency. Mark Lloyd, the chief executive officer of the Rivers Trust, said:

"I'm disappointed that this plan lacks the urgency we so desperately need. This plan is going to need strong input from civil society and NGOs like The Rivers Trust if it is going to outpace the twinned climate and nature crises we're currently facing. We want to have rivers where people and wildlife can thrive, but the target timelines in the plan are far too slow—I want to see this in my lifetime!"

I do not know how old the CEO is, but that is probably a considerable length of time.

Data released by the EA show that the 10 water companies covering England were releasing raw sewage into waterways for hundreds of thousands of hours in 2021. The 372,533 spills were recorded only on those overflows where event duration monitors were in place—just 89%, so the actual figure is considerably higher. More than 60 discharges a year from an overflow is considered too high and should trigger an investigation. On average, 14% of discharges from the 10 water companies passed that limit. In one event last year, 8.7 million gallons of raw sewage discharged into the River Calder above Wakefield, and the fine was just £7,000. Water companies in England are under investigation by the regulator—Ofwat—and the EA after they admitted that they may have illegally released untreated sewage into rivers and waterways. The investigation will involve more than 2,200 sewage treatment works, but any company found breaching its legal permit is liable to enforcement action, including fines or prosecutions. Fines can now be up to up to 10% annual turnover in civil cases or unlimited in criminal proceedings, and I welcome that.

The SPS states that Ofwat should

"enhance the quality of the water environment".

However, last autumn, beaches around the Tees estuary and along the coast in North Yorkshire saw a huge rise in dead and dying crabs and lobsters. Dogs were also found to be falling ill after being walked on the beaches. In January, the Government launched what they called an "investigation". In February, they put out a press release announcing that the mass death of sea creatures and the dog illnesses were caused by an algal bloom. The Minister and I have an association going right back to when I first got elected, and one thing I learned from her is that it is always good to be appropriately dressed for debates, which is why I have worn this tie today. I notice that she is dressed in a very algal-bloom green, so I am not sure whether she is going to refer to this issue in her closing remarks. The Government claimed that there had been a rapid increase in the population of algae that can release toxins into the water and affect other wildlife, but no data or evidence was published.

An algal bloom occurring in October or in February ranges from unlikely to impossible, as blooms require high temperatures and clear water, and the sea off Northumbria and the Tees is cold and turgid. Also, no bloom was noticed by the local fishing community, so they and anglers commissioned an independent investigation by a marine pollution consultant, Tim Deere-Jones. Using freedom of information requests, he found that the Government had based their judgment that it was

algal bloom on only satellite data. More astonishing, he also found that levels of pyridine, a toxic pollutant, in crabs caught in the north-east and tested by the Government was 74 times higher than in crabs caught in Cornwall. Will the Minister now bring together agencies including Ofwat and the Environment Agency, as well her own Department, to get to the truth of the matter?

The strategic policy statement is not just about protecting the environment and the stability of the industry; it is also about protecting consumers. The Government claim that their No. 1 priority is the cost of living crisis, but social tariffs are a postcode lottery, with no consistency between companies in the financial support offered to consumers and no legal minimum. The Government have not even imposed a statutory duty on water companies to provide that support or on Ofwat to require it. The Government have set the weakest possible framework. Average water bills rose by 1.7% to £419 in April 2022, but there is significant regional variation, with the average bill rising by 10.8% in one water company area. People are struggling, and for many households a water bill can be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I stand here not in my algal bloom dress but in what I think of as my biodiverse dress. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) on securing the debate and thank him very much for all the work that the Environmental Audit Committee did during its inquiry into river quality. It is a very popular Committee of which both the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and I are former members. When the Committee comes out with a report such as this, it makes one sit up and take notice.

Philip Dunne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for taking such an early intervention, but as she has mentioned the Committee's popularity, it would be remiss of me not to point out to the House that, as a result of the election of our right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill) as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, there is a vacancy.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for pointing out the opportunity to do a little canvassing.

The report from the Environmental Audit Committee is extremely comprehensive. As my right hon. Friend said, we took careful note of it and took on board a great many of the recommendations made, which shows what a role a Select Committee can play when it is working constructively and well, and we are singing from the same hymn sheet of wanting to improve the quality of our water. We are taking extremely strong action on that agenda and this Government will not stand still. I expect to see change and to see it happen very quickly, and judging by the consensus on both sides of the House today, I believe we all share that view. This Government will not hesitate to take action if the measures we put in place do not happen.

I made water quality a priority when I became an Environment Minister. As the Environment Bill went through, we really strengthened it, with lots of input from Members on both sides of the House. We now have some really strong measures to tackle the unacceptable

[Rebecca Pow]

situation that has come to light. I make absolutely no bones about that. It is this Government who have, for the first time, set out in the strategic policy statement to Ofwat, the regulator, that water quality is a priority and the regulator must hold water companies to account for delivering affordable, secure and resilient water services. This Government have also made it crystal clear that water companies must significantly reduce the frequency and volume of discharges from storm sewage overflows, to the point where the Environment Act 2022, which is an exceedingly weighty tome, now has six pages on tackling storm sewage overflows alone. If hon. Members and hon. Friends have not looked at it, they should do. We have set out a plan that will revolutionise how water companies tackle the number of discharges of untreated sewage.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for referring to the Act, but for the purposes of *Hansard* and the debate, can she say exactly where the stormwater will go if it does not go into the sewage works because the sewage works are overflowing into the river courses? What are the proposals for the excess flows into sewage works, because that is why they are discharging dilute sewage into water courses?

Rebecca Pow: That would be a very long answer—I could write to the hon. Lady with all the detail in the Environment Act, because the whole system is geared up to reduce the sewage going into the pipes in the first place. The clean treated water from sewage works does get released back into the water course, which is why it is important to set targets on a whole range of aspects to do with water; we are not just talking about sewage and how that gets treated. Ultimately, that water goes back into our water courses and channels, which is why it is critical to look at every angle of it and every source of pollution, not just sewage, to stop that going into the water in the first place. All the measures that we have put in place will tackle that from all sides, but I am happy to send her more info on that if she would like.

What we are doing with the storm overflows plan is a game changer that will overhaul our whole sewerage system to tackle those overflows. We heard some great criticism, if I might say so, from the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, but they voted against the amendments in the Environment Act that will improve water quality. Those amendments require the water companies to invest more in improving the infrastructure to prevent all that sewage pollution occurring, so it is a pity that they did not support them.

The hon. Lady mentioned a lot about monitoring, but she seems unaware of all the monitoring procedures and reporting procedures that are being put in place, such as the event duration monitoring, which was picked up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow. I urge the hon. Lady to look at what is being put in place, much of which is already starting. Indeed, all event duration monitoring will be in place by next year—it is happening now and it will happen increasingly. We are working on that and all the measures to make sure that it occurs. Water companies will also face strict limits on when they can use overflows, because they must eliminate the harm that any sewage discharge causes to the environment.

Daisy Cooper: The Minister will be aware that our concern is that we should be banning those companies from allowing raw sewage into our rivers, not just asking them to reduce the amount. Where we have 2,300 hours of raw sewage discharge, reducing it by one hour does not achieve a huge amount. She has talked about the measures that she has been trying to take to encourage companies to invest, so does she agree that a sewage tax is precisely the kind of measure that her Government should consider?

Rebecca Pow: Of course, we are hoping not that sewage discharges will be reduced by one hour, but that they will be reduced pretty much all the time, unless there is an absolute emergency. That is what the storm sewage overflows are there for and that is why they were put in in Victorian times, but they are simply not fit for purpose. That has come to light particularly through the investigation that the EA instigated, which is how we discovered lots of water companies putting up their hands and saying, “Actually, ooh, we’re not adhering to our permits.” We are now on their case, as are the EA and Ofwat the regulator, as a result of that detailed investigation. Certainly, there is a whole raft of measures that will tackle that.

Water companies also need to play their part in reducing nutrient pollution in rivers, which was mentioned by a few colleagues. Through our landmark Environment Act, we propose to set a legally binding target to reduce phosphorous loadings from waste water by 80% by 2030 against the 2020 baseline.¹ That target will provide a legal driver to require water companies to further reduce phosphorous in the water environment, which will protect rivers and our precious habitats. We are also supporting farmers to reduce the nutrient pollution from agriculture.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow mentioned that all of our policies in DEFRA and, I would say, even more widely across Government—for example, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities forms part of this through its housing policies—need to link up. However, I believe they do, because there are measures in our environmental land management scheme and our flooding policy statement that all link to the water landscape, as they need to do.

We have almost doubled our funding for the catchment-sensitive farming programme, which provides farmers with advice on how to reduce pollution. We have increased that budget to £30 million from £16.6 million, and that will cover 100% of England’s farmland, up from 40% of its current coverage, with more catchment-sensitive farming officers.

We must recognise that the water environment faces many other pressures. I was pleased that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) widened the debate, which is so important. Yes, we have worked very closely together, and I acknowledge that he, with an understanding of the whole landscape, has been supportive of many of these measures. Climate change and a growing population, especially in dryer parts of the country, are increasing constraints on our water supply. The Government have been clear in our statement to Ofwat that water companies and Ofwat must take a long-term and strategic view of the challenges ahead. Meeting our future needs must not come at the

1.[Official Report, 15 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 4MC.]

expense of the natural environment, and that includes reducing unsustainable water extraction from chalk streams and aquifers.

We will need a twin-track approach to secure resilient water resources. On the one hand, water companies will need to invest in new supply infrastructure where it is needed, and on the other, we will need to reduce demand for water, use water more efficiently and reduce leaks. We will actually need to secure an additional 4 billion litres of water a day by 2050, and half of that will need to come from reducing demand, as the hon. Member mentioned. By 2050, we expect to see leakage halved, because that is a big part of this, and to see average daily consumption at 110 litres per person, which is actually 30 litres less on average than we are each currently using.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) mentioned a potential reservoir. I will not comment on that particular reservoir, but we will need—and we are putting in place—a whole raft of such measures. We will need new infrastructure, including new reservoirs to reduce leaks, and to use less water overall. Through the Environment Act, we propose to set a legally binding target on the Government to reduce use of the public water supply in England per head of population by 20% by 2037. This will be supported by mandatory water efficiency labelling and building regulations, and water companies must play their part in helping us to achieve that target.

Delivering on these ambitions does not come without costs, and my hon. Friends will be rightly concerned. A number of Members, particularly the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), have raised the effect on the cost of living and how critical this is—and she is going to intervene on me.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for giving way, and she has quite rightly picked up that I have referred to the single social tariff on a number of occasions. In February, she kindly wrote to me, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on water. Can she tell us where we are on the proposal to develop a single social tariff?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Member, and I did write to her; that is right. Obviously, the Chancellor has already announced a whole package of measures to help households with the cost of living, and we do expect the water companies to play their part. All water companies actually have social tariffs in place, as she will know, to support customers who struggle to pay their bills, and close to 1 million customers currently receive that help. My Department is exploring other measures that we may look at to improve this whole sector. I cannot give more detail now, but we are very aware of it.

I want to refer to some of the other excellent contributions to the debate. I am so pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) mentioned wet wipes. Shockingly, wet wipes make up 93% of the material that causes sewerage blockages. That is partly why storm sewage overflows are used so often: they are blocked up by wet wipes which have been chucked down the loo. *[Interruption.]* Yes, and there are horrified looks; I am sure Madam Deputy Speaker does not do that. The cost of dealing with that to the water industry is £100 million a year. We are considering

options and we have consulted on what action we might take. It is also important to remember that wet wipes contain plastics.

Ruth Cadbury: The Minister is right about the scourge of wet wipes: they are plastic and they cause damage to ecosystems in our rivers and seas. Thames Water tells me that one of the costs to water companies is caused by the wet wipes in many of the sewers in our cities and towns combining with the fat illegally discharged into the sewerage system to create fatbergs. What is the Minister doing to stop the discharge of oil into our sewerage systems, such as incentivising caterers?

Rebecca Pow: That is a horrible, graphic description, and we also need to make people aware that they should not pour fat down the drain; that causes huge disruption and cost. We have consulted on wet wipes: we put out a call for evidence and are now looking at what further action might be taken. Also, water companies are indeed raising the issue of illegally discharged fat.

It was great that my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) talked about how wetlands and nature-based solutions are critical to cleaning up our water. We are increasingly using those solutions; the Government are encouraging that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) was as ever the angler extraordinaire—the canary in the coalmine as he calls himself—and I always listen when he speaks. Along with many others, he mentioned supporting a river recovery fund. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who has left his seat, also mentioned that, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, who raised as well the idea of pollution fines going to solving problems relating to water. We are working on a holistic plan for water; it is an interesting concept, and I hear what he says on that. He also talked about development consents and local authorities having no power to include infrastructure relating to water. Again I hear those comments; that is another valid point which I am happy to discuss further with him. In short, he has raised some important points in addition to the inquiry's recommendations and, as ever, the door is open for us to consider them.

I thank all Members who have participated in the debate. I honestly believe this is a turning point for water. We have all had enough, and water companies must put the environment first—that is what the policy statement to Ofwat says. The message has been clearly sent that Ofwat must reduce the harm from storm sewage overflows. We will no longer stand poor performance from the water companies.

Almost everybody raised the issue of the enormous salaries and the dividends taken. It has been made very clear to Ofwat that that is no longer acceptable, and it has already started measures which came through in 2019 to make information on salaries and what they are based on more transparent. I think many colleagues commented that, actually, it is great to take a dividend or a big salary, but something must be shown for it. Our water is a precious thing and, without a shadow of a doubt, we should not be abusing it. We should be cleaning it up, and that is what the Government intend to do. I thank all colleagues for taking part in this extremely constructive debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): A brief conclusion from Philip Dunne.

4.45 pm

Philip Dunne: Very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for calling me and for chairing our debate. In essence, every contribution from across the House has been in agreement: we have broad consensus that now is the time to fix the water quality of our rivers, and Ofwat is the mechanism by which the process can begin. I am extremely grateful to the Minister in particular for her response to comments made from across the House. I hope that her officials will read the transcript and the commitments that she made. Hon. Members, and certainly I, as Chair of the Committee, will be happy to engage with her on some of the additional points on which she responded so positively. I also thank the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who approached the debate in characteristically constructive style.

I would gently say to the sole representative of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), in a slightly discordant way, that calling for a sewage tax and to ban sewage discharges as a legal, overnight measure reflects the lack of credibility or realism in proposals that the Liberal Democrats often make on this matter. I must say that their intervention on the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, which was to make it an offence for mammals to die from sewage exposure, was a typical example of a completely ludicrous proposal. There was no evidence that that was a problem; the Committee received no evidence on the subject whatsoever. It was political posturing ahead of local elections, and I am afraid that that needs to be called out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government's strategic priorities for Ofwat.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if I can take your advice on how I can raise an urgent matter with the Foreign Secretary and her colleagues. Earlier today, a constituent of mine in Newark, Aiden Aslin, along with another British citizen, Shaun Pinner, was sentenced to death in a show trial held at the auspices of Vladimir Putin and his Russian regime.

Both Aiden and Shaun are British citizens who happened to be fighting in the Ukrainian armed forces and were captured by the Russian army around Mariupol. Both are prisoners of war who deserve to be treated appropriately and in accordance with the Geneva convention. Instead, the Russian army put them through a Soviet-era show trial and, earlier today, sentenced them to death. That is completely unacceptable and the most egregious breach of international law. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will summon the Russian ambassador to the Foreign Office at her earliest convenience to convey a clear message that British citizens cannot be treated in that manner, and that both Aiden and Shaun should be freed and returned to their family and friends, either in Ukraine or home here to the United Kingdom, as soon as practicable.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which is disturbing to say the least. Indeed, it is horrific news for the House to receive about the treatment of British citizens at the hands of the Russian regime. He is right to bring the news to the House at the earliest possible point. I am pleased to advise him that there are various ways in which he can raise the matter formally here in the Chamber and with Ministers, the most obvious of which is to submit an urgent question, which I am quite sure will be considered carefully. At the same time, I am also certain that the Treasury Bench will take the opportunity to convey the right hon. Gentleman's concerns, and indeed those of the whole House, to the relevant Ministers, in whom I have every confidence that they will act appropriately.

PETITION

Barclays Muswell Hill Branch

4.50 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): On the point made by the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), may I say how much support we, as Labour Members, will give with respect to the extremely concerning news about his constituents and their families?

I turn to my petition. Many of my constituents in Muswell Hill are extremely concerned about the proposal to close this Barclays branch. Bank closures have a disproportionate impact on older people and on those struggling in the current economy to run small businesses.

We request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and takes immediate action to ensure that the branch is not closed down. We are aware of other closures by Barclays bank, in Wood Green and other parts of north London, that affect my constituents disproportionately. They enjoy using the counter to carry out their business, particularly if they are in a small business and carry large amounts of cash. It is not particularly safe to travel with that cash and hand it over at a different branch. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will lay the petition before the House, and I look forward to the response.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Barclays Muswell Hill branch must not be closed; further that petitioners are extremely disappointed that Barclays has announced the closure of their Muswell Hill branch in June 2022; further that millions of people still rely on cash and petitioners believe that the relentless programme of bank closures only widens inequality by accelerating the move towards a cashless society; and further that Barclays should reconsider and consider the social impact of their proposed closure.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that the Barclays Muswell Hill branch is not closed down.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002735]

Hospital of St Cross: Accident and Emergency

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

4.52 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place. It is a particular pleasure to have been granted this debate on health provision in Rugby—one of the most important issues for my constituents, because my predecessor and father, Jim Pawsey, held such a debate concerning the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby 25 years ago. Much has changed in the intervening period, but the hospital remains as dear to Rugby residents' hearts now as it was then. In particular, I want to talk about the provision of accident and emergency care at the Hospital of St Cross. In the course of my speech, I will first set out the current facilities available to Rugby residents, and then go on to make the case for improved and increased provision.

The urgency of today's debate arises because of the increasing number of cases of concern being brought to my attention by my constituents. They are currently directed to the University Hospitals Coventry & Warwickshire site at Walsgrave in Coventry, 12 miles away. One constituent told me that when he needed to visit A&E, it took 22 hours for his condition to be fully assessed due to the very high number of patients waiting for treatment. He suggested, as I will today, that to help to alleviate pressure in Coventry, the Hospital of St Cross should be used more widely.

Another constituent told me that they were taken to University Hospital by ambulance one evening after suffering heart palpitations. Although the ambulance arrived at their home within 45 minutes, once they arrived at the hospital it took an hour to be taken into the care of the hospital because of the queue of ambulances waiting to discharge their patients. My constituent told me that the care they went on to receive at the hospital was good. That is a recurring theme throughout all the cases that have been brought to me: the care, once it is received, is excellent, but it is taking far too long to access it.

According to the history of the hospital written by the Rugby local history group, the importance of timely emergency care was the catalyst for the foundation of the Hospital of St Cross. In 1882, an engineer on the railway running through Rugby had a serious accident and his leg had to be swiftly amputated. At that time, victims of such accidents were normally taken by rail to either Birmingham or Northampton, but on this occasion, there was not time. The engineer's leg was amputated on a bed in a small hospital on Castle Street in Rugby because there was not an operating table. Sadly, the amputation was not enough to save the young man's life. When Mrs Elizabeth Wood heard of the engineer's fate, she presented the hospital with an operating table, and subsequently, the land for the new hospital. The Hospital of St Cross remains 140 years later. The hospital today offers a number of high-quality specialist services, including orthopaedic and ophthalmic procedures and the recently added haematology service.

In respect of emergency care, there is a minor injury and minor illness unit, which is a nurse-led service for patients over the age of five. Rugby residents can attend

for small wounds, animal stings, some sports injuries, minor injuries or suspected broken bones. X-rays, blood tests and a pharmacy are available, but, significantly, for anything complex or for a serious injury, residents must travel to Coventry.

Rugby residents were bitterly disappointed in 1997 when the A&E service at St Cross was downgraded as part of a wider move away from the district general hospital model and towards a higher concentration of specialists at a smaller number of sites. At the time, serious concerns had surfaced about the quality of some of the clinical services, which resulted in the board of the Rugby NHS trust agreeing to merge with Walsgrave Hospitals NHS trust in February 1997.

The royal colleges were invited to make reports on the services. The Royal College of Surgeons noted that Rugby's catchment area was not at that time—that is the significant bit: it was not then—large enough to provide sufficient opportunities for clinicians to maintain their skills and deliver a safe service. A further justification was that, as medical science advanced, the days of the general surgeon had ended while the required number of support staff and the cost of complex equipment had increased.

Since that 1997 decision, the population served by the Hospital of St Cross has changed substantially. The local authority in Rugby has always been pro-growth. I have been very keen to see the many housing developments in Rugby in recent years, simply because we need to meet the challenge of enabling the next generation to own their own home and because we welcome the additional footfall for our town centre at a time when high streets face stiff competition from online retailers.

Between 2001 and 2011, the population of the Rugby borough grew from 85,000 to 100,000. I expect the 2021 census data to indicate similar or greater growth than that. Rugby is one of the fastest growing places in the UK and has an ambitious local plan that expects an additional 12,500 new homes by 2031. Accordingly, we can expect a population rise of about 30,000 people.

As part of the new developments, we have seen new roads and new schools. The people of Rugby also rightly expect to see a commensurate increase in the health services provided. There are plans for increased primary care provision. Whitehall medical practice has recently expanded and there will be additional provision in Houlton—a new housing area of Rugby—and the south-west development area, which should relieve the pressure on existing GP practices.

However, over recent years it has become clear from constituency cases brought to me and from discussions on the doorstep that Rugby residents are increasingly concerned about the provision of accident and emergency care and the impact of population increases on services. Most treatment is provided at Coventry, which is about 20 minutes' drive from Rugby on a good day, and realistically at least half an hour's drive for most Rugby residents. I understand from information provided by the Library that 83% of my constituents live more than 15 minutes' drive from a major accident and emergency department.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Mark Pawsey: That figure is higher than in 84% of constituencies across England. The travel time is compounded by residents' uncertainty and lack of clarity about what constitutes a minor injury or illness and whether their need can be met in Rugby or requires travel to Coventry. I frequently hear accounts of residents attending St Cross only to be immediately directed to University Hospital in Coventry. On occasion, I hear about residents who have travelled to Coventry for a very simple matter that could have been dealt with at St Cross.

In response to broader concerns about health provision in Rugby, last autumn I carried out a survey on my website asking about accident and emergency care in Rugby. I very much thank the people of Rugby for their outstanding response: nearly 3,000 residents took the time to have their say. That is an outstanding number for such a survey, and it sends a very clear message to local health decision makers about what Rugby residents want. The key points are that 98.5% of respondents believe that Rugby should have its own accident and emergency department, and 93% believe that Rugby does not currently have adequate accident and emergency care provision.

My survey builds on the work that the Coventry and Warwickshire clinical commissioning group carried out over the summer of 2021, covering all of Warwickshire. That survey had 922 respondents, which is rather fewer than the 3,000 who responded to my survey, but about 600 of those 922 people were Rugby residents. My constituents' hugely disproportionate participation shows their strength of feeling.

Given the large number of responses, I am pretty confident that the results of my survey were representative of the views of Rugby people more broadly. It is clear that my constituents believe that our town, particularly given its growth, is currently underserved with A&E provision. After conducting my survey, I met Professor Andrew Hardy, the chief executive of University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. He agreed about the high volume and the unanimous response, which I hope the Minister will acknowledge in his remarks.

One issue for the accident and emergency department at UHCW is that it is very large. It has to be, because according to the Library, most accident and emergency departments serve a population of at least 200,000—the average is 320,000—but the accident and emergency department of University Hospital in Coventry serves a population of about 600,000, nearly double the national average.

It is my contention that if we improve the offer at the Hospital of St Cross, pressure on the University Hospital site in Coventry could be alleviated and waiting times could reduce. Of those residents who completed my survey, 52.7% said they had waited more than four hours for treatment on their most recent visit to Coventry.

Regrettably, since my survey was conducted last autumn, the pressures on accident and emergency departments have only increased; I am sure the Minister will acknowledge that. The minutes of the University Hospitals NHS Trust February board meeting noted that the hospital's occupancy had been over 97% since August 2021, with full hospital protocol occurring in September and early November. However, I was pleased to note that there is an ongoing focus within the trust on using some of the

capacity that exists in Rugby to assist the flow in Coventry. It is my contention, and that of my constituents, that the Hospital of St Cross could be used rather more to relieve the pressure.

The concerns of Rugby residents have been compounded by the closure of Rugby community ambulance station in October of last year, along with a number of other ambulance stations across the west midlands. That was a unilateral decision by West Midlands Ambulance Service University NHS Foundation Trust, which has been opposed by me and by other west midlands MPs. There was no consultation with residents. I was not notified, nor were my parliamentary colleagues: we read about the decision in the press.

It is a simple and regrettable fact that the closure of the community ambulance service in Rugby makes it less likely that there will be an ambulance in Rugby. I believe that if we had ambulances coming to Rugby with patients seeking accident and emergency care, there would be a greater likelihood of an ambulance in the vicinity, and ambulance response times would improve for Rugby residents because ambulances would have a reason to be in Rugby. West Midlands ambulance service says that its service is delivered by people, not buildings, and that the single biggest factor that it faces is handover delays at hospitals. This is a national problem, as the Minister will acknowledge, but, as I have said, if ambulances could come to the Hospital of St Cross rather than going straight to Coventry, there would be a greater likelihood of an ambulance in Rugby able to deal with calls from local residents.

In my survey, I asked Rugby residents this question: if they could change one thing about the NHS locally, what would it be? The vast majority said that they would like to see better accident and emergency provision in Rugby. Others noted difficulties arising from their circumstances. The key theme was the challenge posed by the journey to University Hospital in Coventry. Many residents noted that it was particularly difficult without a car, and that those without cars, who might have had to wait a long time at A&E—until late evening—often ended up returning home in a taxi and paying a large fare that they could ill afford.

I have heard from many constituents about the lack of accident and emergency provision for children under five. One parent wrote:

“My son who is 3 has had 3 fits in the last year and each time we have had to travel to University Hospital”.

Another wrote:

“I have two small children and it terrifies me that I will have to travel so far if they needed emergency care”.

Among the responses from my constituents were a number of heartbreaking accounts, but none was more heartbreaking than an account of an issue that arose in January this year, when my constituent Jamie Rees died of a sudden cardiac arrest. The ambulance that attended the scene had to travel from University Hospital, and given that time lag it had no realistic chance of meeting the category 1 response time, which would have saved Jamie's life. Jamie's family have organised an extraordinarily powerful campaign, known as “Our Jay”, to raise more than £10,000 for externally mounted defibrillators. What was so frustrating for the family was the fact that a nearby defibrillator that could have saved Jamie's life was locked inside a nearby school, which was very sad. There was no externally mounted defibrillator. One

reason for people's unwillingness to provide them is that from time to time they are subject to vandalism and theft.

Jamie's family have also rightly asked questions of the emergency services, particularly about the impact of the closure of the community ambulance station in Rugby in October. Quite reasonably, they were really bothered about the length of time it took for an ambulance to attend. Jamie's parents were full of praise for the amazing staff who cared for Jamie, but they rightly point to the importance of that care being accessible at the time it is needed. We know that people in Rugby want to see improved local accident and emergency provision, and I very much hope to have the opportunity to demonstrate this need for an extension to the A&E provision in Rugby when the Secretary of State comes to visit Rugby and St Cross in the near future, which he has kindly committed to do.

Our role as Members of Parliament is to represent the concerns of our constituents here in this place and to seek redress when it is needed. In Rugby, for my constituents, there is no greater issue right now than health provision, and I would not be doing my job as their representative if I was not doing all I could to make sure that that need is met. The Government have quite reasonably asked that towns such as Rugby do their bit to provide the housing that the people of this country need, and Rugby is proudly meeting that challenge. All we ask is that the Government and local health commissioners also do their bit to provide the healthcare that the people of Rugby need and are asking for.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this important debate. He is right to highlight that it is the responsibility of Members of Parliament to highlight and champion their constituents' concerns, and he is doing exactly that today, just as his illustrious predecessor and father did over a combined total of about 18 years in this House, representing that area with distinction just as he does. My hon. Friend has been a regular campaigner for the NHS in his constituency. Indeed, as I recall from oral questions some time ago, I think I am right in saying that he volunteered at the Locke House vaccination centre during the pandemic to assist his local NHS. Not only does he talk the talk; he walks the walk in supporting his local NHS, and his constituents in Rugby are incredibly lucky to have such a passionate local champion for their cause in this House.

My hon. Friend's engagement with his constituents, and his being in tune with their concerns, is reflected by the survey he mentioned. He said he had received around 3,000 responses, which is a phenomenal response rate for such a survey. I think I read that it was reported on the excellent CoventryLive site, which highlighted exactly what he had done. He asked me to acknowledge, and of course I do, the virtual uniformity of the concerns raised in his constituents' responses. That is a powerful message that his constituents are sending to us.

I understand that the Hospital of St Cross has operated an urgent care centre since the closure of the full A&E in 2011, transitioning to become an urgent treatment centre in line with national changes in 2019. That service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, allowing patients to access the urgent care services that

it is able to provide at any time. Trained nursing staff are on hand and patients can have X-rays and blood tests and access a pharmacy. As my hon. Friend said, patients with more complex medical conditions requiring advanced tests or investigations will be referred or taken by ambulance to be cared for by specialists at the University Hospital in Coventry. This, to a degree, reflects the staffing availability and specialist staff required for different services, and which services are available in a particular setting.

My hon. Friend highlighted an important point, which applies not only to his local hospital but more broadly across the country. There is more we can do to help our constituents, and those who may need services, to understand what services each different NHS destination—be it an A&E or a UTC—can provide, and hopefully reduce the number of people who see the H sign on the motorway and think, "I'll go there because I need assistance," only to end up being transferred to another hospital to receive the services they need for their condition. There is more we can do to make that clear.

I appreciate my hon. Friend's call for a restored full A&E service in Rugby, on the basis of demographic change since the decision was taken in 2010 and implemented in 2011. He is right to highlight the pace of change, including in population. I know his patch a little; it is a relatively short hop down the M69 and back across the M6 from my patch to his. He is right to highlight all that Rugby and the area is doing to help support the objectives of providing affordable housing for people who need it; but that of course comes with additional pressures on local public services and local infrastructure, as he rightly emphasised.

As my hon. Friend knows, the original decision to alter local service provision was made following a full public consultation to address concerns raised at the time that the unit was not able to sustain full A&E services, with serious cases, even then, being sent to Coventry for treatment. I can assure my hon. Friend that this decision will rightly be taken by the local clinical commissioning group, as it was in 2010—although it was possibly a primary care trust at the time. Shortly, it will be a decision for the local integrated care boards, which are due to come into force very soon, following the passage of the Health and Social Care Act 2022. It would not be right for the inception of such decisions to come from Ministers in Whitehall. I would note, however, that for any future changes we will see slightly altered powers for Ministers, with the power of direction and intervention introduced in that legislation.

I can assure my hon. Friend that the funding available to his local health system has risen in line with demographic change since 2010—as determined by the formula set by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation—and that ensuring that resources are allocated to deliver the best care for patients is a key duty of both the CCG and, subsequently, the ICB. The local health system is best placed to consider sustainability, location, and demand for services across its area. Any such assessment of whether to reduce services, move services or open new services should include consideration of the mix of accident and emergency services, UTCs and other treatment services, such as GP access.

Without wishing to pre-empt any particular course of action that my hon. Friend's local system might be persuaded by his forceful advocacy to consider, I would

[*Edward Argar*]

also comment that it is for the ICBs and trusts to plan for reconfigurations of NHS services. Judging by what my hon. Friend said, he is already lobbying them pretty firmly. Where services are reconfigured, we are clear that these are subject to four stringent Government tests, which are strong public and patient engagement, consistency with current and prospective need for patient choice; a clear clinical evidence base, and support for proposals from clinical commissioners.

Decisions on any reconfiguration are rarely easy or straightforward; they are effectively about balancing different needs and benefits, including patient transport and inequalities, and it is important to hear from as many local people as possible about the practical impacts and concerns. As I alluded to, I encourage my hon. Friend to continue his conversations with his local NHS system.

Before turning to pressures on A&Es more broadly and the ambulance service locally, I should say that there is already significant investment to improve services in Rugby. The University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire Trust remains committed to expanding services at the Hospital of St Cross, and in recent times that has included the opening of a £1 million purpose-built haematology and oncology unit, and new modular theatres to help treat more patients on elective waiting lists. It is probably fair to say that a degree of credit goes to my hon. Friend for fighting the corner for his local hospital, as he always does.

I shall now mention pressures on emergency departments. The emergency department at the University Hospital in Coventry has also been granted £15 million by the Government to increase its capacity and further enhance patient care. This investment will expand the department, including with a new minor illness and injuries unit. The funding will also be used to install additional treatment cubicles, to expand the waiting room in the children's ED, to increase the level of same-day emergency care and to support diagnostic capacity with an additional CT scanner.

It is right that we take a whole-system approach to these challenges, and all this work is designed to complement existing services provided at both the Rugby and Coventry urgent treatment centres. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the pressures we are seeing in EDs across the country, which is often manifested in ambulance delays and ambulance queues. That is a symptom of the patient flow challenge in hospitals. Space is needed to offload patients safely into EDs, for which EDs have to be able to discharge patients safely or admit them into the hospital. To do that, hospitals have to be able to discharge patients to free up the bed space to enable that patient flow. In recent months we have seen sustained pressure in hospitals across the country in that respect, and he rightly highlights his local hospital.

My hon. Friend talked about the ambulance service and highlighted the tragic case of Jamie Rees, which has been reported on extensively by CoventryLive. Jamie sadly passed away on new year's day following a cardiac arrest. Through my hon. Friend, I extend my sympathies and condolences to Jamie's family and friends.

I understand the West Midlands ambulance service believes that, sadly, an ambulance station, had there been one in Rugby, would not have altered the outcome in Jamie's case. In the 90 minutes before it received the first 999 call, I understand there had been five other emergency calls in the Rugby area. That means any ambulances based in the town would have already been dispatched to deal with those emergency cases, so the ambulances would not have been available wherever the station were based. I fear that reflects the pressures at the time. None of that will be any consolation to Jamie's family, but I wanted to highlight the context.

My hon. Friend also rightly highlighted the "Our Jay" campaign and the number of externally mounted defibrillators, which is a hugely important topic. It is sad that there is sometimes an unwillingness to fund externally mounted defibrillators due to the despicable behaviour of utterly heartless individuals who, for some reason, think they have the right to vandalise or steal this life-saving kit. It is a sad reflection on them, and I sincerely hope they never find themselves in a situation where they need such kit to be available. I pay tribute to the "Our Jay" campaign.

More broadly, we have put a number of measures in place to try to ease the pressure on A&E and ambulance services. The discharge taskforce is helping to free up patient beds by ensuring that patients who are fit to be discharged are discharged more rapidly. In recent years, £450 million has been spent on expanding A&E departments, and there has been a £55 million investment in strengthening ambulance trusts and keeping an extra 156 ambulances in service and on the road to bolster capacity and resilience during the winter period.

I hear the passionate case my hon. Friend makes. There is significant support in place, both locally and nationally, to help ensure constituents in Rugby can access the care they need when they need it, but I also wish to make a number of points. First, I am happy to meet him to discuss this matter. I was going to offer to make the short hop down the M69 and the M6, but from what he has says I have been pipped to the post by my boss arranging to do that visit; he has perhaps upgraded the offer, with the Secretary of State rather than a mere Minister of State. I hope my hon. Friend will feel free to share the detail of his survey and the responses with me. I am also conscious that I have some outstanding correspondence from him—I checked that this morning—and I will ensure that I respond to it in the next few days. I will pull it out of the system and ensure that he gets answers to the specific points he raised.

I thank my hon. Friend, once again, for rightly raising this important issue, securing an important debate on the Floor of the House today and doing what he does so well: championing his constituents' best interests, and making sure that Ministers have no opportunity to forget them and to forget the people of Rugby. Indeed, he ensures that they are impressed upon our minds. I look forward to meeting him to discuss this further, and I hope that will happen shortly.

Question put and agreed.

5.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 June 2022

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Menopause

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Women and Equalities Committee on 17 November and 8 December 2021, 19 January, 9 February and 16 March, Session 2021-22, on menopause and the workplace, HC 602; Written evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee on menopause and the workplace, reported to the House on 16 February, Session 2021-22, HC 602.]

1.30 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the menopause.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. It has been four years since I first spoke in a debate in this place on the menopause. Each year that followed, I duly put my name down to speak in the annual debate on or around World Menopause Day, but it was not enough. While it might have gone some way towards breaking down barriers and lifting the taboo on this great unspoken issue, speaking about the menopause was not doing anything for the millions of women across the country who were suffering the symptoms and in desperate need of help. This issue was something I had a burning desire to champion as I learned more and more about how support and services are failing women across the country, and my opportunity came when I was successful in the private Member's ballot last year.

The twenty-ninth of October 2021 felt like a momentous day. As we gathered in Parliament Square, there were cheers of joy and tears of relief; the Minister herself was there, so she will know what I mean when I say that you could feel the utter delight in the atmosphere as women celebrated what they perceived as a victory. It is no exaggeration to say that, since that day, I have been bombarded with messages asking when the annual prescription charge for hormone replacement therapy in England will be introduced. We now know—I am sure the Minister will explain the technical reasons for this—that the answer is April 2023: 18 months after the commitment was made, 18 months after the cheers and the tears, and 18 months after that delightful taste of victory, which is so rapidly turning sour.

Naturally, I am frustrated. I have been angry, and I have been very vocal. All the explanations for how and why this has happened mean nothing. They do not help the women who are struggling through a cost of living crisis and can barely afford food and heating, let alone “luxuries” like their medication.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spennings) (Lab): As a woman of a certain age, I put on record my personal thanks to my hon. Friend for her tireless campaigning on this important issue and thank her on behalf of many of my family and friends who have repeatedly shared with me

their praise and admiration for her work. Does she agree that the menopause is not a minor condition, but can severely impact every part of a woman's life, and that the only way we can properly support menopausal women is by taking a holistic approach, looking at everything from employment to medicines and mental and physical health, and of course—as my hon. Friend is rightly doing—by keeping this important issue firmly on the agenda?

Carolyn Harris: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. As she knows, my passion for this subject means that I will champion every one of the issues she has brought to my attention.

Women such as Brioni say:

“We live in deprived communities where HRT is considered a luxury item. The women I support work part time for minimum wage and on temporary contracts. We simply can't afford the resources, products, private consultations that other women from more privileged backgrounds can.”

I can testify to the truth of that. I discovered quite early on that my own menopause was menopause, not depression, and when I spoke publicly about it, my friends said to me, “You're posh having a menopause, Carolyn”—posh, because all the symptoms they were experiencing were things they just put up with and shut up with. I put it under the label of menopause, and the fact that I was able to have HRT—because I went private—made me posh. That was the only time in my life I have ever been called posh.

Brioni is from Doncaster, but what she says is relevant in working-class communities right across the country. Women will always put the needs of their families first, and as long as they have to choose between feeding their kids and paying for their prescriptions, we know where they are going to put their money. To all the Brionis out there struggling, I send my personal apologies that their hopes were prematurely raised. It is not what I expected or wanted, and it is certainly not what I am prepared to accept.

Outside this place, the menopause is a priority, and credit for that must go to all those who are campaigning for change at a grassroots level. Thanks to the willingness of so many of them to work together for the greater good, we now have the menopause mandate in place. We are joining women's voices into a chorus whose mantra is menopause, menopause, menopause, amplifying the individual voices of grassroots campaigners so that all those individuals and their cases, with all their passions, are brought together in one collective.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech, and we are all very grateful. One of my constituents, who wrote to me recently, wants to be one of the voices joining my hon. Friend in calling for change. She says:

“I'm tired of worrying about my next prescription. Will I be able to talk to the GP? Can I persuade the receptionist to talk to the GP on my behalf and get them to issue a repeat? Will the prescribed HRT be available? Will the pharmacy leave me guessing and calling daily for updates? Will they eventually admit they can't get hold of it? I don't want to feel helpless, anxious, potentially suicidal again. Not when this is easily and cheaply treatable.”

She is right, isn't she? Those are precisely the problems that we need to sort out.

Carolyn Harris: My sympathy goes to my hon. Friend's constituent, because the story that she tells is a story that I and other colleagues hear day in, day out from women who are troubled, anxious and scared that they are not getting the treatment or that, if they have the treatment, they cannot get their medication.

I am so proud to work with everyone involved in the menopause mandate, and I am heartened by the work that each and every one of them is doing—whether they are on a national television programme addressing millions of people and spreading the message, or helping a handful of women in their local community. Every one of them is making a difference. We have people such as Davina McCall, Lisa Snowdon, Patsy Kensit, Mariella Frostrup and Gabby Logan. These are strong women with loud voices, who are prepared to share their stories to help support women right across this country to get justice. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and I contribute the political platform for the mandate. We have both made it our mission to mention the menopause in every single policy area right across Whitehall, because it deserves a place at every one of those tables.

Obviously, the Department of Health and Social Care has the biggest role to play when it comes to support and treatment for the physical and psychological impact of the symptoms. It is not just about the prescription charges or the availability of products, because I have grave concerns about the suicide rates among women of menopausal age. There is a 16% increase in risk for this cohort, and there have been some devastating stories in the press recently about women who failed to get a diagnosis and treatment, and who consequently ended their lives. Just a fortnight ago, Penny Lancaster sent me a clip from her local paper about a local solicitor who had taken her life after spending 18 months trying to convince her GP to diagnose her and prescribe her HRT.

However, other Departments have a huge role to play in this endeavour, including the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We have seen women in their 40s and 50s leaving the workplace in growing numbers due to the lack of support. The Department for Work and Pensions deals with the fallout from this, with women suddenly claiming benefits—possibly for the first time in their lives. The Home Office needs to consider the impact that the menopause is having on victims of domestic abuse. We know from research by AVA—Against Violence & Abuse—that domestic abuse escalates when a woman is experiencing menopausal symptoms, and that the symptoms are worse for those who are victims of violent relationships. Education is key if we are to ensure not only that medical professionals are sufficiently trained to diagnose and treat the menopause, but that the next generation are more prepared than any of us were.

Something that really concerns me is the disparity in HRT products currently available in the country. We only have to look at the local formularies to realise that levelling up appears to have overlooked menopausal women. Oxfordshire is recommending the use of newer products, while Manchester's first-line treatment recommendation is cheap oral medication with synthetic progestogens, with patches reserved for more complex cases, such as those with underlying health conditions. That treatment postcode lottery must be taken seriously.

I will continue to campaign for a national formulary, so that all women have fair access to all treatment, regardless of where they live.

Something that came to my attention today, which I am now looking into, is the disparity in the advertising of medications on social media. It is my understanding that on Instagram, medication for erectile dysfunction has free rein to be advertised, but lubricants for vaginal dryness and menopause medications are blocked because they relate to the female genitalia and are therefore assumed to be of a sexual nature. I will be writing to Instagram, and indeed other platforms, to clarify the situation. If that is the case, why are male sexual wellness products given the green light, yet medications for women with menopause are categorised as pornographic? If that is the case, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport can also expect to hear from me.

At Women and Equalities questions on Wednesday, I raised the issue of menopausal support for women on the prison estate. With 39% of women prisoners aged 40 or over, and 38% aged 30 to 39, I would have assumed that it was vital for a menopause strategy to be in place to provide for those women while they serve their sentences. That is primarily because we know that menopause and perimenopause symptoms affect our physical and mental health, as well as our behaviours.

Next Monday is Menopause Monday, and we are bringing Menopause Mandate to Parliament. All Members will have received invites, but will anyone who has not please let my office know? I encourage everyone to come along to the Jubilee Room and meet the fantastic group of women guests and speakers that we have lined up. I am delighted that, in the afternoon, the Fawcett Society will join us to present its recent report on menopause in the workplace. It is a fantastic piece of work, and many of the areas highlighted as concerns are exactly the same as those that colleagues have mentioned today and that are in the menopause mandate. We will also have clinicians, experts and academics explaining why getting the right treatment and support is so important for both physical and mental health. Finally, we will have women telling their own stories about the barriers they have faced in accessing support and treatment for their symptoms.

When Menopause Mandate was first launched, we invited women to not just sign our petition on the implementation of the single prescription charge, but share their own experiences if they felt able to, and it has been humbling to see how many have done that. I urge colleagues, especially those on the Front Benches, to read the submissions on the website, because they really paint a picture of what some women experience every single day.

Take Lucinda from Kent, who told us about her difficulties in being diagnosed and about the impact of her experience:

“My symptoms started at 41. Three and half years and nine GP appointments later, it was the dentist who first said the word perimenopause to me. By this time my confidence was non-existent, I was unemployable, I was being a terrible parent, a vile and unreasonable housemate, and didn't think anything would ever improve. I thought about removing myself far too often”—

it was that bad. Lauren told us about the impact on her work:

“I was a senior leader in financial services...but in my early forties I left my job, thinking I had early-onset dementia. I went from being an uber-confident competent leader and the only female in a peer group of 18 men to losing all my self-confidence.”

We also heard from Catherine, who told us about the “painful hell” she descended into after being dismissed by her GP and prescribed anti-anxiety medication:

“I was in so much distress, but I was labelled as a ‘challenging patient’. I felt every subsequent doctor was influenced by this label and that prevented them from doing proper investigations.”

Thankfully, all three women eventually got put on to treatment paths that worked for them. In fact, Lauren says that when her doctor finally diagnosed her, she was the happiest menopausal woman in Bristol. Despite the heartbreaking circumstances those women originally faced, it is encouraging to read their stories and to know that they are now content and able to cope, but there are plenty more out there still living the nightmare that Lucinda, Lauren and Catherine previously experienced.

Women have been denied HRT because their doctors are not properly educated in diagnosing the menopause or in the benefits of the treatment. Women have been prescribed HRT, but struggle with the cost of their prescriptions as they wait for the annual prescription charge. Women who have been given a new lease of life since taking HRT, but who have vivid memories of hot flushes, sleepless nights, brain fog and extreme anxiety, are now terrified of the very real prospect of the symptoms returning due to shortages of the product that literally changed their lives. There are women who cannot take HRT, who need more support, and who feel broken, lost and helpless. We want all those women to be like Lucinda, Lauren and Catherine and to find what works for them. We want them to get the support they need and to be the happiest menopausal women in every town and city up and down this country. That is why we will keep fighting.

One good thing that came out of my private Member’s Bill was the establishment of the menopause taskforce, which I co-chair with the Minister. It brings together decision makers, policy advisers and experts in the field from across the four nations. We can share what works, and what does not, and make joint decisions that will help us all to provide the best possible care and resource for women in future.

I am sure the Minister, the civil servants in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Health Secretary himself have had quite enough of me going on and on about the menopause and the Government’s failure to prioritise this area of women’s health. I know I sound like a broken record—I very often get on my own nerves—but I will not stop, because everyone experiencing symptoms of the menopause deserves more. They deserve fair and equal access to affordable treatment and to be listened to, supported and prioritised. They deserve to be able to carry on their lives once menopause hits.

I wish I could put my arms around every one of those broken and desperate women who have reached out on our website, and even more so around the ones who have not had the chance or the courage to do so. I wish I could tell them that everything will be okay, that the prescription charges and the stock crisis will be sorted and that life will get better. I care passionately about this issue, and I know that there are MPs of all parties right across the House who care passionately too, whether or not they are in this room today.

Mr Speaker himself has pledged his support, and I am delighted to say that on Monday evening he will be signing the Wellbeing of Women menopause workplace

pledge, which signals the House of Commons position as a progressive and supportive employer. Employers showing that they understand and support their staff is such a positive step, and I am thrilled that Mr Speaker has embraced that and is leading by example.

We are making progress, albeit slowly, and it would appear that globally the UK is seen as a leader in the field. Since last October, I have heard, as has the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North, from the press, politicians and experts from across the world. People expressed a desire to learn from what we are doing—from Australia, Canada, Japan, and across mainland Europe. But if we are going to be the world leaders, we need to get it right ourselves. What is so frustrating is that what is needed to completely change women’s lives is so simple. We need to improve support services and access to treatment and give women’s health the priority it deserves. I know the women’s health strategy is on its way, but it is 2022. Why has it taken until now for women’s health to be prioritised? Some 51% of the population are reliant on this, and they have been left out.

No more delays or false hopes. The time for warm words and gestures has well and truly passed. We cannot let menopausal women today suffer any longer, and we must ensure that future generations do not suffer the same experiences as those who came before them. We need a commitment that this will be a priority, and a promise that it will be taken seriously. We need action, and we need it now.

1.50 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and, dare I say—I do not wish to be rude—an even greater pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has been such a champion on this issue.

As I said at an event earlier this week, having got to the grand old age of nearly 50, I am now a woman in a hurry. I do not feel as if I have an awful lot of time left to effect real change and I have got to the point with the menopause where I am determined that we see change, and we see change quickly. I think it is an age thing, but I have turned into a woman in a hurry. I want there to be change, support and help for women.

Over the last 12 years in this place, one thing I have learned—apologies, Mr Robertson—is that women do things differently in Parliament. We have become very pragmatic. We look at the solutions and the answers, not at the problems and the ideologies. There is no political ideology around the menopause; we just want it sorted, and as quickly as possible. That is why it has always been a huge privilege to work in tandem with the hon. Member for Swansea East. She and I come from different parts of the country and different political persuasions, but we have both recognised a problem that just needs solving.

Women across the country do things pragmatically. We heard from the hon. Member for Swansea East about different support groups, and it really struck me that women, usually of a certain age, come together to provide each other with support, advice, hints and tips about how to get through the menopause. We have all done it in this place, and turned to someone who may be

[Caroline Nokes]

a little bit older or wiser than us to ask them for advice. Last October, I gave up a weekend away. Fridays tend to be precious to Members of Parliament, and none of us likes being in here for private Members' Bills on a Friday, but occasionally a private Member's Bill comes along and one thinks, "That is worth it. That is where I will be this Friday. Instead of going away for a nice weekend, I will be in Parliament to make sure that we effect real change."

On that day, I sat and I listened to a speaker from the other side of the House who cannot be here today because, absolutely fabulously, she is on maternity leave; that speaker was the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), who spoke about her own menopause symptoms. It took real bravery and courage for her to stand up in a packed Chamber of the House of Commons and start listing off all the weird and wonderful symptoms she was suffering. She identified anxiety, sleeplessness and night sweats, and I sat there thinking, "I get that. Yes, I get that. Yes, I get that too."

I then trotted downstairs and found Dr Louise Newson sitting in Portcullis House and said, "The speech by the hon. Member for Leicester West was absolutely fascinating and it made me think that I am suffering from some of those things." Dr Louise Newson turned to me and said, "Will you please go and get yourself a prescription for HRT?" For me, it was a lightbulb moment that showed that in this place, and indeed outside, people can learn so much from their peers.

I take my hat off to my constituent Jo Ibbott, who runs the naughtily entitled *What the Fog?* group, which is specifically designed for menopausal women in the Romsey area. Jo is a menopause guru and a fount of advice. She wanted to come and talk to me about the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Leicester West and about the menopause, and instead she found herself sat in Costa Coffee in Romsey giving me advice about what I needed, the importance of body identical HRT and not allowing myself to be fobbed off with anything that was a lesser product. She managed to persuade the Chamber of Commerce in Romsey to bring together a group of employers, and she has held a number of seminars, in the evening, talking to employers in the town about what they can do to support menopausal women.

That brings me to the whole *raison d'être* of the Women and Equalities Committee over the course of the last year. It feels as if we have been talking about the menopause forever, and I am not going to stand here and trail the recommendations of our report, because it is not yet public but is coming very soon indeed. We have taken evidence from some brilliant and interesting men and women about what we can do to help menopausal women in the workplace. It is not good enough to have policies that sit in filing cabinets gathering dust. They have to be real, living documents that both employers and employees can talk about, so that people can highlight the challenges of their symptoms and be open about them and the flexibilities and changes that might help.

I have spent the last two years trying to find some positives from the pandemic. One of the positives we have learned is that, while flexible working can be a benefit to everyone, it can particularly work for women. I get terribly cross when male employers say that it has

been great for women in the workforce. It has been great for everyone—men as well—and particularly for people suffering from hot flushes, anxiety or sleeplessness. We all know how debilitating insomnia can be. Flexible working could be something that helps menopausal women stay in the workplace.

Standard Chartered and the Fawcett Society have done research on this. They learned that 50% of women do not take on additional responsibilities at work if they are going through menopausal symptoms. I scratched my head and thought, "What does that mean?" It means that they do not take promotions, which means they have less income, which means that they make smaller pension contributions. The menopause does not just affect women physically; it affects them financially, because those promotions are gone.

We know that 25% of women consider leaving work altogether. That is not just an additional income forgone. It is their whole income and whole pension contribution forgone. Is it any wonder that we suffer from a gender pensions gap when over a million women have left the workplace because of the menopause and many more have been forced to take career breaks? That brings me on to some of the wider governmental issues.

I am not going to copy the speech of the hon. Member for Swansea East. Members will have noticed me tearing up pages of my speech, because she covered the issues I wanted to speak about. There is a whole Government challenge around the menopause. I desperately want to see the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy working hand in hand. It is crucial that if somebody is lost from the workplace, there are routes back into it. It is important that work coaches are given support and training so that they understand what the challenges may be for women in their late 40s and early 50s returning to work.

The menopause can give people anxiety, so it is about restoring confidence and giving people the belief in themselves to be able to take on new challenges. Perhaps we need to be looking at retraining programmes that are gendered. I get terribly cross from time to time with the employment Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), who tells me that she must look at employment policies in the round. We have lost a million women going through the menopause from the jobs market. How can we get them back? What additional training and programmes might be put in place in order to achieve that?

We heard yesterday from the Minister for Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), about the work being done in schools and the statutory nature of what I refer to as PSHE and what he refers to as RSHE. It is crucial that we focus not just on building resilient young people and teaching them how not to get pregnant, how to respect each other and about their own bodies; we do have to have those conversations, but there will come a time in every girl's life when they will not be able to get pregnant any more. How will it impact them?

I got to the age of 49 without knowing the slightest thing about the menopause. I have managed to turn myself over the course of the last year into something of an expert. We do not educate children and young women enough about the changes that the menopause will bring to their body and how important it is that

they have knowledge and the ability and confidence to talk about it, whether it be with their employer, family or friends.

We heard moving evidence during the course of the Select Committee's inquiry. It would be unfair to stand here and reel off a great long list; Members would get bored by me, but I do want to highlight some particular challenges. No two women will experience the menopause in the same way. Yes, of course, there will be many similarities, but it is different for each woman. I would particularly like to highlight these challenges for the sake of younger women, for those who might be going through a surgical menopause and for those who go through very early menopause. It can suddenly be very debilitating and feel completely out of kilter with their age and the experience of their peer group. We have to realise that those women need particular assistance.

There are other groups. We heard evidence from a fantastic woman called Karen Arthur, who set up the organisation Menopause Whilst Black. I was being very bad that day and did not take part in a Division that was happening in the House. Instead, I snuck out into the corridor to talk to her about her personal experience. My goodness—she was the most incredibly inspirational and motivating woman. It is true not only that different ethnicities experience the menopause differently but that there are different cultural expectations. It may well be harder for those people to talk to their friends and family about it, and we have to keep breaking down those stigmas.

We heard from representatives from the police service and the ambulance service. I personally picked up the phone to one of the Justice Ministers and begged them to allow the Davina documentary into a prison to talk about the work that was being done not only with inmates but with staff going through the menopause. Every organisation, large or small, has menopausal women in its workforce.

I have been bowled over by the constituents who email or phone me to thank me for doing this, including Simon Parkes, who runs a tiny company in Romsey. Sometimes people say to me, "Will you please stop banging on about the menopause?", but he rang me up to say, "Will you please keep talking about the menopause?" He has very few female employees, but he said that suddenly the penny dropped about what was going on with his wife and what the challenge was with staff members. We have to be able to talk about this and give women in the workforce the support they need.

There were some shocking, sad, awful stories too. I was stunned by how many people wanted their evidence kept confidential. I was struck by an email from the female human resources director of a major blue chip company, who emailed me with her personal story of the menopause and finished by saying, "Please keep this confidential, because I would never want my employers to know what I am going through." That is the HR director of an organisation who did not want her employers to know what she was going through, so we have a long way to go in beating down the taboo.

I am conscious that I have probably spoken for far too long, but I want to make a final plea to the Minister. These are my asks for the Government. The hon. Member for Swansea East rightly focused on prescriptions and the shortages of some HRT products. The DHSC is working hard to resolve that matter, and I very much

welcome the establishment of the taskforce and the appointment of Maddy McTernan. I think we are beginning to see progress on that front, and that gives me hope. It would be wrong of me not to reiterate that we were promised last October that there would be the £18.70 charge for 12 months-worth of prescriptions. I know there are IT challenges and that it is difficult, but please can that be expedited?

I implore BEIS and the DWP to work hand in hand. Why do we still not have an employment Bill that promises flexible working from day one? Why do we not have programmes targeted at retraining women over 45? Why are work coaches not easily able to identify the additional challenges of menopausal women who want to get back into the workforce? I have pointed out the challenges with personal, social, health and economic education and the importance of the Department for Education in ensuring girls are educated about the challenges they will face later in life.

It is really important that we have a women's health ambassador to champion these issues. I raised that with the Minister just yesterday, and it would be remiss of me not to remind her of it. We need to see that appointment. I want to see somebody in place who is experienced, dedicated and committed, and will be a real champion for women up and down the country on a wide range of issues, but please can menopause be front and centre in that?

2.3 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, I believe for the first time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate and on all the campaigning she has done to raise awareness about the barriers women face when accessing HRT prescriptions. There is certainly a lot more work to be done, including on the interaction between black and Asian women and healthcare professionals.

For the last 10 years, I have experienced a multitude of symptoms, including hot flushes, memory loss, fatigue and poor sleep, but I just thought it was this job—boo hoo—so I used the lockdown to press the reset button. I thought, "If I do my bloods, maybe I can find out what is wrong with me." My doctor did not advise me to do my bloods, but I thought I would use my own agency, so I turned up and said to my doctor, "This is what I want to do," and my doctor said, "Okay, go and do your bloods. Let's see what's wrong with you." Bear in mind that for the last 10 years, I have been experiencing different symptoms intermittently, but my doctor did not join the dots for me, and did not explain or say, "Possibly, Kate, this is what you're going through." What came back from the bloods was that I was pre-diabetic—another menopause symptom, but my doctor looked at my results and said, "You are pre-diabetic. You need to change the way you are eating and possibly you will be okay and will not become diabetic."

This was not what I was expecting to find out. I was trying to find out why I was having all the other symptoms, but the bloods showed up different symptoms. I used lockdown and the time I had to reset the button and turn my food habits around and, fortunately, I was able to take my body back to where it should be. I am no longer pre-diabetic and I did not become diabetic—

[Kate Osamor]

I was really happy about that—but my GP did not explain to me that the persistent symptoms were related. If I am honest, it was not until I watched Davina McCall's recent TV show on menopause that I connected the dots.

I grew up, as many of us in this room did, watching Davina on "Big Brother" and all her other shows. She is relatable, she is fun—she is like a friend I have never met. She is a trusted voice. Her view and her vulnerability made me look at the symptoms she was presenting and made me think, "Okay, that could be me." I was not alone. So many women I have spoken to watched the same show and said that Davina turned on the light for them. I thank her for that.

I then had to go on to speak to my GP. Now I had the information I needed, which I had not been given before, and I had the agency to tell my GP, "This is what I want." We had a long discussion and my GP offered me antidepressants. Many women may have taken that option, but I know, from watching Davina's show, that it is an option that a lot of women were being offered. I could have taken the antidepressants, not knowing that it was almost like a barrier put up to stop women getting HRT. I listened, we had a little discussion and my GP agreed to give me HRT. I should not have had to have that conversation and I feel really sorry for those women who do not get past that barrier, accept the antidepressants and just carry on existing, taking the antidepressants but not dealing with the symptoms.

Many black women experience menopause disproportionately. Many black women I speak to say that there is no point going to the GP. It is not something we discuss in our community; it is not something that is passed down to us. We are encouraged to be strong, as black women. We are encouraged to carry the family and to sort out our problems privately. That is not a slight on the community—it is about how we hold ourselves together—but as individuals in the community, at times we need the support when we do go to the doctor. That could be to have antidepressants, but in this instance it is to talk about HRT. That is something we do not do.

I am standing up in Parliament to say, "Let's talk about it. Let's have that discussion. Let's help each other and let's think about the next generation, who will be able to say, there is the blueprint and these are the things that we should be looking for, and when they come up we will go to our doctor and have agency and have strength." We should do that, rather than being quiet and thinking, "My mother never spoke to me about this and my aunts never spoke to me about it, so it must be something to do with my job or my partner or my friends or whatever". It is something that is part of every woman, whether they are black, white or Asian.

I also want to say that black women's voices are less likely to be heard or shared in the media. Black women are less likely to appear in media campaigns. In the menopause landscape, we do not exist. We need to be heard. Our experiences are really important. The next generation need a reference point.

As I said, in our community we are taught to be strong. Slogans like "Black Girl Magic" are associated with strength and glamour, against all odds, which is fantastic, but trying to live up to that all the time puts a lot of pressure on us. We need a wider discussion as a

community, but we also need the media and health professionals to get involved, to reach out to us and to explain, "These symptoms appear at a certain age and if they do, this is what you should do." The media and companies should be looking for black women to front their campaigns to ensure that women feel that there are relatable faces and voices. Yes, here we all know Davina McCall, but not everyone knows Davina—I should not say that; Davina might not be happy. On a serious note, when someone is young and looking up to people, they want to see faces that look like theirs—that is really important. If the Black Lives Matter movement showed us anything, it showed the globe that all lives matter. We should work together.

Do not get me wrong, there are some fantastic black and Asian British women who are raising menopause awareness. There is Karen Arthur, who runs the Menopause Whilst Black Instagram account; she also has a podcast where she shares black women's stories of menopause. There is Dr Arif, the family GP who specialises in women's health—she is a bit of a celebrity now. Dr Arif says:

"NHS practitioners are not trained in menopause. They often don't realise you can have menopausal symptoms during perimenopause, or have symptoms and still have your period. And that there's no blood test that can reliably tell you if you're perimenopausal as hormones fluctuate. That's a barrier to all women."

Today I want to take this opportunity to look forward, based on my own experience, to how we can be better and more productive in the relationships between black women, GPs and advertising. All women need to be included in the menopause debate. Let's be honest: if any other issue had been found to cause one million people to leave the labour market, cause problems with sleeplessness, anxiety, brain fog and countless other overlooked symptoms, and impose an unacceptable and unappreciated burden, then the tabloids would be in overdrive. It is a basic issue of equality in the workplace, and should be treated as such. There should be endless debates and significant Government legislation needs to be passed.

A study earlier this year by Koru Kids found that a quarter of women going through the menopause feel unhappy at the lack of support on offer. Many are likely to be the next workers to drop out of the labour market. While employees can claim some protection through existing legislation, such as the Equality Act 2010, clearly it is falling short. There remains no legislation which expressly puts obligations on employers to ensure they provide necessary adjustments for women going through the menopause. Therefore, I would like to make a few recommendations to the Government.

First, legislation should be passed ensuring women going through the menopause are protected in the workplace in the same way that other protected characteristics are, such as those that exist around pregnancy and maternity discrimination. Workplace menopause policies should be made mandatory. Many employers already recognise the importance of bringing in a menopause policy, but need a little nudge. The Mayor of London announced City Hall's policy on International Women's Day this year, which Unison helped develop. That policy includes tackling discrimination and stigma around menopausal symptoms, as well as introducing temperature-controlled rooms and flexible adjustments to the workday to

accommodate symptoms. Leading examples should be admired, yet progress remains too slow across the board and the best way to enforce minimum standards is by statutory change.

Secondly, the Government should take a proactive approach to promoting best practice on workplace policies. The Government should work alongside the TUC, which has produced a series of recommendations for employers. Those include: awareness training for all staff; risk assessments; and a confidential point of contact for women in their workplace for problems arising due to the menopause.

Lastly, flexible working should be made the default for all workers, unless there are reasons why it is not possible. Sadly, the employment Bill was not included in the Queen's Speech, which is a great shame for all workers—especially those who are going through menopause. Without that right, many workplaces will continue to fall short on making reasonable adjustments, and women will continue to feel their health suffer as they are forced to work hours that do not meet their health needs. These changes are a necessity if we aspire to have a truly equal workplace.

2.15 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to follow the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor). I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing the debate, on her brilliant private Member's Bill that went through last year, and on setting up the incredibly important menopause taskforce with the Minister. I am looking forward to Menopause Monday next week, and I shall look for the invitation in my inbox. I have just checked my diary and shall try to clear it so that I can come along. The work that the hon. Lady is doing is incredibly important, because she is shining a light on something that has been swept under the carpet for a long time.

I feel lucky that I had a mother who was open and who answered the incredible number of curious questions that I had as a teenager. She is 30 years older than me, so I was 18 when she was 48, and I am nearly 48. I remember her going off to the doctor and being diagnosed with depression. This is such a perennial story, and I cannot believe that, 30 years later, we still have women being diagnosed with depression instead of perimenopause, which is what she was going through. She did not get on with the antidepressants, so she stopped taking them and went back to her old doctor—she had moved area—who prescribed her HRT. She did not get on with that either, but that was probably due to my mother's sensitivity to changes. Throughout my life, I have not been able to cope with hormones from certain forms of birth control and such things. I have never really wanted to use them or got on with them, and I think a lot of people are sensitive to them. Because my mother did not have a very good experience with HRT, I thought, "When I get to that time of my life, I'm just going to be tough and see it through," like we all have to do.

I loved the hon. Lady's comment about HRT being a posh woman's thing. It probably is, to some extent. She is absolutely right to talk about the postcode lotteries. However, the majority of women—they are busy and getting on with their lives, because they are working or have children at various different ages—put themselves

last. We do not put ourselves first, and it often takes something quite significant for us to seek the medical help that we need, as we all lead busy lives.

I first experienced menopausal symptoms last summer—it was a bit before my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), and before the debate last October. During the summer I thought, "Have I got long covid again?" I had had covid in March 2020 and had nine months of long covid, which involved complete and utter exhaustion. I got over it and got my lung function back again, and I thought, "Why am I so tired? Why am I exhausted all the time?" Like the hon. Member for Edmonton, I thought, "Is it just this job?"

I was curious to hear my right hon. Friend talk about the HR director saying, "I don't want anybody to know I've got this." I can promise Members that, as an MP, I rely on the fact that people realise that I work hard for my constituents seven days a week. Why would I want to tell them that I am absolutely exhausted, that I am struggling to sleep at night, that I am having hot flushes, and that it takes me about five attempts to get up in the morning? That is what it was like with long covid.

The point I want to make to the Minister is that about 2 million people in the country are currently suffering from long covid. It is really important for women who are over the age of 40 and who are suffering from long covid to double-check and make sure that they are not also having to deal with perimenopause or the menopause. There could be an easy solution for them, such as taking HRT. The symptoms include brain fog and not being able to find the right words, which is a serious problem in a job like this. When your brain stops working and you are in the middle of a speech, you think, "I know what the answer is. Why can't I find it? What's going on?" It is due to perimenopause, and there is a good solution for it.

I decided in August last year—thankfully, we were on recess—that I could not wait any longer. I needed to go and see a doctor, and I did the research. I am lucky: I am able to spend time googling. I am looking up things all the time, and I found Dr Alex Standing at the Surrey Park Clinic, who had put together a whole load of informative videos about symptoms and what women were going through. I got in touch with her and managed to get myself a prescription, and the change was immediate. Almost within two weeks, I felt like a different person.

I came into this place thinking, "I don't want to be boxed in talking about women's issues. I've got to talk about the economy, defence, justice and big meaty things", but we have to speak our truth and talk about what we are going through. As women, we have powerful voices in this place. We ask women to stand for Parliament, and it is quite often at this time in their life that they are ready to make that sort of contribution, yet they might come in and find themselves suffering with perimenopausal symptoms, and then probably from impostor syndrome—"What am I doing here? I don't belong here. I can't do this job." We absolutely can do this job, and we need more women to come into this place. We have hit the prime of our life. Quite often, women have had their children—or they may not have had children, but they are at a point in their career when they should absolutely be humming. It is such a shame to see so many women step back from what they can potentially be in the workplace and in everything they are doing because

[Angela Richardson]

these awful symptoms of perimenopause and menopause come along. Many role models have been mentioned, and I just wanted to say that Sophie, Countess of Wessex, is also doing a brilliant job in raising awareness.

My colleagues have already mentioned asks of Government in their speeches, so I will not repeat them, but it is important that we keep talking about this issue and raising awareness. I am pleased that steps seem to be being taken on a more regular basis, due to the one-woman campaign machine that is the hon. Member for Swansea East, as well as the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, keeping these things at the forefront of everyone's mind. I thank all Members present for their indulgence, because it is important that we are able to tell our stories and talk about what we have experienced. I also thank the Minister for her tireless work behind the scenes; it is not always easy.

2.22 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I offer my warmest commendations and congratulations to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has done such a magnificent job of raising awareness and understanding of the menopause. She has ensured that many women feel heard and understood, but crucially has also galvanised change—information, services, policy, and a strategy—to normalise and support something that half of the population are going to go through at some point. Many of us share her righteous frustration about the delay in implementing many of these changes, but the conversations and actions of the hon. Member and others now constitute a real movement for change and progress in this area, so that fewer women will suffer in silence or experience anxiety and ill health.

I also commend the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), whose Committee is on the frontline of so many of the issues facing women, and the all-party parliamentary group on menopause that is capturing and organising all of the actions and ideas that are now flowing.

I particularly want to speak up for women in Northern Ireland, who feel that this—like other issues that affect women, women's health and women's lives—is an area in which we are lagging behind other parts of these islands. Over the past couple of years, primarily through the entry point of HRT supply issues, which Members have referenced, I have been engaging with constituents and others about the need for a co-ordinated approach to menopause support, one that is funded and joined up between the many Departments and areas of responsibility that have been identified today, and hopefully will be ultimately underpinned by legislation. That approach, of course, starts with awareness and understanding, which thankfully is improving as a result of many of the people in this room and others pushing the issue.

Last night, I posted on social media that I would be taking part in today's debate. I was amazed by the number of replies from people who are experiencing challenges with the menopause and those who are just delighted by this fresh climate of support and action. Many had very developed and constructive ideas for how to improve the situation.

I am grateful to all the people who got in touch, particularly Siobhan Kearney of At One Wellbeing and Anne McGale at Menopause Wellbeing NI for sharing with me the benefit of their research and experience as practitioners. I also pay tribute to Marie-Louise Connolly, BBC Northern Ireland's redoubtable health correspondent, who has been brilliant at forcing this issue on to the agenda in Northern Ireland and keeping it there; Members will appreciate that the policy agenda in Northern Ireland is fairly cluttered at the best of times.

Although many will experience few or manageable menopause symptoms, for some women the menopause is intense and bleak, and women often enter into it without having the right information or the right access to decisions. One woman—a robust and well-regarded professional at home—told me:

"I'm going through it. It's something I find difficult to discuss. I'm surprised at myself but just can't. Rotten symptoms, making life miserable. Open to HRT but due to personal and family medical history, it might be difficult. GP says I need to see specialist at the clinic in Belfast but the waiting list is 4 years...It feels like a death sentence, bringing back trauma about family and my own medical conditions, and my physical symptoms make me feel like a stranger in my own body which is attacking me. It feels like a death sentence, there is no escape."

I found that really difficult to hear from somebody I regard as strong and confident and able to articulate herself well. I feel so much for others who may be unnecessarily going through this situation in the dark, without knowing that there is a definable cause and without knowing that there are things that can be done to help them. I also heard from other women who had been in a very difficult place but who now, having received the right support, are on the other side and desperate to ensure that other women need not fight the same battle that they have.

The dearth of appropriate services is a core problem. Although many GPs have been brilliant, and able to guide and advise their patients, we know that primary care is overwhelmed and under-resourced. Many people cannot get access to their GP, or there is inadequate continuing professional development and education for GPs on this issue, and insufficient time for them to explore and pinpoint some of the issues, so that they can holistically address them. Then, of course, there are few or no specialists to refer to. Enhanced specialist clinics now available in the south of Ireland. There are two in Northern Ireland, but the majority of NHS trusts do not have one, and I have already referred to the long waiting lists.

We know that many doctors are either not sold on HRT or are cautious about complicating factors, and people often tell me about the pushback that they have experienced. I am not sure whether other Members are watching "Borgen"; if they are not, I warmly recommend it, as it is an excellent series. I was struck, while watching the new episodes on Sunday night, that the brilliant character of Birgitte Nyborg, a former Prime Minister and former Foreign Minister, had a scene in which she explained her menopause symptoms and the impact they were having on her work. I was struck by her being, I suppose, brushed off. I mean, medical reasons were discussed, but I thought it was telling that a woman with all of that character's powers of communication also felt unable to access the services that we need.

Numerous constituents report feeling brushed off or—of course—being offered inappropriate antidepressants. Members have addressed the acute problems caused by

shortages of HRT drugs and I ask the Minister when the HRT tsar is expected to be able to report. That issue is causing real concern for people who are worried that, having finally found this solution to their problem, it will suddenly drop. I am hearing of people sharing medication, which obviously brings its own complications.

Menopause is also very much a workforce issue. Currently, about 9 million women in the UK are experiencing or will experience the menopause, and around 3.5 million of them are in the workplace. Policy is not in place to support and protect those women, who might be experiencing some of the symptoms that have been referred to here today, including tiredness, anxiety, brain fog, mood swings, headaches, joint pain and the spill-over effects from things such as insomnia and relationship challenges that the menopause can exacerbate.

There is no policy in place to protect and retain the huge skills and experience bank that these women offer. Other Members have referred to the point in people's lives and careers when they are particularly valuable for the workplace, so the menopause is also an economic issue. If more women have to leave the workforce, that will exacerbate existing issues such as the gender pay gap. We are all increasingly aware of the benefits for public policy, decision making and economic activity when women are at the table. We know that childbearing and caring responsibilities mean that many women are deleted from that area of their lives and face marginalisation and exclusion later in their careers or soon after.

A growing number of employers are taking the issue very seriously and putting policy and guidance in place, but that is far from universal, perhaps due to lack of awareness, embarrassment, or not understanding the relevance. Workplaces need guidance and, in time, legislation to ensure that that guidance is in place. They also need support. Some practitioners have developed a really good skillset and go into workplaces big and small.

Menopause is an economic issue and an equality and public health issue. We need to normalise all aspects of women's health so that they can be addressed like every other health and wellbeing issue, so that people do not feel alone, inadequate, confused or unprepared, and so that they feel empowered to make choices, whether about their lifestyle or medical support, to help them walk this path.

In her excellent speech, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North was right to say that this is not an ideological issue, but there is no doubt in my mind that if men experienced a similar, universal change, it would be a massive part of political discourse and culture. I can imagine all the movies and books that would be made and written about this time in life. Given that issues such as menstruation, women's reproductive health, low-paid care work, the pension changes experienced by WASPI women, and childcare primarily affect women, they do not reach the top of the policy agenda. We need to address that.

We also have an opportunity to establish menopause as a rite of passage—hopefully, a rite of passage to a stage in a woman's life when they are valued for the benefits, talents and wisdom that come with having lived decades of life. I commend the motion, the work and all the policy suggestions that have been made here today.

2.32 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I want to start by congratulating my dear friend, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), on securing this debate and on all her brilliant work highlighting the importance of speaking about the menopause. I am very proud to be a vice chair of the APPG on menopause, which she chairs. We have done some brilliant work together and will continue to do so. We have finally lifted the lid off the menopause jar—the genie is out of the bottle. I could refer to other sayings, but it is important that finally we are ensuring this is no longer a taboo subject where we whisper, “the change”.

The issue crosses over every demographic—from royalty, including the Countess of Wessex, all the way through. I was fascinated to hear the hon. Member for Swansea East refer to it as a “posh” issue. That is so depressing, but she is absolutely right that some women feel that HRT products and help and support are available only if they are posh and can demand them. She is right that in the cost of living challenge we are now living through, too many women will be putting food on the table for their children rather than spending £18 on the vital HRT products that they need.

I welcomed the Minister and the Secretary of State for Health's support for the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Swansea East. They agreed to her proposals, but it is disappointing that we have to wait until April 2023, given that there are women in England who are desperately waiting for an annual prescription.

It was interesting to listen to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna). The issue applies to all four nations, and it is a shame that England is still the poor relation of the four. She reminded me of a close friend of mine who lives in Northern Ireland and is a constituent of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). She was telling me a few weeks ago of all the symptoms she had. She had been to her GP in Northern Ireland and he was suggesting antidepressants. I begged her and said, “Please, you are 51. You are going through the menopause. Go back to that GP and demand.” She did, and now she is on HRT. She is an educated woman who has been to university and has a high-profile job, but she still has to beg her GP to take her seriously. That is unacceptable. There is more to do to ensure that GPs across the four nations have the right advice and training.

I want to highlight Pausitivity, an organisation I know very well and whose posters I have previously mentioned in the Chamber. I wrote to the Minister recently and I hope she will respond positively. We need to support Pausitivity's Know Your Menopause campaign. Its leaflets are a signpost for women and highlight symptoms, so that they can go back to their GPs and demand support and help.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point about Pausitivity. Claire Hattrick from Hampshire has published a whole book about self-help. There is a brilliant case for the Department of Health and Social Care to consider making small funding streams available to ensure that the work of all those smaller, regional self-help and campaign groups can be disseminated much more widely. All of us have friends, like my hon. Friend's friend in Northern Ireland, who have not had the confidence, knowledge or expertise to go to their

[Caroline Nokes]

GP and say, “This is what I have got. Please can I have?” We need to spread the information. Perhaps DHSC should look at how it can fund that.

Nickie Aiken: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I wrote in my letter to the Minister that we need to support organisations such as Pausitivity so that women can use them as a signpost. Its posters are brilliant. They are in Urdu, Punjabi, French, Dutch, German, English and also, as the hon. Member for Swansea East will be delighted to know, Cymraeg. Let us support women from all walks of life, and let us also support families.

This morning I went to talk to a group of year 10 pupils at Pimlico Academy. They asked me what I was doing this afternoon and I said that I would be speaking in the menopause debate. I said, “It is really important that you guys, aged 15—boys and girls—are aware.” I said to the girls, “PMT and periods are tough enough, but you wait: the menopause is something to really know about. You have to know for your mums who are going through it, or are about to go through it, and for your grandmothers and your aunts. It is really important that you know about the menopause so that you can support them and so that you know that when they are screaming at you, there is probably a reason for it. It is not because of you, but because they are probably having a really tough time because they haven’t slept for five days, they feel like they are having an out-of-body experience, they do not feel themselves and then they take that out on their families.” It is really important that husbands, partners, brothers and fathers also understand what women are going through.

We have come a long way. The Government have been listening. I know that the Minister takes a lead on this issue and I absolutely welcome the Government’s real emphasis on it, but we still have issues with a shortage of HRT products. When I went to get my prescription a few months ago, I was told that I could not have my Oestrogel because it is not in supply at the moment. I was really worried. I have one bottle left and am squeezing every single ounce of it. I hope to God that it will be back in when I go back to the GP next week. I urge the Minister to do all she can to make sure that the products get back on the shelves. I fear for my Chief Whip and my Whip if I do not get my HRT product. I am just putting that out there to the Minister—you have been warned.

More seriously, there is so much more that we have to do on education and for businesses. I am extremely proud that this week the Cabinet Office—the Minister was also at this event—became the largest organisation to sign the menopause workplace pledge. More than 1,000 organisations have now done so. That is a start, and it is amazing. The Government are actually taking the lead, but as many have said here today, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, there is much more that each Government Department can do—like not working in silos. We know that when Governments work in silos, nothing gets done. There has to be a holistic approach. Let us get this done.

It is very important to ensure that women are aware of the symptoms of menopause, but also that they can be symptoms of other conditions. I have recently been

diagnosed with hypothyroidism and Hashimoto’s, and the symptoms are very much related to the menopause. Although I may have been going through the menopause, I wonder whether the vast majority of my issues over the past two or three years were because of my thyroid problem. I am now on thyroxine, and it is changing my life, but women need to understand that their symptoms might not just be from the menopause. GPs have to understand that, too. Again, I would like there to be more information and for GPs to have a better understanding of those issues.

To conclude, being in politics can be very difficult. We have so many arguments, and there is so much that can divide us, but women’s health—particularly issues such as the menopause—unites us. We can see Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English MPs here today in support of getting more help for the menopause. That is what makes it great to be a Member of Parliament—we can come together and join forces to ensure that we support women and men in all walks of life. The menopause revolution has only just begun. It is only the start, but I am sure that, working together, we will ensure that women have the products and support they need to carry on with their lives. The menopause is a change. It is the midpoint in our lives. It should never be the end of women’s lives. I feel that I am just beginning my life.

2.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, I am thankful to be able to speak on behalf of my constituents. I want to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I have been fortunate in my life to have always been surrounded by powerful women. It was my mother to start with, then my wife, and in the political sphere the hon. Member for Swansea East, who is a really powerful lady. Whenever she asks me to be involved with debates, she is pushing on an open door. She knows I will be more than happy to support her—I always have been.

When the hon. Member for Swansea East started this campaign some time ago, she and I talked about it, and she was very keen to have a man on board. I am very happy to give my support, for a number of reasons. I do it because the request is right: it is about raising awareness. As a man, I do not find these subject matters particularly easy to discuss—it is probably my old-fashioned, traditional nature—but I know that these things happen. It happened to my wife, Sandra. We have been married 35 years. She is an extremely powerful lady. She is very understanding and has stuck with me for 35 years, so I think that tells you all about that lady.

I remember that when we married she had period problems. The doctor she went to see was very good and he said, “Sandra, when you have children, everything will change.” Well, it did not. We had three children fairly quickly in a period of five to six years. We both wanted children. I was very fortunate to get three boys. I think Sandra would have liked a wee girl, but it did not work out that way. Throughout her life, she always had problems with her periods—they were always very heavy—but then she came to the menopause.

I am pleased to speak in this debate and give a man’s point of view. I am giving a husband’s point of view, too, because I understood from the very beginning what the problems were for my wife. It was all the things that the hon. Members for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and for Guildford (Angela Richardson) referred to: the

night sweats, the brain fog, the pain, the agony. She just could not get settled and was always restless. I understood why that change was coming in Sandra's life. I was not there all the time—perhaps that was better for her, actually—but whenever I was, on those three and a half days a week, I understood that she was having terrible difficulties. We are lucky that the boys have left the house, but the two cats and the dog absolutely dote on her. They do not understand what is happening, but they trot alongside her.

I tell that story because I want the ladies here—the right hon. and hon. Members—to know that I do understand, although I have not experienced it personally. The hon. Member for Belfast South asked what would happen if men could live through this. I tell you what—we would have a different attitude. I have lived through it with my wife, and I think I understand it—I hopefully understand it well.

I have been very pleased to see more businesses and people seeing the benefit of bringing menopause into the light. The civil service has launched a menopause strategy, citing that females account for 50% of the 24,000 Northern Ireland civil service workforce, and that more than 55% of the female employees are over the age of 45, so a significant number of employees are likely to be affected by the menopause. The aim of the policy is to raise awareness and understanding of menopause and outline the support available.

The hon. Member for Belfast South and I, as Northern Ireland MPs, understand this debate from a Northern Ireland perspective, but also because we are active constituency MPs. We understand the importance of having a good workforce who are able to do the work and understand when things are not right.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) referred to GPs. I have seen a change—I just whispered this to the hon. Member for Belfast South—in GPs and doctors in my constituency. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster inadvertently, or maybe purposely, referred to her friend from Killinchy. Men have retired and ladies have taken their place, so I hope that means that there will be better understanding. Giving depression and anxiety medication is the wrong thing to do; HRT should be given. I hope to see those changes. I see them in my doctor's surgery and in the surgeries and clinics in Newtownards. That seems to be replicated across the whole of the constituency, and I suspect it is happening in other parts of Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Belfast South, in conversations we have had, has said that women GPs and doctors have to take time out to look after their families. That happens at times, but I see a change coming, with a better understanding, so that in the future we will hopefully not have the problems that we once had in the past.

I referred to the strategy for the 24,000 members of the Northern Ireland civil service workforce, and that comes on the back of the first meeting of the UK-wide menopause taskforce, which has been established to strengthen co-ordination across Government and raise awareness of the impact of menopause, improving care and support for women and ending the taboos and stigmas that still surround a natural part of ageing.

I echo the request that every other Member has made. I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. I have seen more of her this week than I have seen of my

wife—she has been in this Chamber on three or four occasions to respond to debates. She said to me, “You're back again,” to which I said, “Well, I never leave here.” I am so pleased to see her in her place. I know that she has understanding of the issue and compassion. When the hon. Member for Swansea East was introducing the debate, the Minister was cheering as much the hon. Lady was—that's the Minister. I look forward to her response.

I am pleased that the taskforce is attempting to lead the way. While I am thankful to all the big businesses that are stepping in to acknowledge this medical issue, my mind turns to those smaller businesses that do not have a human resources department to guide them. I ask the Minister—I do not know whether this is under her control; responsibility might lie with another Minister—what support are the Government offering smaller businesses to help them understand the issues that their workforce are facing, and to support their workforce throughout their journey?

I am very fortunate to have always had powerful women in my life. I have six ladies in my office—apart from me, it is a purely female staff. That sometimes gives me an understanding of what happens in the office among ladies. One of the lovely ladies in my office had a hysterectomy and went through her menopause in her mid-50s. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster referred to the age of 51 in relation to the menopause. I do not miss too much in the office; I usually have a fairly good idea of what is cooking. One of the other girls in the office did a small thing that I think made a big difference. She bought her a wee pink fan—I use the word “wee” all the time; it is a Northern Ireland thing—that sat on her desk and made a psychological difference for her. The girls were telling her, “We know what you are going through.”

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes a brilliant point about the small pink fan. Some of the interventions, changes and support measures that employers can put in place are small, cheap, unobtrusive and not difficult.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. As with constituents, the small things that we do are big things in their lives.

At the same time that my staff member had her hysterectomy, one of the younger girls in the office—I have two girls in their early 20s in my office—was going through endometriosis treatment, and her medication pushed her into menopause. It was drastic for a such a young girl, and one who is keen to have children someday—I very often feel for her.

The issue of menopause and perimenopause affects a large amount of the working population. It is great that work has begun to recognise that, but that support should be in every avenue of work, not simply the big companies. Can the Minister therefore give us some indication of what is happening for smaller companies in that regard?

The hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster and for Belfast South asked about HRT. We would really appreciate an update on the supply of HRT medication. When ladies present themselves to GPs, there needs to be a better understanding of how to respond. In this House we need to ask ourselves how we

[Jim Shannon]

can come alongside the small business owner to ensure that they are aware of how the small things—as the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said—can make a huge difference to the quality of life of their employees, as well as to the environment and productivity in the workplace. It has been said for many years that a contented workforce is a productive workforce, and which of us does not want to understand how to get the best work out of our employees and allow them a decent quality of life?

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster and I must have been speaking to the same script writer. I remember the days when people muttered under their breath, in hushed tones, that someone “must be going through the change.” People almost whispered it—“don’t say it too loudly.” Today’s debate is about saying it loudly, because it is important. That is what the hon. Member for Swansea East has done, right down the line. I admire her courage and determination to make things happen, which is infectious—I come to all her debates and support her in everything she does. I do it because I want to, but also because it is right. This is a debate that is right.

It is time for us not to be ashamed of the menopause or to try to hide it; we should accept that it is a part of life with medical implications. We need appropriate responses in the workplace and appropriate responses from the general public—from men and all those out there who do not understand it. That may be because they do not want to, or because they have a wee bit of trepidation about it. We should give those businesses the opportunity to learn more, and put in place effective policies. That is up to the Departments for Work and Pensions and for Health and Social Care, working in partnership and, respectfully, what I believe we must see.

Again, I am thankful for the opportunity to represent my constituents, and to represent my wife, obviously, since I have first-hand knowledge of how this has affected her. I have always tried very hard to be supportive and understanding. I hope that this will not be another lost opportunity, where words are spoken but no action is taken. To be fair, today’s debate is about actions, and there are people here who drive actions.

I said this in the last debate, and I will say it again:

“Eighty per cent. of women suffer from menopausal symptoms; 100% of women deserve support.”—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2021; Vol. 701, c. 1023.]

For me, this debate is about every one of those 80% of the ladies, and giving them my 100% support, as everyone else here today does. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response shortly, and to the participation of my male colleague, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar).

2.56 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you serve in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing the debate, and for her ongoing commitment to pursuing wider public understanding and support for menopausal and perimenopausal women. The fact that all four nations of the UK are represented here is a real testament to the

diligence, determination and doggedness of her campaigning. Having spoken in the debate that she secured last year, I am pleased that this is now a regular feature, and that the needs and experiences of women undergoing this stage of life are now being properly considered.

According to *Hansard*, the first time that the word “menopause” was used in our Parliament was in 1943, in the Lords, in a debate on “population problems”. It was not mentioned in the Commons until 1964, and the 100th reference was not until 2017. We are in a much healthier position now that we can consider it as one of the areas of life that we should properly appreciate.

I was struck by the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea about the experiences of women wrongly prescribed antidepressants and anxiety medication when what they needed was HRT. I know at first hand the life-saving potential of medications of that type, but only when they are appropriately prescribed. Side effects can often include excessive sweating, insomnia, agitation, anxiousness and dizziness—all things that can, themselves, be symptoms of menopause. That means that the wrongful prescription of those medications could actually exacerbate the very misery that caused affected women to seek medical support in the first place. At best, it would be treating some of the symptoms but not the underlying causes.

Let us hope that, as a Parliament, we are reflecting a society that increasingly understands and accommodates the symptoms of menopause, which affect so many in our country—around 5.1 million women aged between 45 and 55. As the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) made clear, many younger women, and people who do not define themselves as women at all, also experience this. They may find it even more difficult to access support as they do not fit the typical profile.

It is essential that every affected person feels confident and able to discuss their symptoms with their employers, and to have requests for workplace adjustments met. We have all now had the chance to see the value of flexible working, and if a woman suffering from hot flushes asks to wear a more forgiving uniform, or to change her work hours so that she is not commuting in cramped transport during rush hour, that should be granted. That is an area that should have been included in the long-promised employment Bill that was so glaringly absent from the Queen’s Speech.

Throughout my career I have often been lucky enough to be one of the youngest, if not the youngest, women within my team, and to have been surrounded by women who were older and more experienced, and who were often going through symptoms of the menopause or the perimenopause. It has meant that I have had the benefit of watching them, listening to them and hearing them. Their generosity, in talking about what they were going through, means that when I get to that stage of life I will know what to look out for, what treatments are available, and what adjustments I should be able to ask for, demand and expect from my employer. We need to foster cultures in every workplace that allow people to have those conversations with each other, with younger colleagues and with their employer, and importantly, to be listened to so that accommodations can be made. That will set a really positive precedent for our society as we move forward.

An important part of that wider societal understanding is the inclusion of menopause in relationship and sex education classes in schools. I am glad that that has been the case since 2019, but I would like to hear from the Minister about how widespread that teaching is. It would be ironic if our children now learn more about menopause than our medical professionals do. Last year I challenged the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), about gaps in training at medical schools, as 41% do not teach about the menopause. She promised improvements by 2024, but I would like to know what the figures are now, because we cannot improve what we are not consistently measuring and tracking.

Many of the physical challenges of the menopause can be addressed through HRT, but access should not be a postcode lottery dependent on GP understanding or sympathy. In Wales and Scotland, women benefit from free prescriptions, including for HRT treatments. Can the Minister tell us what more the Government will do to ensure affordable access, particularly in the context of our current cost of living crisis, and what steps are being taken to address the issues of supply that have been raised by right hon. and hon. Members across the House?

To conclude, I am delighted that this is becoming a regular discussion, not least because we can therefore hold Ministers accountable on progress. I hope our questions are answered today. If not, we will continue to raise them at every opportunity, because suffering is not a necessary or inevitable part of ageing.

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

3.2 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson—also for the first time, I believe. I join other Members in thanking the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing the debate and informing us all so well on the subject. Her contributions on this matter through the years have clearly made a big impact in this place, and I commend her for that.

Those with an old-fashioned mindset will perhaps look at me standing here and say, “You are a man. What do you know about the menopause? What has it to do with you?” There are many more out there who would agree with that position—that is the current reality—but I say to those people that, as the son of a beloved mother and the father of a daughter first and foremost, conditions that affect women and girls today are just as important to me as any that I might face due to my being a man. That is why I did not hesitate to come along to today’s debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. Hearing the valuable contributions of Members and others from across society can only help my understanding and, hopefully in turn, that of my constituents.

Understanding is the key to this whole debate. It both puzzles and worries me that although women make up half of our population, the menopause remains a taboo subject: one that we will not mention, shrouded in stigma, hidden away, and perhaps even leaving feelings of shame being common. In particular, we as men cannot allow ignorance of conditions affecting the other sex—the women in our lives—to pose a danger to their

health and mental wellbeing or their happiness. Also, why should women be made to feel that the men in their life might not want to be bothered talking about the often debilitating effects that the menopause is having on them? That shushing-up mentality must stop, and men can play their part in that.

The veil that too often covers discussions about the menopause is damaging for women who are experiencing it. There are often health and wellbeing implications to the menopause, and if those symptoms are even acknowledged at all, they are often dismissed as “women’s troubles”. Few men probably realise that the menopause can have a serious physical and psychological impact on women. I have heard my own mum refer to “the change of life”. As a man, the term “the change of life” seems to be a pretty dramatic and traumatic thing, so why do we just dismiss it out of hand in the manner that we do?

We have heard today from the hon. Member for Swansea East about the HRT lottery being experienced, particularly in deprived areas. I am so proud of the Scottish Government and their policy of abolishing prescription charges. This is exactly why policies like that matter. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) outlined the obstacles to career progression and the financial implications that can be caused by the menopause throughout a lady’s life and, indeed, her career. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) outlined her experiences and the impact of the matter and the attitudes around the discussions that need to be had within our communities, across all these nations and across ethnic diversities. I thank all hon. Members today for their excellent contributions.

On top of the abolition of prescription charges and the introduction of free sanitary products in schools and community buildings across Scotland, I am proud to say once again that progressive action has been taken by the Scottish Government on the matter of menopause, because shying away from the issues that matter most of all: the women in our individual lives and the women who power the four nations of the United Kingdom. With a focus on earlier education about the menopause, the Scottish school curriculum includes meaningful learning about this vitally important subject. Our younger generation can now learn and grasp why menopause understanding is vital, seeing it as a relevant health condition. I would like to hear the Minister’s plans in that respect. What action are the UK Government taking now and in future to educate and involve younger persons in the discussion?

Supplementing that educational work, in August 2021 the SNP Scottish Government published a new women’s health plan, which set out 66 individual actions to ensure that all women enjoy the best possible healthcare, suited to their needs throughout their lives. Instead of making decisions behind closed doors, the real-life experiences of women are sought out and considered, recognising the importance of their feedback in effective policy making. From that, the menopause specialists network was established, whereby primary care teams meet on a regular basis to provide specialist, consistent and updated advice and training. This is what effective policy looks like: putting power into the hands of those most affected by the menopause, and enabling them to input and inform the best outcomes for their own lives.

[Steven Bonnar]

Scotland is providing more than just hope to women that the menopause is to be seen as a normal thing and everyone in the health community is there to support them. I know the Minister here takes note of the outstanding work being done in Scotland on other matters. I hope that she will do the same on menopause matters as well.

We also note that implications of the menopause, unfortunately, display themselves most of all in the workplace. Those experiencing the menopause are the fastest growing demographic in the workplace. Recent data found that 62% of women report being stigmatised by their employers for requesting leave or specialised support to deal with their early menopausal years. Too many employers are choosing to take an ageist and outdated approach to specific healthcare needs and are, frankly, in grave danger of losing out on exceptional talent and experience by taking the decision to treat older women differently from other staff.

Although employment law is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government are working to make our country a fair work nation, where all employers will offer flexible working and support equal working practices by 2025. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the pink fan. Those are all matters that need to be taken on board to make the workplace a more practical place for women going through the menopause.

I believe that the UK Government could go further. If they need any inspiration, they can look to our European counterparts. Spain has recently made landmark changes in introducing menstrual leave, whereby employers make workplaces a comfortable place for women to support them from a medical perspective and also take necessary time out for painful periods or menopausal symptoms. I urge the Government to take similar action. If we want to reflect the growing awareness of employee health and wellbeing and to prioritise it, we must integrate such progressive approaches into our entire working culture, rather than depending on individual businesses taking individual actions.

Lastly, as a man, I want to see the Government normalise the menopause discussion and make it a conversation we can all have openly, before finding and offering the solutions we know are required. I want to see more men in this place and across wider society speak up for women and stand in solidarity with them for fair treatment by employers, in particular on matters such as the menopause. We will all experience gender-specific issues in life. The more we learn about and understand those issues, the better we, as a society, can effectively deal with them, for the good of us all.

3.10 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Robertson. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing the debate. She has gone above and beyond in pursuit of this cause, empowering women across the country to stand up against a system that is simply not working for them. She inspires me and so many others in this place, and I am proud to call her a colleague and a friend.

I thank all Members for their passionate and important contributions, especially those who have shared their experience and the experiences of their constituents.

I praise the work of campaign groups such as Menopause Support and Menopause Mandate, which do great advocacy work and provide women with the information and support they need in what are often incredibly difficult situations.

As we have heard from hon. and right hon. Members throughout this debate, too many menopausal women are suffering unnecessarily in silence. This remains a national health scandal. Too many women are still being dismissed and told that menopause is a natural part of life—that they just need to put up with it. That is simply not good enough. Women should not be made to put up with it. I am pleased to say that, seeing the recent campaigns and hearing Members speak today, I am confident that it will not continue for too long.

Change needs to start with ensuring that healthcare professionals are properly informed and have the confidence to give women the advice and treatment that work for them. We know that, at present, that is simply not the case. As we have heard today, women are still being fobbed off and given the wrong treatment. In 2021, Menopause Support revealed that 41% of UK medical schools did not have mandatory menopause education on their curriculum. Healthcare professionals are not adequately trained to give women the right solution and treatment or even to identify menopause in the first place.

When it comes to treatment, hormone replacement therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence as a first-line and proven treatment for menopause symptoms, but that is only if patients can get it. We have heard today about the recent shortage of HRT. It is reported that the Health Secretary knew of the shortage as early as October 2021, and yet he did nothing. It took until May—seven months on—for the Government to allow pharmacists to make swaps to women's HRT prescriptions to deliver the care they need. It took a mass public outcry for the Government to listen to the needs and voices of women. A failure to plan left women unable to access the treatment they so desperately need.

The situation is even worse for black and ethnic minority women, as set out so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), and I thank her for sharing her personal experience. It is even harder for black, Asian and minority ethnic women to get diagnoses or to be heard. A report by the Fawcett Society showed that 45% of BAME women required multiple appointments for their GPs to realise they were experiencing menopause or perimenopause. I hope the Minister heard my hon. Friend's helpful suggestions, and that she will do more to ensure that black and Asian women's voices and experiences of the menopause are heard and that the campaigns my hon. Friend mentioned are recognised.

Menopause is yet another example of women's health being ignored. In the Government's own survey on women's healthcare, 84% of respondents said there had been instances where they had not been listened to by healthcare professionals. In recent years, we have seen a string of healthcare scandals primarily affecting women. The Minister needs to wake up to the fact that women are still not listened to when it comes to health. Let me just name some of those scandals: nearly 2,000 reported cases of avoidable harm and death in maternity services at Shrewsbury and Telford; more than 1,000 women operated on unnecessarily by a rogue breast surgeon, Ian Paterson;

and thousands in the UK given faulty PIP breast implants. There is a really long list of health scandals, which indicate that women are still not heard in the health system.

On access to HRT, the Government have delayed changes to prescription charges, leaving some women paying £200 more this year for HRT, making it inaccessible to many women in the middle of a cost of living crisis that is particularly felt by women in BAME and deprived communities, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East. In some communities, HRT is considered a luxury. That is a scandal in the fifth richest country in the world. How can we be in this place? It is disgraceful that women are being priced out of getting treatments that they need while trying to make ends meet.

The recent shortage of HRT, unfortunately, merely adds to the ever growing list. The Government have failed to take meaningful action to improve women's health. They are a Government of tsars, taskforces and reviews but no action. There is a huge list of reviews that have been commissioned by the Government, the recommendations of which they have refused to fully implement. The menopause taskforce, which my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea mentioned, will run for 18 months and there will only be nine meetings. How will that create meaningful change for women?

I have a lot of respect for the Minister, and I believe she is one of the hardest working Ministers in the Health Department, but she works very hard to act as a gatekeeper for the Treasury. How do we make sure that this taskforce is not yet another example of the Government covering their own back, with no action? The Government had promised their comprehensive women's health strategy by the end of last year, but it has still not appeared. Waiting lists across the NHS are at a record high, and when it comes to health issues affecting women, the waiting lists for essential appointments are even longer. The Government must start taking women's health seriously.

We have heard great suggestions about raising awareness of the menopause, including from the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). Making it easier for women to access HRT and improving the education and training of health professionals is essential. That is the only way we will get women across the country the right diagnosis and right treatment at the right time. However, it is clear, sadly, that health continues to be an afterthought for this Government, and the voices of women have been, at best, ignored and, at worst, silenced.

Will the Minister commit to finally publishing the women's health strategy and listening to women by delivering the healthcare they need, when and where they need it? Furthermore, when will she finally deliver the Government's commitment to enable women to pay a single annual prescription for HRT? As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea said: no more warm words—women need the Minister to act. If history tells us anything, it is that women will not sit back in the face of injustice. From what I have heard today, we can be sure that those voices will not go away—they will get louder and louder. I hope the Government wake up and start to act.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate

the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on once again securing a debate on this important issue. It is good to see all four nations represented here this afternoon and both men and women involved in the debate. It is my wedding anniversary today, and it is a pleasure to share it with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to show our continuing working relationship—[*Laughter.*]

To reassure hon. Members, progress has been made since the debate held by the hon. Member for Swansea East last October. It was one of the first debates I took part in as a new Minister, and I can honestly say that virtually every day since then we have worked on many of the issues addressed in that debate to improve outcomes for women going through the menopause. This is an important issue for me not only because it is a key priority area in my portfolio, but because I went through an early menopause over 10 years ago. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) described her struggle to get her GP to take her seriously, but for someone in their 30s it is even more difficult, and it can be a lonely experience if your peers are not going through the same thing. They are busy getting married and having children; they are certainly not talking about hot flushes and not being able to sleep. It can be a very difficult experience. So, for me, this is a personal mission as well as a ministerial one.

I want to reassure colleagues that I absolutely have a laser focus on delivering many of the pledges made in the previous debate. On the cost of HRT, we announced in that debate that we would accept the move towards reducing the costs. It only affects women in England, but it is an important issue. Around 89% of all prescriptions issued in England are free. People qualify for free prescriptions when they are on income support, universal credit, jobseeker's allowance and pension credit, so the vast majority of people getting general prescriptions are entitled to free prescriptions.

However, women going through the menopause often do not meet those criteria. I fully recognise that the cost is very high, particularly for women who are on two hormones or who have multiple products that they need dispensing. That is why we are committed to introducing the bespoke prepayment certificate for HRT by April next year. It is very different from the prepayment certificates that exist for general medicine. However, there are steps that we have to take. We are expected to consult the professional bodies involved. There will be changes to both dispensing and prescribing. A statutory instrument needs to be laid to make those changes happen. IT changes are also needed to make these things happen in practical terms, so that when women turn up at the chemist, their prescriptions are actually there for them to collect. We are not making excuses, and this will happen by April next year, not from April next year. If we can do it any quicker, we will. The prescription will be £18.70 for all HRT products, whether that is for two hormones or multiple products, and that will be a considerable cost saving for women.

The supply of HRT has been a challenge. We have seen more than a 30% increase in demand, thanks to all the campaigners raising the profile of the menopause but also highlighting the benefits of HRT and breaking the taboos. GPs and doctors were often worried about the safety of HRT, but campaigners have explained that some of the research that was around 10 or 15 years ago

[*Maria Caulfield*]

is out of date and that HRT is a safe and effective product for many women. So there has been a huge increase in demand. We have met trade suppliers, manufacturers and pharmacists to discuss the challenges they face and to try to overcome them. Of the more than 70 products that are available, we are now down to pressures on three or four, and even with those we are seeing significant progress.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) asked for an update. Maddy McTernan, the head of HRT supply, updated the taskforce this week. We are making good progress. There is commercially sensitive information, which we cannot share, but manufacturers are stepping up to the plate to produce extra supplies. It is not about meeting the demand now. Demand will continue to grow, and we need to future-proof to ensure that we are not in the same situation in six months.

The prepayment certificate will also help. Women will no longer have to try to get a prescription for three or four months in order to keep the cost down. They will be able to get a monthly supply and not have to pay an increased cost for doing so. That will help manage supplies overall. We have also introduced three serious shortage protocols for the three products, so that we can manage the amount that is being dispensed and have better stock control. It will also give powers to pharmacists to give alternative products. That is not always ideal, because I know that some women notice instantly a difference in the effect of a drug, even if it is the same drug but with a change in manufacturer. It is not ideal, but it is helping us get through this acute period, and it will enable us to better control stocks in the longer term. We will be updating colleagues as we go through this, and Maddy and the team from BEIS have been helping us hugely with that.

The UK menopause taskforce that has been set up was one of the asks from the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark); it was not a Government suggestion. We agreed to it and have had our second meeting. There are four key areas where we want to make recommendations. Those include education—for women, men, boys and girls, and healthcare professionals too. The taskforce will also look at the workplace, health provision, and research into areas such as testosterone, where we need to be breaking some barriers.

In the short time I have, I would like to touch on the workplace issue, which is crucial. One of the key things about the taskforce is that it is not just about health. We have a BEIS Minister and an employment Minister, and we are going to invite, as was suggested earlier, a Minister from Justice as well so that we reach out to all women affected by the menopause. I am really pleased that the civil service led the way this week when we signed Wellbeing of Women's menopause workplace pledge. That will not just help women in the civil service who are going through the menopause it is to show other employers the sorts of small changes, such as the pink fan mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that can make a big difference. It will also enable women and employers to feel confident to have those discussions at work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said, these women are in the prime of life. We have women with extraordinary experience and talent who we should be harnessing, not letting go.

We are really serious about improving GP training. It has been difficult for GPs to get that specialist advice and support, as this is a growing area, but the General Medical Council will be including the menopause as part of its licensing assessment, so it will be a core part of training. The NHS England menopause programme will be producing resources for all types of healthcare professionals so that we can make sure that people are trained.

I know I have to let the hon. Member for Swansea East come back in—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): There is plenty of time.

Maria Caulfield: Okay. The NHS itself is setting up a training programme to make sure that at every point that a woman approaches the health service—when meeting GPs or nurses—they get the specialist training they need.

The women's health strategy is coming forward. I would rather spend time getting it right than rush it through to meet a deadline. We are weeks away from publishing. We have already published our vision and the findings from the consultation, and the strategy will build on that. The menopause will be a priority area within that document. We will also be announcing a women's health ambassador very shortly, who will be holding my feet to the fire, as will the hon. Member for Swansea East.

I hope I have reassured colleagues that we are doing so much work in this area. Debates such as this are not just about holding me to account. They are about breaking taboos and having lightbulb moments for women across the country, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said. I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House and in all four nations to improve the experience for women.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I call Carolyn Harris to wind up.

3.29 pm

Carolyn Harris: Thank you, Mr Robertson. I will not take the hour that is left for my summing up, although I could start all over again.

I want to make just a few points. First, I thank everybody for being here and for sharing their personal stories—I am looking in a certain direction. I know it is painful and hard, but when people in this place talk about their personal experiences, it makes us look like what we are—real people with real lives and real feelings—to the outside world. That gives confidence to women out there who are thinking that nobody cares and nobody is listening. Unless we talk to those women, we will not know how they feel. When Nicola Sturgeon appears on “Loose Women” and talks about her menopause, it is inspirational for women right across the UK. When a certain Jim Shannon gets a shout-out as a menopause ambassador on “Loose Women”, it gives confidence to women across the UK that we politicians are listening.

The celebrities who are coming in on Monday are really nervous about coming to Westminster. They think they are coming into a world where they are expected to perform in a particular way, and that we will all be looking at them and thinking, “What do you know about politics?” Through the work they have done, they have proved that they may do politics better than we do,

and that they have used their platform to change actually things, without making it party political, which we try not to do on this subject. They are using their platform to share really important messages and really personal stories, in an industry where, traditionally, nobody wants to admit to being a certain age or to potentially being menopausal, because they would be seen as getting on a bit. I really want to thank them.

One thing that it is really important to say is that I would like to see the Davina effect enshrined in legislation—perhaps we can have a show of hands on that—because Davina McCall has played a huge role. I do not think any of us could really have done what we have done without Davina’s documentaries and the work she has done.

Nickie Aiken: On that point, rather than having the Davina McCall effect, perhaps we should all write to whomever we are meant to write to, to ask whether Davina McCall should become a Dame.

Carolyn Harris: That is a perfect suggestion, and it is something that has been playing on my mind lately.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. This is a winding-up speech and should last only two minutes.

Carolyn Harris: Yes, two minutes.

The last thing I will say is that everything that everybody has said is wonderful, but as long as women do not have a single prescription charge, do not have a proper diagnosis and proper medication, are giving up work and do not have equal treatment, we are failing. We cannot continue to fail women.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the menopause.

3.33 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 9 June 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Storm Arwen Review: Final Report

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): The Energy Emergencies Executive Committee Storm Arwen review was commissioned in December 2021 by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, due to unacceptable levels of power disruption following Storm Arwen. The interim report was published in February 2022, and the final report has now been completed and published on gov.uk.

The review has been a joint endeavour between Government, industry and the regulator (Ofgem) with the aim of identifying lessons to be learned and actions to take forward. These actions will drive improvements to Great Britain's electricity network resilience to severe weather events. The actions recommended by this review address concerns under the three pillars of system resilience, consumer protection and additional support.

The majority address improvements to be made across all electricity distribution network operators regardless of their impact during this particular storm. Lessons from subsequent storms that hit the UK in February 2022 have also been incorporated and reflected as part of this final report. While improvements will be made, no electricity system can be totally immune from disruption.

The Energy Emergencies Executive Committee will be responsible for the implementation of these actions, in collaboration with other partners as appropriate, alongside my Department which will ensure the delivery and implementation of the actions recommended.

[HCWS84]

CABINET OFFICE

Transforming for a Digital Future: 2022-25 Roadmap

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Later today, I will publish "Transforming for a Digital Future: Government's 2022-25 Roadmap for Digital and Data", which sets out an ambitious plan to ensure that, by 2025, we deliver a transformed, more efficient digital Government that provides better outcomes for everyone. I have requested that a copy of the full text be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses in Parliament.

The importance of digital and data

Digital and data are key to unlocking many of this Government's priorities, from generating efficiencies to net zero and levelling up. Better digital systems and access to data will allow smaller teams across Government to work faster, make better decisions, and deliver better policies. Modern technology will minimise waste and reduce our reliance on paper-based forms. A more digitally skilled civil service, working across the UK, will ensure that citizens get access to the same great services no matter where they live.

The opportunity

The Government have some excellent digital services and examples of digital transformation, but we still need to harness the full potential of digital transformation at scale. Many services are in need of improvement to deliver the right outcomes, our technology is in need of refreshing to give value for money, we have significant and persistent gaps in skills and expertise, and our business systems are in need of reform to keep pace with the digital age.

If we maintain the current course, we will miss opportunities to deliver the experiences and outcomes that citizens expect and we have committed to deliver, we will see talented digital and data professionals choosing to work elsewhere, and we will miss out on efficiency savings.

Cross-Government support and collaboration

This road map has been collectively agreed by the Cabinet Economic and Domestic Implementation Committee.

The road map is the result of an unprecedented level of collaboration from digital leaders across Government. The Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) in the Cabinet Office has worked with representatives from Departments to develop the road map, including regular engagement with the permanent secretary-level Digital and Data Board.

CDDO will continue to work closely with Departments to support and monitor progress against the road map. Each mission has a senior civil servant "executive sponsor" who will act as an advocate for that mission and support work to progress against the specific commitments.

As a result, I am confident that there is sufficient support and momentum behind this road map to ensure we will meet all of the commitments it sets out by 2025.

What we will deliver by 2025

The road map sets out a bold vision for change which is supported by a set of clear, feasible and measurable commitments that Departments have collectively agreed to deliver between now and 2025.

By 2025 the most frequently used critical services will have great user experience and incorporate efficient processes that reduce their cost to run. We will provide a single, efficient and accessible digital identity process for citizens, and ensure that data which is central to priority Government objectives will be safely shared and used to improve policy and service delivery. We will build digital technology in a consistent way, improving the quality of what we build and our speed to deployment. We will be an employer of choice for digital talent, with highly skilled teams and leaders, and have funding structures and delivery approaches that enable and incentivise modern, efficient and user-centric investment and high-quality services.

The pace of technological change and the growing expectations of citizens and businesses mean we must renew our focus and go further than ever before to realise the opportunities presented by digital transformation. I am confident that, by fulfilling the commitments set out in the road map, we will be able to do exactly that.

[HCWS83]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Smokefree 2030: Independent Review

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): In 2019, this Government set the bold ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030—reducing smoking rates to 5% or less.

Today, Dr Javed Khan OBE published his independent review on Smokefree 2030, providing this Government with a wide range of recommendations for how we can achieve this ambition.

Tragically, smoking remains the single biggest cause of preventable illness and death across the country. There are still almost 6 million smokers in England—and two out of three will die from smoking unless they quit.

Although smoking rates have fallen, we know that they are currently not falling fast enough.

The Government are committed to levelling up society and extending the same chances in life to all people and all parts of our country. However, smoking is one of the largest drivers of health disparities and rates vary substantially across different parts of the country. As stated by Dr Khan in his independent review, at its most extreme, smoking prevalence is 4.5 times higher in Burnley than in Exeter.

Smoking is a significant drain on the household finances of our most disadvantaged families. In Halton in Cheshire, smokers spend an estimated £3,551 a year on tobacco, nearly 15% of their income. Reducing smoking presents a huge economic opportunity in higher disposable income and higher labour productivity.

Smoking is particularly high amongst certain populations, and one third of all cigarettes smoked in England are smoked by people with a mental health condition. Nearly 10% of mothers smoke at the time of giving birth, increasing the risk of sudden infant death syndrome by over three times compared to mothers who do not smoke. Further, the risk of stillbirth is increased by at least 60% if the father smokes. Smoking is also known to increase the risk of miscarriage.

Behind all of these statistics are individuals, families and communities who are suffering from the harms of tobacco. This Government are committed to doing more to help smokers to quit and stop people from taking up this deadly addiction. We also know that most smokers want to quit.

For these reasons, we asked Dr Khan to undertake this independent review to help the Government reduce the devastation that smoking causes in our communities. There are a number of recommendations in Dr Khan's independent review. The Government will now consider their response.

There is a call for greater investment—from local authority-led stop smoking services, through to improved data and evidence. The Government are already investing funding through the public health grant, but we will examine where we can go further.

There is a call to offer vaping as a substitute for smoking. Vaping is far less harmful than smoking and is an effective quitting device. It is recognised that there is much more Government can do to tackle the myths and misconceptions that surround vaping. We have worked

with the MHRA to provide guidance to support bringing e-cigarettes to market as licensed therapies and this Government will take forward a range of work on vaping as a substitute for smoking in due course.

Dr Khan also calls for the NHS to prioritise further action to stop people from smoking. Smoking costs the NHS £2.5 billion every year. The benefits of focusing on preventing smoking-related illnesses, rather than treating them, are clear for patients and the NHS themselves.

This Government are determined to address the challenges raised in the independent review and to meet the Smokefree 2030 target. We know that more action needs to be taken to protect our people from this dangerous addiction.

The Department will now carefully consider the recommendations set out in this independent review. The independent review will help to inform our upcoming White Paper on health disparities, which we plan to publish this summer. To complement this, the Department will also be publishing a new tobacco control plan in due course.

We would like to thank Dr Khan for his far-reaching work on the independent review, and for his clear and challenging recommendations.

A copy of the independent Khan review will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS87]

Medical Examiners

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is our intention to work towards commencing implementation plans for the statutory medical examiner system from April 2023, recognising the need for all relevant Government Departments to be ready and aligned to enable successful implementation. The statutory medical examiner system will be centrally funded in England. This follows the required amendment to the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, which has now been made through the Health and Care Act 2022, to host medical examiners in England in NHS bodies rather than local health authorities.

The National Medical Examiner has published the report for year 2021 which sets out the non-statutory medical examiner system progress to date. The medical examiner system will introduce an additional layer of scrutiny of the cause of death by the medical practitioner, improving the quality and accuracy of the medical certificate of cause of death and thereby informing the national data on mortality and patient safety. The medical examiner system will increase transparency and facilitate discussions with the bereaved about any concerns they may have, providing new levels of scrutiny to improve detection of criminal activity or poor practice.

After the statutory medical examiner system has been introduced, all non-coronial deaths will be scrutinised by a medical examiner, for both burials and cremations.

[HCWS85]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Serious Violence Duty: Draft Statutory Guidance Consultation

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

The Government are today announcing the publication of a consultation on the draft statutory guidance on the serious violence duty (the duty) which will be issued by the Secretary of State as statutory guidance under chapter 1 of part 2 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to support specified authorities and organisation exercising functions in relation to the duty.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 introduced the duty to ensure specified authorities, being police, fire and rescue authorities, local authorities, specified health authorities and criminal justice agencies and organisations work collaboratively, to share data and information, understand the causes and consequences of serious violence, focusing on prevention and early intervention, and put in place plans informed by evidence to prevent and reduce serious violence. In addition, section 6(1) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 has been amended to ensure that serious violence is an explicit priority for community safety partnerships and that a strategy is in place to explicitly tackle serious violence.

The duty is a key part of the Government's programme of work to reduce serious violence and put an end to the tragedies afflicting our communities. It is very important we work together, across Government, statutory, private, and voluntary sectors to deliver this crucial change. The Government have made £130 million available this financial year, 2022-23, to tackle serious violence, including murder and knife crime.

This Government committed to update and formally consult on the draft statutory guidance published in May 2021 on before the duty's implementation. Officials have revised the guidance by engaging with other government departments, stakeholders and wider partners. Government amendments are also reflected in the new draft, and these:

- provide clarity that the definition of violence for the purpose of the duty includes domestic abuse and sexual violence,

- exclude patient information and in addition health or social care authorities cannot share personal information under the data sharing provisions in respect of the duty,

- restrict data requests from local policing bodies, PCCs, and in London the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and the Common Council of the City of London as police authority, to information already held by an authority to whom the request is made,

- require that the Secretary of State lays a copy of the final statutory guidance for the serious violence duty in Parliament,
- clarify on the face of the legislation that specified authorities must publish a strategy and that regulations will provide further detail about the publication or dissemination of a strategy.

Specific guidance is included for authorities operating in Wales, to reflect the distinct Welsh legislative and operational context as well as additional content on housing and homelessness. The outline policy for secondary legislation on the publication and dissemination of local partnerships serious violence strategies and local policing

bodies' discretionary role to support the development and implementation of the local serious violence strategy is included.

The consultation, which launches today, 9 June, will run for a period of six weeks, closing on 21 July. Once the response to the consultation along with a final version of the guidance have been published, the duty and associated secondary legislation will be commenced to enable local partnerships to work towards publication and dissemination of their serious violence strategies.

A copy of this consultation and the draft statutory guidance will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS86]

JUSTICE

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme Review: Supplementary Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice

(Tom Pursglove): Today I have laid before Parliament a public consultation on one of the eligibility rules of the statutory criminal injuries compensation scheme 2012 (the scheme). This follows the criminal injuries compensation review 2020 in which we consulted on proposals to improve the experience of victims applying for compensation, by making the scheme simpler and easier to navigate.

The statutory scheme exists to compensate victims of violent crime in Great Britain, to recognise, through compensation, the injuries and harm they experienced. The so-called unspent convictions rule has been an eligibility requirement since the first statutory scheme came into force in 1996. The 2012 scheme sets out the circumstances in which an award will be withheld or reduced where the applicant has an unspent conviction. In the 2012 scheme an exclusion was introduced which means that an applicant is not eligible if they have an unspent conviction that resulted in a custodial or community sentence. The rationale for this is to prevent individuals who have committed serious illegal acts benefiting from state-funded compensation, to reflect the degree of harm done to others and the cost to society of offending behaviour.

Since 2012 there have been varying calls for abolition of the rule or reform of it to reintroduce discretion, particularly in relation to certain victim groups or specific circumstances such as compulsion or childhood trauma. As part of our review of the scheme leading up to the 2020 consultation, options for reform were carefully explored and in the consultation our conclusions for proposing no change to the rule were explained.

In July 2021 the Supreme Court determined that the rule in the 2012 scheme is lawful and proportionate, and stated that the exclusionary approach is an acceptable one and has the advantage of leading to consistency and clarity. The Supreme Court also noted that the legislator is entitled to adopt a scheme with clearly defined rules for determining entitlement to publicly-funded compensation. However, in a separate case the High Court found that the Government had not met a legitimate

expectation to consult on reform of the unspent convictions rule. This was because the 2020 consultation did not ask a specific question on whether it should be revised in line with a recommendation made by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in 2018. As required by the High Court we are publishing this supplementary consultation to invite views on reform of the rule.

We are looking at the rule afresh. The consultation poses broad questions about retaining the rule unchanged, which remains an option, and on the following potential reforms: introducing exemptions so that not all claims are automatically rejected on the basis of a specified unspent conviction; amending the terms of the rule to reduce the number of claims that are automatically rejected; and removing the exclusionary part of the rule so that no claims are automatically rejected.

After this second consultation we will decide whether or not to revise the rule and share our conclusions and proposals about reform of the scheme as a whole following our comprehensive review.

The consultation is available in full at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/criminal-injuries-compensation-scheme-review-supplementary-consultation>.

The consultation will close 5 August 2022.

[HCWS88]

TRANSPORT

Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail: Public Consultation

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

Today, my department launches a public consultation on the primary legislative changes required to deliver structural reform of our railways. This follows publication of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail in May 2021, which heralded the start of the biggest transformation of Great Britain's railways in three decades, and the announcement in the Queen's Speech on 10 May 2022 of the introduction of a transport Bill to Parliament which will modernise rail services, put passengers and freight customers first, deliver for taxpayers and combine the best of the public and private sectors.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail highlighted the need for change. It was clear that our railways had become fragmented, the system was complicated, and passengers deserved better. This, alongside spiralling costs, delays to upgrades and commercial failures, pointed to a railway in need of fundamental reform. Getting this right means that we can ensure this historic industry delivers for its users, setting it on a more sustainable and secure footing. It also means delivering a stronger, more levelled up and increasingly green economy, of which the railways are a crucial part.

Many of the commitments set out in the plan for rail do not require legislation in order to be taken forward, and the Government are already working in close partnership with the rail industry to deliver rapid improvements for passengers and freight customers. For example, new flexible season tickets went on sale last summer and we continue to work with train operators to roll out digital ticketing to make journeys easier. We

are also undertaking a comprehensive accessibility audit of stations across Great Britain, continuing to cut the costs and time of infrastructure work through Project SPEED and developing a 30-year whole industry strategic plan.

In addition to this, we have launched the Great British Railways Transition Team, under the leadership of Andrew Haines, to drive forward reforms and develop the model for a new arm's-length body, Great British Railways, including its initial structure, leadership and people. GBRTT is focused on establishing a new, customer-focused industry culture, driving revenue recovery efforts and establishing an interim strategic freight unit to work collaboratively with the sector, ensuring an immediate focus on delivery of the Government's ambitions for rail freight. GBRTT is also currently overseeing a competition for the location of a national headquarters for Great British Railways, to be based outside of London, in line with this Government's commitment to levelling up.

However, primary legislation is required to deliver key elements of structural reform set out in the plan for rail. This includes providing Great British Railways with the powers and authority it needs to act as the single guiding mind for the railways, ending years of fragmentation. The consultation launched today seeks views of all those with an interest in our railways, to help shape these reforms.

The consultation is focused across three key areas as outlined below.

The first is on the establishment of Great British Railways, including its proposed functions and duties and how we propose to legislate and work with stakeholders to enable Great British Railways to become the single guiding mind for the railways.

The second is focused on how we will ensure clear accountabilities in the rail sector through a new governance framework, including the regulator's role in providing independent scrutiny and challenge.

The third centres on reform of wider industry structures and processes that are needed to deliver transformation of the railways and a new industry culture, including a new passenger champion role for transport focus and proposals for open data sharing.

Great British Railways is key to delivering a customer-focused railway. The plans outlined in this consultation will deliver a rail system that is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport system, offering passengers and freight customers a better deal and greater value for money for taxpayers. The private sector has played an integral role in improving our railways over the past 25 years; these plans are designed to take the best of the private sector and fuse it with a single guiding mind that can drive benefits and efficiencies across the system as a whole.

I hope that all those with an interest in our railways will find the time to participate and share their views through this consultation. Sharing your views will help to ensure the legislative changes that we enact will deliver the vision set out in the plan for rail, securing our railways so that they are able to flourish into the future and as we approach their bicentenary in 2025.

[HCWS89]

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