

Thursday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 June 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Today marks the sixth anniversary of the death of our friend and colleague Jo Cox, who was murdered on her way to meet constituents in her Batley and Spen constituency. She was doing what so many of us do as constituency MPs, and that was what made her death all the more shocking. May I express on behalf of the whole House our sympathy with her family, friends and colleagues on this sad anniversary? We will never forget Jo, or her legacy. We remember her wise words that we “have far more in common than that which divides us”.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CONTINGENCIES FUND ACCOUNT 2021-22

Ordered,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2021-22, showing—

1. A Statement of Financial Position
2. A Statement of Cash Flows and
3. Notes to the Accounts; together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK's Green Industries: Export Opportunities

1. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to increase export opportunities for the UK's green industries. [900486]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Our clean growth programme launched during COP26 has boosted support for green exporters, including a new clean growth faculty in our Export Academy, while UK Export Finance has provided over £7 billion of support for sustainable deals since 2019. Our free trade agreements are liberalising green trade, supporting green jobs across the country, including on the Humber. This autumn we will host a UK green trade and investment expo in the north-east connecting UK industry with global investors and buyers to promote green opportunities.

Martin Vickers: It is quite clear that the Government are doing a great deal to promote the green sector and make it easier for our British-based companies to exploit the export market, but given the commitments that have been made by countries across the globe at the COP26 conference, there is clearly always more that can be done. Are the Government planning any additional new initiatives other than those that the Minister has outlined?

Mike Freer: The Government will continue to use the free trade agreements to liberalise and encourage green investment. We lead outward-bound trade visits. We are constantly seeking opportunities and talking to our partner countries to assist them in expanding on green exports, particularly in things like solar power, wind power, renewables and smart cities. These are all technological sectors where the UK leads the world.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What discussions has the Minister had with the Scottish Government about the potential for Scotland's green energy industries such as offshore wind and hydrogen and the part that they have to play in a UK trade strategy?

Mike Freer: I am planning a trip to Scotland in the very near future to have the very conversations that the hon. Lady mentions. The Department works closely with the Scottish Government. Only this week, we took a trade delegation of Azerbaijanis up to Aberdeen to look at how people can transition from carbon to renewable energy.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Ruth Cadbury.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I start by endorsing your comments about our colleague, my friend, Jo Cox? She is still very much missed and always will be.

It is vital that we support green industries in the UK, especially those that are exporting products around the world, yet the investor state dispute settlements threaten green industries and renewable energy projects. Many of these provisions are in the energy charter treaty, which lets fossil fuel companies sue Governments who are trying to decarbonise, such as the Netherlands. Will the Government therefore support efforts to remove in full these protections for fossil fuel companies in the energy charter treaty?

Mike Freer: I understand that we have never been defeated in any disputes on that particular subject. If the hon. Lady has any specific issues about barriers that she wants to have addressed, I am more than happy to ensure that that conversation is taken forward. As the Minister responsible for exports, I can say that those particular barriers have never been raised with me when talking to partner countries.

Mr Speaker: I call SNP spokesperson Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I echo your comments regarding our colleague Jo Cox?

Germany is a key export target, along with other nations, for Scottish clean hydrogen. Scotland is already a net energy exporter—an energy-rich country ready for independence. Given that clean hydrogen from Scotland can generate an extra £25 billion gross value added and create tens of jobs by 2045, what discussions has the Minister had with his Government colleagues about reversing the £1 billion betrayal of the carbon capture and storage scheme at Peterhead, dumped in 2017 and shamefully ignored ever since, in order both to capitalise on and turbocharge this export potential?

Mike Freer: If there is such great export potential, I am surprised that the member of the Scottish Government who, let us not say has responsibility for exports, because we have been there before, but who does specific work on exports, has not raised it with me. I look forward to that conversation when I go up to Scotland, but if this is such a barrier, I urge the Scottish Government to discuss it with the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change.

India: Foreign Direct Investment and Trade

2. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her Indian counterpart on increasing (a) trade with and (b) foreign direct investment from India. [900490]

15. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her Indian counterpart on increasing (a) trade with and (b) foreign direct investment from India. [900507]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Mr Speaker, I should also like to associate myself with your comments about our colleague Jo Cox.

Our trading relationship with India was worth over £24 billion last year, and we are already India's top investment destination in Europe. We have had many discussions and remain determined to create more good jobs and boost wages across Britain. Together, we are bulldozing trade barriers and—from Scotch whisky to Welsh lamb and medical devices—I think we all know that a trade deal will take our relationship even further.

Felicity Buchan: My constituency of Kensington has strong links with India. We have the oldest gurdwara in the whole of Europe, the Khalsa Jatha, and we also have the residency of the Indian high commission. Indeed, on Sunday I will be with the Indian high commissioner in Holland Park launching International Yoga Day. Everyone is welcome to attend. [*Laughter.*] Can my hon. Friend explain to the House how a trade agreement with India can benefit the whole of the UK?

Mr Jayawardena: I may not be sufficiently flexible to attend and to join the high commissioner on International Yoga Day, but it is wonderful to hear of my hon. Friend's collaboration.

Following the Prime Minister's visit to India in April, British and Indian businesses have confirmed more than £1 billion of new investment and export deals in areas from software engineering to health, and this has created almost 11,000 jobs across the country, including in Edinburgh, Leeds, Northumberland and York. This illustrates how investment and a trade deal will continue to bolster our levelling-up agenda to the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom.

Andrew Bridgen: Does the Minister agree that British business should look more towards India than China for future trade relationships given its democratic structure and our historical ties, and what steps are the Government taking to encourage and facilitate that?

Mr Jayawardena: The world's oldest democracy and the world's biggest are certainly natural partners, and this, alongside our historical ties and thoroughly modern relationship with one of the fastest growing economies

in the world, makes India a clear priority trading partner for the United Kingdom. Through the integrated review, we are pursuing deeper engagement with India and other partners across the Indo-Pacific, and I am very keen to continue our work to support those who do so much to champion Anglo-Indian relations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself with your comments about Jo Cox? It is hard to believe that it is six years, but while she was cruelly taken from us and from her family, she very clearly lives on with her legacy, and we remember that.

I thank the Minister for his response. We understand that there are clear contacts between ourselves and India culturally, economically and historically. At the same time, can the Minister outline what steps are being taken to ensure compliance with human rights, which is an essential component of any trade deal, as a priority? Human rights must be central to any deal.

Mr Jayawardena: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great champion of religious freedom in particular, and the Government's international obligations and commitments, including on freedoms, are always of paramount importance when it comes to making our decisions. We encourage all states to uphold their obligations, and we condemn any incidences of discrimination because of religion or belief, regardless of the country or faith involved. We do engage with India on a range of issues, as global Britain does carry the torch of freedom forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We very much welcome the prospect of increased trading opportunities with India, a country with which we have many historical ties. At the COP26 summit in Glasgow last year, Prime Minister Modi announced demanding commitments to reduce emissions. After the Government's shocking sell-out on the Australia deal, what preparation is the Minister making to use a possible trade deal to support Modi's ambitions and to act on recommendations from the CBI about how our trade policy can support our climate goals, such as by including incentives to meet or surpass emissions reduction targets in a trade agreement?

Mr Jayawardena: I am not going to comment on live negotiations. Indeed, we were delighted to welcome the Indian negotiators to London this week for a further round of discussions. We have been very clear that we want trade to be a force for good in the world, including green trade, which we believe can create thousands if not millions of jobs across Britain and indeed the world, and I am sure that the Indian Government would agree.

Trade with Commonwealth Countries

3. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase trade with Commonwealth countries. [900491]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Mr Speaker, may I also associate myself with your remarks about Jo Cox and her legacy? My thoughts are with her family today.

Pre-pandemic, the combined GDP of the Commonwealth was \$9 trillion, and nearly 80% of that was due to four nations: us, India, Canada, with which we are now negotiating a free trade agreement, and Australia, with which we have already secured a from-scratch FTA. With 27 economic partnerships, we intend to boost our intra-Commonwealth trade to \$2 trillion by 2030.

Mrs Murray: In this year of the platinum jubilee, what better time could there be to cement our bond with Commonwealth countries? Does my right hon. Friend agree that this would be an excellent year to redouble our efforts to increase trade with those nations, which have such a strong history with our own?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. Yes, we have the jubilee, and we also have the Commonwealth games, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is approaching. It is right that we celebrate and enhance the power of our Commonwealth family. We are united in our commitment to democracy, peace and prosperity, and we will continue to work with our partners to capture the potential of the Commonwealth advantage, which on average allows for 21% lower bilateral trade costs between Commonwealth countries, compared with most non-Commonwealth countries. We should put all our weight behind maximising that.

Surveillance Technology: Trade with China

4. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of trade with China on surveillance technology. [900493]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): China remains a significant trading partner for the United Kingdom, and there is scope for mutually beneficial trade and investment. In 2021, China was Britain's third largest trading partner, but our approach to China is, and will remain, rooted in our values. As set out in the integrated review, we want a positive trade and investment relationship with China, but we will make sure that Britain's national security, and the values of the British people, are protected.

Rachael Maskell: The EU Parliament, Australian Government, and the US recognise the dangers of Chinese state owned surveillance cameras, and are introducing sanctions against Hikvision, and others, due to the national security considerations, and the facilitation of human rights atrocities in Xinjiang. The UK Government have not ceased trade in those products, and are placing them in UK schools, hospitals, on our streets, and even in Government Departments. Does the Minister agree that the UK should immediately cease trading in security equipment with China, and funding those companies implicated in genocide?

Mr Jayawardena: We remain seriously concerned about allegations levied against Chinese surveillance firms with regard to Xinjiang, and we take the security of our citizens, systems and establishments very seriously. We have a range of measures in place to scrutinise the integrity of our arrangements. In addition, the Procurement Bill will further strengthen the ability of public sector bodies to disqualify suppliers from bidding for contracts where there is a history of misconduct. We have already

set out a number of measures to help ensure that no British organisations are profiting from or contributing to the violations of rights.

UK-India Free Trade Agreement

5. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent assessment her Department has made of the progress of the UK-India Free Trade Agreement. [900494]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): As I said a moment ago, talks with India continue to be positive, and on Monday we welcomed Indian officials to London for the fourth round of negotiations. An FTA offers the opportunity to deepen our already strong relationship, which was worth over £24 billion last year. We are determined to grow that, creating jobs in every corner of the country, including in whisky distilleries across Scotland, on which 150% of tariffs and taxes must currently be paid in India.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The Republic of India has a respected independent legal system, and that will form part of the basis of the FTA between the UK and India. The Secretary of State will be aware of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal. What importance do the Minister and the Government place on a well-functioning legal system that respects human rights and the dignity of the individual when progressing free trade negotiations with states such as the Republic of India?

Mr Jayawardena: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he says, and he has raised this issue with me in the past. Her Majesty's Government are committed to working with the Government of India to resolve longstanding and complex consular cases such as this. The Foreign Secretary met the hon. Gentleman and the family of his constituent on 9 June, and she committed to continuing to raise those concerns with the Indian authorities. Our strong ties with India benefit British prosperity and security, and vice versa, but we are clear that increased trade need not come at the expense of our values.

UK Exports to Ukraine

6. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help UK exports reach Ukraine. [900495]

9. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help UK exports reach Ukraine. [900499]

14. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help UK exports reach Ukraine. [900506]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Since 22 February, the Export Support Service has supported over 400 businesses and individuals wishing to export to Ukraine. To support British businesses, the Department for International Trade has expanded its Export Support Service to act as a single point of enquiry for businesses and traders with questions relating to the situation in

Ukraine and Russia. The Department will continue to support business and traders during this period. Having a dedicated export support team ready to help at the end of the phone will help businesses to access the information they need at any time. Indeed, the Department runs Britain's system of export controls and licensing. The export control joint unit is expediting urgent export licence applications for Ukraine.

Harriett Baldwin: The British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union is honoured to be hosting a delegation of Ukrainian MPs to Parliament today; I will share that information with them. For Ukraine, the big issue in exports is getting grain out of the blockaded port of Odesa. What conversations is the Minister having with the World Trade Organisation to stop the illegal blockade?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Indeed, until Russia's invasion in February, Ukraine was one of the largest exporters of grains and vegetable oils. Britain has developed a six-point plan for tackling food insecurity. We continue to work with international partners, including at the WTO, to find ways to resume grain exports from Ukraine to the countries who desperately need them, particularly in the developing world. The outcome that we want is to keep trade flowing and to keep prices down.

Mark Fletcher: Will the Minister update the House on how liberalising tariffs on Ukraine has supported the flow of trade and, in turn, on how effective our sanctions have been against Russia?

Mr Jayawardena: On 10 May, Britain laid legislation to liberalise all tariffs on imports of Ukrainian origin. Those measures have reduced barriers faced by Ukrainian businesses and consumers in their time of need, making it easier to obtain essential goods and aid from Britain. In lockstep with our allies, we are introducing the largest and most severe economic sanctions that Russia has ever faced, with, for example, up to 60% of Russian foreign currency reserves currently frozen. Analysis shows that, as a result, Russia is heading for its deepest recession since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Tom Randall: We have all seen on television the widespread devastation in Ukraine caused by Russia, so we know that its path to reconstruction will be a long one. What steps are the Government taking in planning and support of future rebuilding efforts in Ukraine?

Mr Jayawardena: The United Kingdom is exploring how she can support the Ukrainian Government's reconstruction efforts. There may be opportunities for British businesses to contribute with their skills, technology and ingenuity. To that end, I am delighted that, tomorrow, the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), will host the Ukraine investment summit to bring together British companies who have expertise in reconstruction with Ukrainian decision makers to begin identifying opportunities for collaboration.

Trade Remedies Authority

7. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Trade Remedies Authority. [900496]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): The Trade Remedies Authority seeks to defend UK industries from unfair trade practices. It was established last year and has already begun a series of investigations and making recommendations to support businesses in sectors vital to the UK national interest.

Liz Twist: Hydro, which produces aluminium extrusions at its Birtley factory in my constituency, is concerned that the final measures proposed by the Trade Remedies Authority will not protect it from imports from China and that they are nowhere near as strong as EU tariffs. Will the Minister or the Secretary of State meet me and Hydro to discuss the situation and how the proposed TRA decision will affect the company?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The provisional rates are based on the evidence that the TRA had gathered at that point in its investigation. Companies will have to pay provisional duties only if there is a decision to apply a definitive anti-dumping duty. The TRA was in Parliament last week, I think, willing to talk to Members of Parliament. It is always open to doing that, as well as to speaking directly with businesses, but I shall pass on her comments to the Secretary of State. She is not here today because of MC12—the World Trade Organisation's 12th ministerial conference—but I will ensure that the hon. Lady's concerns are passed on to her.

UK Food Exports: Promotion

8. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote UK food exports around the world. [900497]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): The Department works with the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board to promote cheese exports in the middle east and China. We have dedicated cheese stands at trade shows in the middle east, such as Gulfood. We promote cheese through China's social media. We operate "meet the buyer" events. For example, I was out in Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, and saw for myself how our Department's people on the ground try to ensure that major supermarket chains have access to British cheese. We have over 100 specialists in food, beverage and agriculture, and newly appointed agri-commissioners in key markets to continue to boost this important sector.

Theresa Villiers: Mr Speaker, I hope you and the whole House will agree with me when I say that the cheese produced by the farmers of the four nations of this great country is the best in the world. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] So, I want to hear that cheese is at the heart of our trade and export policy. Let us hear about the action being taken to ensure that more people in the middle east, China, India and across the world are eating our Great British cheese.

Mike Freer: Let me reassure my right hon. Friend that the grand fromage in No. 10 Downing Street—[HON. MEMBERS: "Groan!"] It was certainly a cheesy line. The Prime Minister has made it abundantly clear that he expects us to continue to push the export of food and beverage. It is working, because the UK's cheese exports to the world were £565 million in 2021. Exports to China were £3.9 million in 2021, which is an increase of

3.9%. Exports to Saudi Arabia are up 53% and exports to the Gulf in general are up 16.2%. This is a British success story, which we will sell to the world.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Vickers, you had Question 1. You cannot have two bites of the cherry, as much as I am tempted! I know you want to talk about great Lancashire cheeses, but unfortunately you cannot. Let us move on to Craig Tracey.

USA: Tariffs on Imports from UK

10. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage the US Administration to lift tariffs on imports from the UK. [900500]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): On 1 June, section 232 tariffs on imports of UK steel and aluminium products were lifted. We have also secured the lifting of the long-standing US ban on the import of British beef and lamb.

Craig Tracey: The Minister is doing excellent work to help pave the way for UK businesses to do more trade in the US, and lifting tariffs is just one of the ways we can do that. Will she set out what more the Government can do to support our leading service sectors, as well as help our small and medium-sized enterprises to get their foot in the door?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. In addition to a free trade agreement, which will assist us on tariffs and those kinds of barriers, we are pursuing a twin-track approach with US states. That will help our service sector in particular. We are also looking at the mutual recognition of qualifications in accounting, auditing, legal services and so on. Next week, we are holding a UK-US SME dialogue in Boston to help us open up procurement possibilities for companies that would find it difficult to seek out those opportunities.

Covid-19 Vaccines: Global Access

11. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps her Department plans to take to help secure an agreement at the World Trade Organisation on ensuring global access to covid-19 vaccines. [900501]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Negotiations on the response to the covid-19 pandemic are taking place at the World Trade Organisation's 12th ministerial conference this week. Although I cannot comment on live negotiations—and they are very live today—the UK is seeking a comprehensive multilateral declaration addressing the trade policy issues that will make a real difference to global access to vaccines.

Mr Speaker: Sir Christopher Chope. [*Interruption.*] Oh, sorry. I call Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson: I would like to have my say! Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I think there is broad agreement across the House that the world will not fully defeat covid until its vaccination levels are the same as those we have been very fortunate

to get through the NHS. Will the Minister go further and give more detail on what we are asking for in those negotiations? She was quite brief in what she said.

Penny Mordaunt: The right hon. Lady's question is very timely. The negotiations are going on as we speak, so I do not want to comment on those live negotiations. She will know that we firmly believe that having strong intellectual property rights is key to ensuring that investment is going into the science base and that these products and vaccines will continue to be developed. We need that to happen, as well as to ensure that there is equity and that the world can make use of these amazing products.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps the reason that the Minister of State does not want to give any more detail is that in Geneva this week the Secretary of State has actually been leading efforts to water down or block any deal on access to covid medicines. I gently ask the Minister of State this: with so few people in developing countries having had their first covid vaccine, why are Ministers so determined to prevent some of the richest companies across the globe from giving the poorest people in the world the tools they need to stop transmission and save lives?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a ridiculous mischaracterisation of this country's stance. We are one of the largest donors to the covid advance market commitment, which is ensuring that the vaccine is being rolled out in 92 developing countries. We are at the forefront of that effort. What the Secretary of State is trying to do is ensure that investment in the science base that created these vaccines remains strong. We need to do both of those things if we are going to vaccinate the world.

Trade: UK and California

12. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote trade between the UK and California. [900502]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Across the US, we are unlocking barriers for business at state level, while also engaging at the federal level. There is huge potential for growing trade in California, and I have visited California three times as part of the Department for International Trade stateside tour.

Sir Christopher Chope: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, but as California is the fifth largest economy in the world, will she redouble her efforts and, in particular, give us a timescale for securing a memorandum of understanding with the state of California similar to that which she successfully negotiated with Indiana?

Penny Mordaunt: We are currently talking to about 25 states with regard to memorandums of understanding, including California. Larger economy states will take longer than smaller economies to arrive at the final MOU. We think that within the first eight we will have some super-economy states, including Texas. California will be a little way off, but I hope to conclude a large number of these MOUs by the end of this year, and we expect to sign further in the coming weeks.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The UK Government, as we have heard, are in talks with 25 individual US states, in the hope of establishing tailored free trade agreements. I believe that the Cabinet has set California and Texas in its immediate sights. If the UK Government have no qualms in entering into trade agreements with sub-state actors such as those US states and do not think that that violates US sovereignty, why do they oppose the Scottish Government entering into their own free trade negotiations?

Penny Mordaunt: This argument, I am afraid, is a false one, and it has also been perpetrated with regard to the Australia deal. The structures and kinds of regulations and laws that we are talking about are not equivalent. In Australia's case, we are not talking about law or EU retained law; we are talking about guidelines that sit at state level. Obviously, the MOUs that we are agreeing with US states are not free trade agreements in terms of tariffs; they talk about our regulation, mutual recognition of qualifications and all of those things. Within those MOUs, we are actually doing partnerships between particular locations of the UK, which could include the devolved nations. Northern Ireland has such an MOU with other parts of the US, and I encourage the Scottish Government to get on board, because there would be massive advantages to people in Scotland if they did so.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend's progress in her discussions with California, but she will know that many leading companies have left California for Texas because of that state's low-tax, light-touch, pro-growth regulation. Will she update the House on the progress that she is making in her discussions with Texas? What lessons has she learned and passed on about the scope for regulatory reform in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: There is massive scope for such reform, which is one reason why we are pursuing this agenda. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that business is seeking out business-friendly states in the United States. There is now some competition to secure MOUs with us, and we are going after states that are really open for business and open to bringing people, ideas and money together to solve the world's problems. Texas will be a trailblazer state; we have signed with Indiana; and Oklahoma, the Carolinas and others are really pushing the agenda forward. There are massive potential benefits for us, and for the United States too.

Export Opportunities: International Markets

13. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on measures to support companies to exploit export opportunities in international markets. [900505]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Our export strategy and export support service have cross-Whitehall support. The "Made in the UK, Sold to the World" campaign will help to reach more than 67 million consumers, buyers and business leaders in 24 key markets. Our nine trade commissioner regions, our 40 Prime Minister's trade envoys and our international market advisers are all helping businesses to exploit major market openings through our free trade agreements.

Neale Hanvey: In the light of recent price hikes on fuel and ambitious net zero targets, seaport connectivity and infrastructure which allow goods, especially perishable items, to travel quickly are vital to businesses that export or wish to do so. With hundreds of thousands of jobs reliant on accessing the European market, does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government should make serious strategic efforts to re-establish a direct ferry link for freight between Scotland and mainland Europe? That would also provide resilience for international trade, given the ongoing pressure on ports in the south-east of England.

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman is passionate about seeing ferry services restored from Scottish ports to mainland Europe, and he is absolutely right. Although it is very much a devolved issue, I am more than happy to encourage the Scottish Government to pursue it. It is a genuine issue, because the ability to build additional routes into the UK for freight builds resilience into the market and helps us to alleviate pressure points, particularly in moments of disruption across the straits. Importantly, as the hon. Gentleman says, it helps to reduce the carbon miles for haulage firms as they take goods from the straits to Scotland.

Exports to European Markets

16. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help businesses export to European markets. [900509]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Our export support service provides businesses with tailored support for exporting to Europe and beyond. Businesses are connected to our excellent array of support services such as the UK Export Academy and our trade show programme. We are operating bilateral partnerships to open up markets and overcome market access barriers. There is currently an eight-week consultation on an enhanced FTA between the UK and Switzerland. Those are just some of the measures that we can take to help businesses to export to European markets.

Chris Elmore: Research published yesterday shows that UK exports to the EU fell by £12.4 billion, or 15.6%, in the first six months of last year. I have seen that at first hand in my Ogmore constituency: businesses are being left with no option but to set up legal entities and warehouses within the EU in order to export. That is understandable, given the barriers that they face, but it results in jobs being moved away from the UK. Will the Minister commit to getting back around the table to reduce the costs and red tape that businesses the length and breadth of the United Kingdom are facing when exporting to the EU?

Mike Freer: I have to say that I do not recognise that data. The Office for National Statistics data published yesterday showed that exports have continued to grow, month on month. For the past 12 months, exports to the UK were £650 billion. That is £53 billion up. Those are not my statistics, but those of the ONS. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but if he disagrees with the statistics, he should take that up with the ONS. These are the highest levels of exports to the EU since records began.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Prime Minister's poor trade deal with the EU has already damaged exports and cost jobs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) says, the warnings from business groups this week that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill risks further damage to trade and investment ought to have rung very loud alarm bells across Whitehall. Will Ministers commit to publishing, before the Bill's Second Reading, an analysis of its implications for British exporters and all those whose jobs depend on exports to European markets?

Mike Freer: I will take away the hon. Gentleman's request and discuss it with colleagues.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Royal Scottish National Orchestra is one of Scotland's great cultural exports. It has its own specialist vehicle for touring, but Brexit red tape and cabotage rules mean that it is very difficult and expensive now for it to export its cultural wares in Europe. Can the Minister tell us what he is doing to remove the Brexit red tape that is tied around our musical industries?

Mike Freer: I can tell the hon. Lady what I am doing about it. We appreciate that creative industries are massive exporters for the UK and they are highly valued. What the Department does across all sectors, not just creative industries, where we identify specific barriers resulting from our new trading arrangements, is have regular contact with our partners in-country. Sometimes it is about interpretation of the rules and sometimes it is the rules. What we do is sit down with our colleagues to work out whether we can find a practical solution for the benefit of both the UK and our European partners.

Topical Questions

T1. [900511] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): The UK signed a trade and economic development memorandum with the state of Indiana on 27 May. The first such arrangement between the UK and an individual US state, it forms part of our twin-track approach to trading with the United States, seeking out ways to unlock barriers for business at state level in addition to our engagement at federal level. We are to sign further memorandums of understanding in the coming weeks.

Theresa Villiers: May we have a cross-Government effort on post-Brexit reform to ensure that our regulation does more to facilitate competition and new market entrants? That is crucial not only to grow our domestic economy but to secure trade agreements and boost international trade.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She is one of the authors of the appropriately named TIGRR report—the report of the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform—which pointed to some great ideas and focused on how we can ensure that our regulation is enabling, not a barrier to deepening trade ties and opening up opportunities for our citizens.

In addition to our work on our domestic regime, we are, as I said earlier, working with other nations and getting our regulators to talk together, so that we can improve our international trade opportunities.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I echo your words about Jo Cox, whose ongoing legacy is testament to her remarkable dedication and compassion. Members across the House will be thinking of her family today.

Steel is a foundational industry for our economy, yet Members across the House will be aware of the difficulties that steelworkers have been through in recent years, from the US tariffs to the current cost of living crisis. The clock is ticking for the Secretary of State to make a decision on whether current trade safeguards remain in place. Will the Minister of State help to remove the uncertainty by urging the Secretary of State to make that decision today?

Penny Mordaunt: The Secretary of State needs no urging, but it is important that she is able to make the right decision on this. The steel safeguards reconsideration is ongoing. I know the deadline is looming. My right hon. Friend is carefully considering all the information that has been presented to her. Obviously, we expect a decision very shortly. We understand its importance to the steel sector, both producers and end users.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To say that a decision is expected shortly simply is not good enough. To ensure that this vital industry can survive, Ministers must stop dragging their feet and act urgently to safeguard the steel sector. Jobs and livelihoods in our communities are at risk. Labour backs UK steel. Does the Minister of State not accept that the reality is that, with time passing, Ministers are too busy propping up the Prime Minister to act decisively for the people?

Penny Mordaunt: With regard to the right hon. Member's last comment, it is always a good indication that we do not have to look at the ONS statistics to know that the trade numbers are going the right way when the Opposition spokesman wants to ask questions that are not related to trade. This Secretary of State has done a huge amount to support the steel and aluminium industries of the UK, not least in managing to renegotiate the decision on section 232 tariffs. She will continue to do that and she will make an announcement on the safeguarding issue very shortly.

T2. [900512] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): As the UK decarbonises our economy to deliver net zero, it is vital that a carbon border adjustment mechanism is implemented to prevent carbon leakage to other parts of the world, to ensure that our own domestic producers are not undercut and to create jobs. Will my right hon. Friend provide an update on the Government's work to deliver the mechanism, particularly with regard to international co-operation with the EU and the US?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. We recognise that the risk of carbon leakage is a very real one, and on 16 May we announced our intention to consult on a range of

possible mitigation options, including product standards and a carbon border adjustment mechanism. We are working with our international partners and we are clear that any policies we consider will have to fit in with other UK priorities, which include the cost of living, economic growth, and our commitment to the World Trade Organisation, free and fair trade and the needs of developing nations.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Anum Qaisar.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): According to Action Aid, the UK's position on trade and women's rights has yet to be set out through a clear, comprehensive UK trade strategy. Further to this, Action Aid has also accused the UK Government of taking a quick delivery approach to securing free trade agreements. In the SNP, however, we have committed to adopting a feminist foreign policy in an independent Scotland, and this work is being undertaken. In their current and future trade deal negotiations, will the UK Government commit to conducting gender-specific impact assessments of its free trade deals, not just economic impact assessments? Will the Department commission an independent statutory body to conduct these gender-just impact assessments?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I am delighted to be able to confirm that Britain is committed to creating a global trade policy that ensures that women have the same opportunities from trade as men, and that women worldwide can benefit from trade as a route to prosperity. That reflects a core element of this Government's modernising trade agenda. We recognise that women face varied and disproportionate barriers to trade in some areas, and that they are underrepresented among entrepreneurs and businesses that export, and we will continue to do more to ensure that everyone benefits from global trade.

T5. [900516] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): My constituents in beautiful Hastings and Rye are concerned about the environment and climate change, but they are also aware that our local businesses need to expand their trade exports across the globe to benefit from post-Brexit freedoms. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to tackle climate change through trade policy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Last month the Secretary of State set out priorities for green trade, both in the global green transition and in maximising opportunities for the UK by driving global action on trade and the environment multilaterally through our engagement in the G7 and the World Trade Organisation while strengthening bilateral co-operation through our free trade agreement agenda. By 2030, low-carbon industries could generate up to £170 billion-worth of UK exports. For example, UK Export Finance's climate change strategy commits it to achieving net zero across its portfolio and operations by 2050. In 2021, UKEF provided £3.6 billion-worth of support for sustainable projects, an increase of 50% on the previous year.

T3. [900514] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): This morning we have heard some frankly staggering attempts to present a dreadful UK-EU trade

context as some kind of triumph, but that simply will not wash with my constituents who are struggling with increased red tape when exporting to EU member states. Rather than building stronger trade links with our closest neighbours, Ministers are now ripping up the agreement they negotiated and risking a trade war with the EU. What is the Secretary of State doing to improve trading links with Europe and to end disruption for businesses?

Penny Mordaunt: I remind the hon. Lady of the trader support service and the export support service, which are there to provide bespoke support to businesses. I encourage her to put them in touch with her constituents.

I am afraid the figures do not bear out what the hon. Lady is saying. The increase in goods exports to the EU, to which the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) alluded, has in part been driven by an 8.1% increase in exports from the UK to the EU in April compared with March. We are bouncing back from the pandemic and the difficulties as we changed our border and left the EU. The country is improving on that front. Where issues remain, whether for the hon. Lady's local businesses or for the Northern Ireland protocol, we are determined to resolve them.

T6. [900517] **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): Many of my constituents work in the nearby Port Talbot steelworks, located just outside my Bridgend constituency. Will my right hon. Friend give an assessment of the impact on the UK steel sector of removing US tariffs on UK steel?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work to champion the steel industry. The 500,000-tonne annual quota secured for steel exporters is almost double the annual volume of UK steel exports to the US between 2018 and 2019, and it provides a significant opportunity for the UK industry to increase its supply to US customers.

T4. [900515] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): According to the latest figures from the Food and Drink Federation, despite the Minister's earlier remarks, UK food and drink exports to the EU in the first quarter of 2022 were still £600 million lower than in the first quarter of 2019. Given the continual shortfall in post-Brexit trade with our largest trading partner, does she think embarking on a wholly unnecessary trade war is wise? If not, what will she do to avert it?

Penny Mordaunt: The statistics I quoted are from the Office for National Statistics. Across all goods there is a marked improvement, but we want to do more in the food and drink sector. That is why we are putting in place bespoke food, drink and agriculture attachés around the world to ensure our farmers and producers have more opportunities in global trade.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): A trade deal with Israel would slash red tape and increase investment opportunities for both the UK and Israel. What progress have the Government made in securing a bilateral free trade deal with our close ally?

Mr Jayawardena: I am delighted that my hon. Friend raises this issue because, of course, our trade and partnership agreement was originally signed as one of the first continuity agreements back in 2019, but the Prime Minister announced last year that we would begin talks with Israel on an enhanced and improved UK-Israel free trade agreement. We have had a consultation, and I look forward to taking that work forward to boost our trade and investment relationship and to make sure the further ambitions of both nations are secured.

T7. [900518] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Since Brexit, many UK companies have stopped exporting to the EU altogether, whatever the Minister is trying to sell us. The situation has become even worse for many of my small businesses in Bath since the closure of the SME Brexit support fund. Will the Government consider introducing a new version of that fund?

Mike Freer: I would direct the hon. Lady's businesses to contact the export support service, which provides practical assistance in overcoming particular issues. On top of that, we also have the internationalisation fund, the shared prosperity fund and the trade access programme. Picking on one pot that is no longer available misses the point. A whole range of financial support pots are available to businesses. If she would like directions to those pots, I am more than happy to write to her.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on post-Brexit trade opportunities?

Penny Mordaunt: Obviously, we have agreed an enormous number of trade agreements, including several from scratch. We have a new export strategy and more support for British business; we have a new export finance mission; we are an Association of Southeast Asian Nations dialogue partner; we have a voice back at the World Trade Organisation; we have created the Trade Remedies Authority, to help support our own economic interests; we have set our own global tariff regime; we have streamlined nearly 6,000 tariff lines, lowering costs for business, and scrapped thousands of unnecessary tariff variations; we are creating a single trade window; we will have the most effective border in the world by 2025; and Mr Speaker will be very pleased to hear that we are bringing forward measures to ensure that cat fur products are not allowed to be traded. All this is in addition to blue passports and the prospect of the crown stamp on a pint of English beer.

T8. [900520] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A recent London School of Economics report has found that between the end of 2019 and September 2021 UK-EU trade barriers led to a 6% increase in food prices in the UK. Will Ministers start being truthful and admit that the soaring prices are being caused not by the war in Ukraine but the Government's post-Brexit trade agreement, which is causing so much hardship for my constituents in Glasgow?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that work in government is looking at our global tariff and our tariff regime, with specific reference to ensuring that we are helping on the cost of living issues, which are really affecting our constituents. Leaving the EU has enabled

us not only to make those decisions, but to treat developing nations with better preferences on tariffs, helping their economies as well as our own.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): We heard a lot in the reply to an earlier question about exports of cheese. What initiatives are the Government planning to extend the export market for seafood? My constituency and neighbouring Grimsby are major centres for excellent seafood.

Mike Freer: The Food and Drink Federation reported last month that food and drink exports are showing strong recovery as they get back up to pre-covid levels. Some of the specific actions we are taking include the creation of a new food and drink export council; this is between the Department and the sector, so that we continue the collaboration. We have also announced a new £1 million export fund to support our world-class seafood exporters, and held food and drink spring export showcases in the UK and overseas. I also urge my hon. Friend to contact me and I will arrange a briefing with our trade commissioner for China, where seafood exports are absolutely booming.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda is an excellent opportunity to promote trade with the Commonwealth. As chair of the all-party group on Africa, I am well aware of the important role that diaspora communities can play in growing trade, where familial and friendship links are so important. Newcastle, like many cities and towns in this country, has a number of Commonwealth diaspora communities. What specific help can people in Newcastle expect from this Department to trade with the countries they, their parents or their grandparents may have come from?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for that important question. She will know that both import and export figures with regard to Commonwealth nations are increasing quite substantially. There are many schemes that both our Department and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have in place. Obviously the local enterprise partnership networks are also assisting with this.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When a group of us from the British-American Parliamentary Group visited California last month, we were much impressed by the work of our trade teams in Los Angeles and San Francisco. However, those teams would be able to be even more effective if they had more flexibility to employ local staff, in line with prevailing labour market rates, as filling vacancies is a problem. What will the Government do to enable them to do that?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing several pieces of work on that, but one thing we are looking at in respect of our memorandums of understanding and our economic dialogues with individual states is the mutual recognition of qualifications. We are focusing on technical trades in particular, with legal, accountancy and audit, engineering and architecture being the trailblazers. This will not only help UK firms to win more business but help with the labour-market issues that are affecting businesses on both sides of the Atlantic.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): How are Ministers planning to promote the Trade Remedies Authority to businesses in Scotland, to increase the awareness and take-up of its services where necessary?

Penny Mordaunt: They should follow the hon. Lady's example: I know that she attended the session with the Trade Remedies Authority. It is incredibly important that we get the message out to businesses that the TRA is an independent body with which they can take up issues. I thank the hon. Lady for attending and for enabling me to say that at the Dispatch Box today.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): There are significant opportunities for British exporters to the Gulf states that are members of the Gulf Co-operation Council, not least because we already export a lot and because the barriers for our exporters are greater than those for GCC exports to the UK. Will my hon. Friend update me on what progress is being made on achieving such a deal?

Mr Jayawardena: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has raised the great opportunity there is with the Gulf Co-operation Council. The bloc is made up of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and is a major trading partner of Britain, with something like £23 billion-worth of trade. We closed our public consultation some time ago and are raring to go on negotiations on an FTA with the GCC very soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline what steps have been taken to solidify our technological partnership with Israel, in the light of the tremendous advances that come from that nation, and the potential that home tech companies have to expand if we can build relationships more effectively?

Mr Jayawardena: Israel is one of the middle east's most dynamic and innovative economies and there is a great opportunity in tech in particular. It is not only a bilateral opportunity but a multilateral or plurilateral opportunity: I was recently in Brazil, which is interested in a three-way partnership between Brazil, the United Kingdom and Israel.

Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests Resignation

10.32 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the resignation of the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Let me start by thanking Lord Geidt for his work as Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests and, indeed, for his years of public service before he took up that role. I hold him in the highest regard. He has been honoured multiple times and is, of course, an example of excellence and service in public life. I thank all Members for their work in respect of this matter, but I think all Members of this House will recognise that Lord Geidt has demonstrated diligence and thoughtfulness in the way he has discharged his role over the past year. We have benefited hugely from his service.

The Prime Minister will be issuing a letter in relation to Lord Geidt's announcement. Both Lord Geidt's letter and the Prime Minister's reply will be deposited in the House shortly—as soon as my office has those letters, Mr Speaker, they will be placed in the Library. The Government are of course particularly disappointed that Lord Geidt has taken this decision, because only very recently—as the House knows from the debate last week—significant changes were made to the role and status of Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests. As I set out to the House last week, the changes represent the most substantial strengthening of the role, office and remit of independent adviser since the post was created in 2006.

Let me set out briefly the reforms to the role that the Prime Minister has introduced. First, the independent adviser has a new ability, which Lord Geidt and his predecessors did not previously have, to initiate investigations in relation to allegations where there has been a breach of the "Ministerial Code". This is a significant change. Previously, as the House knows, as an adviser, he and his predecessors were not permitted to do this. The adviser will still need the consent of the Prime Minister of the day to start an investigation, but, as I made it very clear last week, this consent will normally be given.

The "Ministerial Code" now includes new detail on proportionate sanctions for a breach of the code. Previously, there was no proportionality in those sanctions, and even the smallest of technical breaches by a Minister in place might have resulted in an enforced resignation. Now there is a proportionate range of options, and that was exactly as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

In future, the independent adviser will be consulted about the revisions to the code, as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. The "Ministerial Code" now includes more specific references to the role of the independent adviser and more specific references to the duty on Ministers to provide the independent adviser with all information reasonably necessary for the discharge of the role.

In conclusion, as Lord Geidt himself has made clear, the new arrangements are workable, and he noted the increased transparency that they bring. The Government will of course now move to make new arrangements and we look forward to working within the strengthened system that I have described.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Minister, for whom I have the greatest respect, that he knows that his answer should have been three minutes. I am sure that the team here could have managed to get that speech down to three minutes. I say to Members on both sides of the House, please, do not take advantage, as there is a lot of other business to follow.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome the fact that this letter will be published. It has taken my asking an urgent question to get that, so I am very glad that I was able to do so. Clearly, the new arrangements for the independent adviser are not workable, which is why Lord Geidt has had to resign.

To lose one ethics adviser is an embarrassment, but to lose two in two years, just days after the Prime Minister's own anti-corruption Tsar walked out on him, means that it is becoming a bit of a pattern—a pattern of degrading the principles of our democracy. The Prime Minister has now driven both of his hand-picked ethics advisers to resign in despair in two years. It is a badge of shame for this Government.

In an unprecedented move, the Cabinet Office had failed to publish Lord Geidt's resignation letter and it has taken this urgent question to get it. Lord Geidt described resignation as a "last resort" to send a critical signal to the public domain. Can the Minister confirm whether ongoing investigations launched by Lord Geidt will now be completed? Will that be in the Prime Minister's letter? For example, how will the shameful allegations of Islamophobia experienced by the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) now be investigated?

Yesterday, No. 10 stated that Lord Geidt had been asked to give advice on a commercially sensitive matter in the national interest. What is that? Can the Minister confirm whether that relates to a direct or an indirect financial interest of the Prime Minister, a family member, a friend or a donor? When will a replacement be appointed? Can the Minister assure us that there will not be another five-month gap? I know that it will be hard to recruit somebody for this position, because it has clearly been shown to be unworkable. Lord Geidt's predecessor walked out following the publication of his findings on the Home Secretary's bullying, which was excused by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has ridden roughshod over the rules.

In conclusion, what comes next? This vacancy must be filled urgently, but the role must be reformed, as the Committee on Standards in Public Life has concluded. Honesty matters. Integrity matters. Decency matters. I hope the Minister will do the right thing and come clean about this resignation.

Mr Speaker: When the Minister is ready.

Michael Ellis *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: Well, you need to come to the Dispatch Box. It might be easier if you stand up.

Michael Ellis: Let me briefly answer the hon. Lady. I cannot speak to other investigations that may or may not have been in progress, but we will find about them in due course. That speaks for itself. As for other sensitive matters, it is obviously not appropriate to dwell on those. What is clear though is that the letters will speak for themselves. I think the hon. Lady will wish to wait for those.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, William Wragg.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I will channel my rare inner Lady Bracknell and say that for the Prime Minister to lose one adviser on Ministers' interests may be regarded as misfortune, but to lose two looks like carelessness—I hope my right hon. and learned Friend will take that in the spirit it is meant. I thank Lord Geidt for appearing before our Committee on Tuesday, where I think he did his best—with what he would work with, I think was one thing he said, but he did his best none the less. I am very sad that he felt the need to resign, and I look forward to reading his letter and the reply from the Prime Minister. Can the Minister give the House some reassurance on this particular point? There was a five-month vacancy in the role upon the resignation of the previous independent adviser. How much more quickly will that be filled this time?

Michael Ellis: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree with me that it is important to ensure that whoever holds that role is not under constant political pressure to attack the Prime Minister for party political reasons and that, if they do not do so, they are not accused of being a lackey or a patsy. That is not something our independent advisers on Ministers' interests deserve. We want the best public servants in our public life. We have had one in Lord Geidt, and we will work further in due course, but I know my hon. Friend will agree that it is in the public interest that party politics is not allowed to put pressure where it does not belong.

Mr Speaker: We now come to SNP spokesperson Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Another day, another scandal, another humiliation for the Prime Minister as another sleaze adviser quits. Let us not forget that when Lord Geidt took this job on 16 months ago he was the personal appointment of the Prime Minister, and we were assured that his credentials were absolutely impeccable. Lord Geidt said that if he were to resign it would be a last resort, and that he would use that resignation to send a critical signal into the public domain. We need to know what critical signal he was sending out last night. As yet, we do not have details of his resignation letter. We could speculate—could it be lawbreaking? PPE contracts? Breach of international law? I am pleased that the Minister is publishing the correspondence in full, but will he define “shortly”, as opposed to immediately, and will he confirm that all the correspondence will be published in full when it is published?

Michael Ellis: Lord Geidt's credentials are impeccable and remain impeccable. He is an example to people like me and to all people in public life for the service he has given to Queen and country over the course of decades.

The hon. Gentleman seeks to criticise people who hold those public roles and make political points if they do not support his position, and I suggest that is not the right approach.

Brendan O'Hara: No, I don't! That is shameful nonsense!

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Sheryll Murray.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have a job to do, and that our time is best spent getting on with the job and delivering on the promises we made to the British people and voters in 2019?

Michael Ellis: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): This is the second of the Prime Minister's hand-picked ethics advisers to resign, alongside his anti-corruption champion. I have met children from two primary schools in my constituency this week. Children as young as seven can see what is plain as day—that this Government are rotten from the top. Does the Minister have any concerns about the impact that this shocking mess is having on trust and confidence in Government and in our democracy?

Michael Ellis: I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing this urgent question, but it is a bit of a shame that it is not on something our constituents care about. I do not know who Lord Geidt is—I bet half of the Opposition do not know who Lord Geidt is. If you want to get rid of the Prime Minister, you lot sitting there, move—[*Interruption.*] Not you, Mr Speaker; I know you do not want to get rid of the Prime Minister. I would never suggest that.

Mr Speaker: You are not drawing me into the political mix as supporting yes or no.

Mr Bone: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I got carried away. Her Majesty's loyal Opposition know that if things are as bad as they say they are, the way to get rid of the Prime Minister and this Government is to have a vote of no confidence in the Government. The loyal Opposition have not been willing to do that. I think my constituents will draw their own conclusions about that.

Michael Ellis: May I gently say to the Opposition parties that if they wish for a change of Prime Minister, they should do something different from attacking personalities? They should attack policies, but of course if they were to attack policies, they would find that they would lose.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Government is accountable to Parliament. The independent adviser on Ministers' interests is a crucial role that is appointed by the Prime Minister. Does the Minister accept that the only way to begin the process of restoring trust in standards of public life—standards undermined by the Prime Minister—is to give Parliament a role in the appointment of the new adviser? At minimum, we should be looking at a scrutiny session by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and a confirmatory vote in this House.

Michael Ellis: Any Prime Minister of any political party appoints their own advisers. That is historically what has taken place, and that is no doubt what will take place in the future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Lord Geidt is a public servant of superb, unequalled reputation and the utmost integrity, and his departure is greatly to be regretted. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree with me more generally that those placed in a position of judgment over others must not have a previously stated position on the matter in question?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, and it of course is an age-old principle of natural justice that no person should be a judge in their own cause. Where an individual has given a view on the guilt or innocence of any person, they ought not then to sit in judgment on that person. I know the point that he is referring to, and I have no doubt that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) will consider that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I always feel sorry for the Minister when he has to come and defend the indefensible, but what we have heard this morning is a real disservice to the House, in that we have not seen these letters. They should have been available, but can I also say this to him? It is not only disgusting and disgraceful, but it is shambolic. This is the Government. We are talking about the responsibility of the Prime Minister, but the responsibility is not his alone: it is for the honour and integrity of every Member of Parliament on the Government Benches that they should do something about this shocking scandal that undermines our parliamentary democracy.

Michael Ellis: It is the job of all Members of Parliament of all political parties to maintain the honour and integrity of this House, and that is what the Prime Minister continues to do. The fact is that Prime Ministers of all political parties have had Ministers who have been in breach of the ministerial code. Last week I cited some on the Labour side.

Helen Hayes: They resigned!

Michael Ellis: They have not always done so, and I gave examples last week in the Opposition day debate of cases where Labour Prime Ministers did not take resignations from Ministers who were found in breach of the ministerial code. I would rather not refer to those names again—they are on the record—but that is an example of a Prime Minister being able to say whether they continue to have confidence in their Ministers. That is a constitutional imperative. They must be able, whether a Labour Prime Minister such as Tony Blair or Gordon Brown, or a Conservative Prime Minister, to have confidence in their own Ministers. They cannot absolve themselves of that responsibility by farming it out to somebody else, however honourable that person is.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for confirming to the House that the letter of resignation does exist, because the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also, I understand, a leading lawyer, said on the “Today” programme this morning that he did not know whether the letter exists, and then he went on to say that he had not read it. We

are extremely grateful to the Minister for confirming that. Why is the letter not available to us now? He knew he was responding to this urgent question. We could have then discussed its contents. We have heard about Lady Bracknell; what we have before us this morning is Uriah Heep.

Michael Ellis: I think we can do without the literary references, but what I will say is that the letter does exist. I can confirm that, and it will be released very soon. By the way, it has only been about two working hours since this matter was dealt with, so the Government are acting very expeditiously.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask my right hon. and learned Friend a practical question? We understand that the Prime Minister asked his special adviser Lord Geidt to give him advice on a particular issue. That advice has not yet been given and the person who was asked for that advice has now resigned without even giving any notice or extending his terms so that he could answer that question. Who will answer the burning question that was put to Lord Geidt by the Prime Minister a few days ago?

Michael Ellis: I am afraid that we will have to wait and see.

May I take this opportunity to refer to an earlier question? I think I may have mischaracterised what the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said. If I did, I would like to apologise if that was not his intention.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What is it about the current Prime Minister that causes him to have such rotten luck in retaining ethics and anti-corruption advisers?

Michael Ellis: It is kind of the right hon. Lady to ask that question. I think the Prime Minister has a lot of good luck in winning elections. He won elections in London, he won a general election in this country, and he will win more.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): When questioned at the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on Tuesday, the now former ethics adviser described himself as “an asset of the Prime Minister...rather than a free-orbiting adviser”.

Does the Minister not agree that it is time for the ethics adviser’s appointment to be truly independent of the Prime Minister and of politics, and for them to be appointed by the civil service board?

Michael Ellis: I think all our independent advisers since 2006 have been independent of politics. They have been people of the highest integrity and probity, as is Lord Geidt. It is a position that is increasingly put under considerable pressure, but we must have regard for that and ensure that the standards are maintained.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The integrity and ability of Lord Geidt is not in question. The question that we are all asking is, what on earth was it that encouraged him to tender his resignation? What scandal should we expect to come down the tracks?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman may well be disappointed; he will find that looking for scandal under every stone is disappointing.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I make a point to the Minister and to the House? To do effective work, an ethics adviser is required to be above day-to-day political feuds and not the focus of them. In the last few weeks and months, however, the position of the ethics adviser to the Prime Minister has been at the centre of political feuds on both sides of the House—not confined to the Opposition or to the Conservatives. What actions will the Minister take to ensure that the new appointee is protected from being the target of political attacks from whichever side?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which I alluded to before. We must be careful to ensure that future independent arrangements are made so that individuals or entities are not put under political pressure to either do something or be accused of being some sort of patsy. The right thing to do is what is important.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I cannot believe that the Minister has come here without the letter being published. Is the Downing Street photocopier broken or is it more game playing? I suspect the latter. I want to ask him about the commercially sensitive matter that Lord Geidt was asked to investigate, which I noticed he did not deny when responding to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). He did not answer her question as to whether it relates to a direct or indirect financial interest for the Prime Minister or any of his friends, families or business associates. He could answer that question now. He does not need to give any details that would be commercially sensitive; he could just confirm who it relates to. If he does not answer that, it does not look like carelessness; it looks like a cover-up.

Michael Ellis: The letter will be published and given to the Library of the House in due course—very soon.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Today, the Minister for defending the indefensible has been sent out to account for the resignation of Lord Geidt, who was no longer willing to do the same. My constituents see Westminster Ministers breaking the rules with no consequences, no sanctions and no ethics. Is it any wonder that they now have no faith in this broken Westminster system?

Michael Ellis: I disagree with the hon. Lady.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): After many years working in both the public and private sectors in many countries around the world, I cannot think of a single instance where the behaviour of someone in a leadership position obliged a person responsible for giving ethical or standards advice to resign twice in succession and yet the person in the leadership position remained in place. Does the Minister agree that my constituents will conclude that the Prime Minister finds it hard to maintain a working relationship with ethical advice, and how many resignations of ethical advisers will it take before the Prime Minister does resign?

Michael Ellis: I venture to suggest that the hon. Lady's constituents will find it surprising that in the past six months Labour has focused constantly on personalities and not on policies. The reason has to be that when it comes to policy, Labour loses.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister will agree that principles and standards in public life must be upheld. Can he confirm from the Dispatch Box that the Government have no plans whatsoever to abolish the role of the independent adviser on ministerial interests?

Michael Ellis: I can only reiterate what I have said before.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Just a few of the political casualties of the Prime Minister's premiership so far have been Allegra Stratton, who did not attend Downing Street parties; Lord Wolfson, on the principle that the PM should not break the laws he makes; the PM's anti-corruption tsar; and now Lord Geidt, presumably—who knows, because the send button has not been used on the email—for being unable to hold the Prime Minister accountable for breaches of the ministerial code. When will someone actually responsible for the degeneration of standards in government be the one to go—namely, the Prime Minister?

Michael Ellis: I think the House will forgive me if I do not take lectures on moral probity from the Scottish nationalists. One needs only to google the SNP to have whole list of those incidents.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What is it that is so unethical about this law-breaking, rule-breaking Prime Minister? Is it not about time he resigned?

Michael Ellis: I realise that it is challenging, but if Labour Members wish a change of Prime Minister, they ought to try to win a general election; they are not going to be able to do it.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Is there any point in appointing a new ethics adviser for a Prime Minister with no ethics?

Michael Ellis: Of course, the Prime Minister maintains the highest standards in public life and will continue to do so. Despite all the scurrilous suggestions otherwise, the hon. Lady has given no evidence to indicate in what way she is referring to a lack of ethics.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On TV this morning, the Secretary of State for Justice indicated that the resignation could be for confidential reasons, could be for security-related reasons that therefore cannot be disclosed, or indeed could be for other reasons. When will the appointment of Lord Geidt's successor be made? How can the House be assured that the person who is appointed will have a permanent position and will stay the course?

Michael Ellis: I think the position may become a bit clearer when the letters are published very shortly, but on the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the future arrangements, they will be under very careful consideration.

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 20 June will include:

MONDAY 20 JUNE—Second Reading of the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill.

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

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Social Security (Additional Payments) Bill.

THURSDAY 23 JUNE—General debate on investing in the future of motor neurone disease, followed by a general debate on the national food strategy and food security. Business determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 24 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 27 June will include:

MONDAY 27 JUNE—Committee of the whole House on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 28 JUNE—Conclusion of Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business, but all we can conclude from his statement is that, whether it is failing to deal with the Tory cost of living crisis or just adding to backlog Britain, this is a Government with no plan. They continue on with reckless undermining of British institutions and principles that we on this side of the House are proud of.

And now the Prime Minister adds to his own labour market shortage after losing his second ethics adviser in just 14 months. There is a reason why even his hand-picked referees cannot defend him: it is because the Prime Minister is indefensible. He should come to this House and come clean about the events that led to Lord Geidt's resignation. I am glad that Labour's urgent question finally pushed the Government into announcing they would publish the resignation letter, but why was it not published earlier? Why has it not been published yet? Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to come to this House and answer questions after it is published? Does he have any answers to the questions put by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) during the urgent question on concerns, which I share, about the impact of all this on public faith in our democracy?

Meanwhile, Labour, the party of patriotism, stands up for our world-renowned broadcasting industry. On Tuesday, in our successful Opposition day motion, we called on Government to reverse the decision to sell off Channel 4. That provides great entertainment, quality news reporting, good jobs around the country—including in Bristol—and projects British values and creativity

overseas, so could the Leader of the House tell us why the Government are prioritising selling off Channel 4 over dealing with food, energy and fuel bills?

Not happy with selling off our country's most treasured institutions, Government are also selling out our global reputation. Breaking international law with the Northern Ireland protocol legislation damages our standing on the world stage, and it does not solve the problem. It does look like the Government are deliberately making things worse to distract from their own civil war. Ministers say that it is normal only to publish a summary of legal advice, but this does happen to be the only Prime Minister to have broken the law while in office. So I ask the Leader of the House: if the Government have nothing to hide, will he undertake to publish the legal advice in full?

This morning, we heard that more than 150 men who worked at the British embassy in Kabul are still in Afghanistan. Many have applied to come here, but have not heard back from this Government, and many have been tortured, which is shameful. The Home Secretary told us only yesterday that there are supposed to be safe and legal routes here. This needs sorting. Will the Leader of the House get the Government on to this today?

Last week, a BBC investigation revealed shocking abuse and safeguarding failures in children's homes run by Calcot Services for Children. At the same time as these alleged incidents, the company recorded massive profits. We have not had a response from Government, so could the Leader of the House please ask an Education Minister for a statement?

The Government's failure to tackle backlog Britain is piling misery on to millions. Waiting lists in Government departments cripple our economy, cost the taxpayer billions of pounds and prevent people from getting on with their lives. Just look at the Home Office. We have families forced to pay for fast-track passport services and millions wasted on failed outsourced contracts, including a courier service—you could not make this up—that is losing hundreds of passports. This is a Home Office in freefall.

Labour called for an apology from the passports Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—but he cannot even tell us the scale of the backlog. He said work continues to recruit more staff over the summer. Where is the urgency? Given the Home Office's well-known top-down culture of fear, I am sceptical that it will be able to fill the jobs. So could the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement telling us exactly how many outstanding passport applications there are and how she plans to recruit more staff?

It is worth mentioning that backlog Britain seems to extend to the Government's own legislative agenda. The renters' rights reforms announced today are welcome, but they were promised three years ago. All we have is a White Paper. When will they bring the legislation forward and give renters the rights they deserve?

Downing Street is now Britain's boulevard of broken dreams—a Queen's Speech in disarray, failure to tackle the Tory cost of living crisis, writing off billions to fraudsters, selling off British institutions, selling out

[Thangam Debbonaire]

Britain's reputation and no grip on backlog Britain. A party unable to govern ought to make way for one that can. Labour will get the country back on track.

Mark Spencer: We are getting into a regular pattern, where the hon. Lady basically stands up and has her weekly rant. She started with Lord Geidt. We have just spent an hour debating that and the Minister I think answered those questions. Those letters will be published very soon and we await that. She went on to talk about the sale of Channel 4. I think we had a slight glimpse of Labour party DNA, where apparently public is good and private is bad. Actually, that does not stack up. Channel 4 is a great TV station and releasing it into the private sector, and allowing it to flourish and compete with other great private sector programme providers, will allow it to continue to be a world leader. We look forward to it flourishing within the private sector.

Afghanistan is a very important issue and the Government managed to get out 15,000 people under very difficult circumstances. I acknowledge that there are people who struggle to get out, and we continue to help people to find safe routes to get to the United Kingdom. It was a huge success to get in there and get thousands of people out in the middle of a war zone, and the people involved in that process should be commended.

The hon. Lady went on to talk about waiting lists and passports. The statistics are out there: 91% of people get their passport within six weeks and we continue to recruit more people. I acknowledge that 91% of people getting their passport within six weeks means that 9% of people are struggling to get their passport. That is why the Home Secretary is bringing on more staff. She has brought 750 on already. More are coming before the summer. We acknowledge that we need to get people their passports, so that they can enjoy a summer holiday post covid as we move forward.

The hon. Lady made passing reference to the backlogs in the NHS. That is why we introduced the health and social care levy to help fund the NHS and provide support to get the backlogs down post pandemic. It is disappointing that the Labour party decided not to support that investment in the NHS and not to address those challenges. We can see through it—Labour just likes to complain. It does not have a plan. It just wants to criticise the Government because it does not have a plan, and it will do anything it can not to talk about its union bosses who are going to call strikes and make people's lives a misery. It just wants to throw mud and criticise, to hide the fact that it does not have a plan for the country and the British people.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on support for parents with children who are gravely ill, such as those on continuous life support? One of my constituents, Archie Battersbee, is only 11, yet he is on life support in hospital following a freak accident at home in April. His family are by his side, day and night. Does my right hon. Friend agree that maximum professional mental health and emotional support, not just legal support, is needed in these extremely sad circumstances?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Of course our thoughts are with Archie and his family at this very difficult time. Such difficult situations put a huge amount of pressure on friends and family, and they need help and support with physically getting to and from hospital, but also their mental health and the impact that has on their family life. That is why we are expanding and transforming mental health services in England through the NHS long-term plan, which will see an additional 2 million people able to access mental health support. The House will want to recognise Archie and his fight.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am sorry I was not in my place last week, Mr Speaker, to enjoy all the fun. But I don't know what those 140 Tory MPs were possibly thinking. Don't they know that Scotland needs this Prime Minister? We have a referendum to win, and we need him in place because he is the best recruiting sergeant we have ever had. Come on Tory MPs—think about the Scottish national interest and let the big dog roam free, unneutered.

We need a debate about the opportunities that Scotland can secure through being unshackled from this place. Can you imagine any other successful, resource-rich country in the world being asked to forgo all its internal democracy to be run by this place—this morally bankrupt, failed state? It would be laughed all the way out of the United Nations, but that is what Scotland has: a Prime Minister we did not vote for doing things that we profoundly disagree with.

Following the urgent question earlier, we need a full debate about who should become the next ethics adviser to the Prime Minister. I know it is a tough job and someone has got to do it, but think about it. The job security is good. All the new person has to do is say, "The Prime Minister is a very fine chap who always demonstrates the highest possible standards of behaviour. And he doesn't even like partying." I am sure that the House could provide a list of candidates to fulfil the role in that post. My starter for 10 would be the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, or perhaps Machiavelli. How about Attila the Hun or Vlad the Impaler?

The stench of moral decay from this failing Government now stinks to high heaven, and the House wonders why Scotland wants to get out. The Scottish people are closely observing this place and, when they are given the opportunity to make a decision about their future, they will grab it with both hands.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Government are getting on with the job and delivering on behalf of the British people. They are concentrating on the huge backlogs that we face following covid and dealing with the fight against global inflation. I understand why he wants just to talk about independence and another referendum—and maybe another one after that and another after that. It is because he does not want us to talk about the SNP Government's diabolical record. He does not want us to talk about their failing education system and how they are letting young Scottish kids down. He does not want to talk about the debacle about their ferries—their landlocked ferries cannot sail on the ocean waves. That is why he just wants to talk about independence.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Please can we have a debate on the support given to homes that have less conventional fuel supply sources but still face fuel inflation like everyone else? I think in particular about those who live in park homes, who may have contracts detailing where they have to buy their liquefied petroleum gas, or metering arrangements through park owners. I fully recognise that the Government's general support on fuel prices has been fantastic, but in a debate we could explore how different types of homes are exposed to fuel inflation.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is an undoubted champion for those people who live in rural areas such as Harrogate and Knaresborough. He will know that the Government are committed to targeting support to the people who need it the most in our fight against global inflation. The issue of households who do not receive electricity through a domestic electricity supply contract, such as residents in park homes, was covered by the Government's technical consultation, which concluded on 23 May. The Government's response to the consultation will be issued later this summer.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that many of us on both sides of the House frequently raise the scourge of knife crime, which affects constituencies not just in London but across the country. It certainly affects mine. A knife crime event organised by my neighbours, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), started a quarter of an hour ago in Committee Room 14. Could we also have a statement from the Home Office? Many of us—this affects both sides of the House—are worried that, with the longer days, we will see an upturn in knife crime.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right to highlight the issue and I encourage Members across the House to attend the event in Committee Room 14. The Government take knife crime seriously: that is why we committed to another 20,000 police officers and we have already recruited 13,500 more of them. Colleagues across the House do the right thing in highlighting the challenge and the Government will continue to work on it. I hope that he will be in his place for Home Office questions next week to raise the matter again with the Home Secretary.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On the sixth anniversary of the dreadful murder of Jo Cox, who I remember as a happy young Labour MP who was clearly going to make a mark on this place—I also think, of course, of the loss of my dear friend David Amess—I thought it might be helpful to the House if I read out an email that I got yesterday:

“Hi,

Just wanted to say something to you Peter.

YOU ARE AN ODIUS” —

the next word begins with F, and the next with C. It continues:

“I hope you get a horrible painful cancer and suffer in agony.

Either that or someone kicks” —

the F word again —

“out of you in the street.”

That is not fair, obviously, to me. It is not fair to my staff, who have to read it, and it is not fair to my family members. I do not raise this today because it is about me—I bet that virtually everyone in this House has had something like this. On the anniversary when we remember Jo, I wonder if the Leader of the House could arrange for a statement or debate, or, more importantly, something to stop this sick element in society.

Mr Speaker: It is appalling. It is not acceptable. I will take this up and speak to our head of security immediately after I have finished in the Chair. I remind Members that if they get emails, threats or any intimidation, please let us know. You can go directly to the police in the constituency, but certainly speak to people here. It is not acceptable. It is not tolerable. We will not put up with it. We will follow up on what has been mentioned. Sorry, Leader of the House, but I do think it is important.

Mark Spencer: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and may I take this opportunity to pay tribute to you and all the work you have done in this area? I know that the House is certainly grateful for your efforts and I echo your comments. It is a poignant moment to reflect on colleagues we have lost and to recognise the seriousness of this issue. Sometimes it is easy to dismiss such emails as just an email, but they can turn into physical violence and that must be avoided.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It was recently brought to my attention, by members of the ACORN Union and tenants in York House in my constituency, that properties in that building are fitted with asbestos floor tiles and that the social landlord responsible for the building has failed to make residents aware of that. Understandably, it has caused great concern to the residents of York House, particularly where the asbestos floor tiles are damaged. It has left them deeply concerned for their health. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate on social landlords and their absolute responsibility to keep their properties and those living in them safe, especially where asbestos is present?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear of the plight of those residents. I am glad that the ACORN Union has drawn the issue to the hon. Gentleman's attention and I am sure he will take action to ensure it is put right. The Government take this issue very seriously, which is why we are introducing the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill. There is a White Paper this morning on taking action to ensure we get good landlords and good tenants. We can make progress in this area and I look forward to him supporting the progress of the Bill.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for his comments earlier on Afghanistan. For about six months, my office and I have been trying to assist a constituent of mine whose former colleague is in hiding. He was very publicly exposed as having been involved in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism, and served the UK Government in Afghanistan for over 10 years. Can he use his good offices to speed up the process at the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence? Could we possibly even have a debate in this House to discuss how we can improve the

[Andrew Bowie]

situation for those people out there who served, with great courage, our country and our allies over the years we were in Afghanistan?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that case. A debate would be worthy of consideration. The Government have a proud record of supporting people and getting them back to safety and to the UK. If he wants to write to me with the specific details of the case, I will make sure I raise it with the Home Secretary directly.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has published a report, “Tip of the Iceberg” indicating that waiting times in accident and emergency and access to emergency care are a lot worse than officially reported. That is down to a reporting mechanism that only counts the time from DTA—decision to admit—made by a responsible clinician, which is often hours after a patient first arrives in A&E. The college found that in 2021, on average over 1,000 patients waited in A&E for 12 hours or more from time of arrival every single day. May we have a debate in Government time on this hugely concerning and important issue?

Mark Spencer: I would welcome a debate. That is why the Government introduced the health and social care levy to give the NHS investment to cope with the covid backlogs, and why we are doing NHS reform. I do not understand why the hon. Lady did not support that NHS investment through the health and social care levy. I only hope that she will have another opportunity to put the record right and to support the Health Secretary as he brings forward reforms to make the NHS more efficient.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The BBC has announced that it plans to end the local TV news bulletins produced in Oxford that serve my constituency of Aylesbury. Instead, we will receive a bulletin from Southampton. Stories about sailing and the coast are not terribly relevant to one of the most inland towns in England. I am extremely concerned that this move is in contravention of the BBC charter, which says that all audiences should be able to engage fully with major local issues. Could my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House tell me how best this can be addressed by this House?

Mark Spencer: I am sure that my hon. Friend understands that the BBC is operationally and editorially independent of Government, and that that is a decision for the BBC. We recognise that the BBC is having to make difficult financial decisions. However, under the licence fee settlement, the BBC will continue to receive around £3.7 billion of public money. I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is conducting an inquiry into the sustainability of local journalism, which plays a vital role in scrutinising local authorities. That is something that I personally value: the BBC’s “East Midlands Today” is a great resource. I look forward to seeing what the Committee reports in due course.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Thousands of immunocompromised people are still shielding because they know that the vaccine does not really work for

them. However, there is hope with Evusheld, so will the Leader of the House help to press to ensure that a timeline is published for when this life-changing drug will be made available?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who is a doughty campaigner and has done a lot of work in this area. I do not know whether she had a chance to raise the issue during this week’s Health questions, but I will raise it with the Health Secretary on her behalf and try to assist her in the work that she is trying to deliver.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Many businesses in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey have been in touch with me because they are experiencing severe difficulties in recruiting staff, especially seasonal workers in the tourism and transport industry. They make up a large part of the sector’s workforce, but UK restrictions are depriving our communities of their contribution. This Government’s hostile environment, coupled with being ripped out—against Scotland’s will—of the EU, the single market and freedom of movement, has left too big a gap. Can we have a debate in Government time on the urgent need for Scotland to have the power to address this issue?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there will be Home Office questions next week, so he will have a chance to raise that directly with the Home Secretary. I think he will recognise that, because the economy is so strong and because the Government have put measures in place to allow us to come out of covid quicker than other economies, that has brought huge pressure to the employment market. I think this is an opportunity for people to improve their life chances by seeking other careers and jobs. There are support mechanisms for getting people back into work and off unemployment benefit and into employment. I hope that those businesses will take the opportunity to look at those schemes.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): To mark the Queen’s platinum jubilee, schoolchildren across the UK were given jubilee books. Schools automatically received the books to coincide with the celebrations, but in Wales, where education is run by the Welsh Labour Government, this automatic system was rejected in favour of each school opting in. However, the opt-in system means that schoolchildren will not receive the books until September. That means that children in my constituency of Wrexham have not received their books, but their next-door neighbours in England have. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Department for Education was explicit in telling the Welsh Labour Government about the delivery date of the books?

Mark Spencer: I think my hon. Friend is right that the Department for Education was explicit with the Welsh Government. It is very disappointing. We had a fantastic jubilee weekend, where the whole country celebrated Her Majesty’s achievement of 70 years. It is really disappointing for those schoolchildren that they will not get their books on time or be able to read them as part of looking back at those jubilee weekend celebrations.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A year on from the Government's rape review, in which they admitted that they had failed victims, the Secretary of State for Justice has announced today that a new pilot will be rolled out in just three out of 77 Crown courts, and not even in those until October. When rape prosecutions have reached record lows and court backlogs have reached record highs, that is simply not good enough. Can we have a statement from the Justice Secretary so that hon. Members have the opportunity to question him on why the Conservatives continue to let rapists off and let survivors down?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I do not accept the premise. The Home Secretary has made violence against women and girls a national policing priority. Home Office questions are next week and Justice questions are in early July, but we have launched the safer streets fund and the safety of women at night fund, we are providing £25 million for safer streets projects, we have established a new lead on violence against women and girls, and last year we passed the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Government have a fantastic track record. I accept that there is more to do, but the Government are committed to doing it and we are making great progress in the right direction. I hope that the hon. Lady will support us when we introduce the victims Bill in the near future.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Many Blackpool residents are struggling to access an NHS dentist appointment, which is creating considerable problems for thousands of my constituents who cannot afford to access early preventive treatments. It is also putting the Government's levelling-up agenda at risk by undermining action on health inequalities for the most disadvantaged communities. Will the Leader of the House look into holding a debate in Government time on how we can best support additional NHS dentistry provision?

Mark Spencer: Dentistry provision is, of course, worthy of debate. The Government are investing millions of pounds in our NHS, and dentistry is a very important part of that. I am sure that my hon. Friend, as a local champion, will continue to pursue the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that his constituents get the services they deserve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House agree that every one of our constituents deserves the inalienable right to breathe clean air? On Clean Air Day, is he concerned that all the people who work in this Parliament were breathing in poisonous air yesterday? The measurements around Westminster were so bad: there was such a high level of nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere. It was deeply poisonous. May I remind him that when we come inside the building, the air follows us in? The levels of air contamination are as bad in here as they are next to a diesel bus outside. Can we have an early debate on how to tackle the problem and ensure clean air for everyone in our country?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Gentleman in recognising Clean Air Day today. Clean air is an important issue and the Government take it seriously, so we are investing in infrastructure to improve the quality of our vehicles and move towards electric vehicles. We recently passed

the Environment Act 2021 and we are looking at investment in our energy production infrastructure to move to more renewable sources. We need to proceed at a pace that our constituents and consumers can afford, but the infrastructure is coming very quickly.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Yesterday, I took part in a discussion on BBC Radio Humberside that included Councillor Steve Beasant, the mayor of North East Lincolnshire. The mayor's wife suffered a delay of 10 hours after Councillor Beasant called for an ambulance. On a previous occasion, when I was out with the ambulance crews, there seemed to be unnecessary delays in changeover times at the hospital. I know that procedures have to be followed, but can we have a debate or a statement from a Health Minister so we can see what we can do to improve the situation?

Mark Spencer: I hope that the councillor's wife is okay. *[Interruption.]* It is good to see my hon. Friend indicating that she is. Clearly we are committed to investing huge amounts of cash in the NHS, but money is not always the answer. That is why the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is determined to reform our great health services to ensure that they are more efficient, and look at practices to ensure that our constituents up and down the country get the service from the NHS that they deserve.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This week I have heard that another three NHS dentists in the City of York are handing back their NHS work and will be going private. We have hardly any NHS dentists in the city now. People are not only travelling miles but waiting years to see a dentist. This is completely unacceptable, and the pace at which the Government are addressing it is also unacceptable. Can we have an urgent statement on NHS dentistry? Our constituents cannot wait and the oral health of our nation is in deep decline.

Mark Spencer: We had Health questions this week, although I do not think the hon. Lady had the chance to ask the Health Secretary her question directly. What she describes is exactly why we are investing huge amounts in our NHS—to deal with the challenges in the NHS. She chose not to support that huge investment we are putting in alongside the reforms we are making. I hope she will be in her place to support the Government as we move forward with reform and investment.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): May we have a debate on diagnosis and support at an early age for children with autism and Asperger's? Currently, the pathway for diagnosis is difficult for parents and often takes a couple of years, which means that many young people are not getting the support they need in nursery, in school and at home.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work and his tenacity in pursuing this campaign. We had Health questions this week, on Tuesday, but I will pass on his concerns directly to the Health Secretary. I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to press the issue enthusiastically.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): On 26 May, I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on the role of traffic commissioners, given that bus companies are cancelling and changing bus routes without proper notice and consultation. His rather glib reply was that I should speak to my Labour colleagues in Wales, as transport is devolved. I am fully aware that transport is devolved. In fact, my Labour colleagues in the Senedd have already published a buses Bill to try to correct the mess created by a previous Tory Government. But the role of the traffic commissioners is not devolved, so may I ask the Leader of the House again to grant a debate on the commissioners' role? The cancellation of buses without notice is affecting constituencies right across the country.

Mark Spencer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that transport is devolved. Of course we were told yesterday that, because of the brilliance of the Welsh Government, there are no rail strikes in Wales, but that turns out not to be true.

I think such matters are worthy of debate, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for a debate. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will engage enthusiastically in such a debate and make sure that the Government's record is set out very firmly.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The rising cost of energy bills in the UK underlines the importance of security of energy supply. Rolls-Royce has developed a state of the art modular nuclear reactor. Each such reactor could power a city the size of Leeds, and once up and running one reactor could be produced every six months. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is supporting this financially, but the plans are stuck in the Treasury. May we have a statement by the Treasury giving the green light to that important project, so that we can improve our energy resilience?

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Treasury questions are on 28 June, I think, and I am sure he will be his place to ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer directly. He recognises that we need a diverse energy supply system. We are just catching up after previous Governments' lack of investment in nuclear power. That is something we can put right, and with great technology such as that supplied by Rolls-Royce, there is a bright future for the country's energy supply.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This week is Scottish Breastfeeding Week. Would the Leader of the House like to congratulate everyone involved in Scotland and more widely in supporting breastfeeding? Will he bring forward a debate in Government time on the merits of bringing the international code on marketing of breast-milk substitutes into legislation, so that those who are breastfeeding and those who are bottle feeding can be protected properly?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in supporting Scottish Breastfeeding Week. I do not know why it is just Scottish Breastfeeding Week and we do not take it across the whole country. Breastfeeding needs to be supported and advertised so that young mums can engage and make sure that their children

have their brightest future, having started life with healthy support. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have heard her comments, but if that is not the case, I will make sure that he does so.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Mayor of London is consulting on axing 18% of London's buses—that's right, 18%. That would affect Kensington and Chelsea very badly, where he is proposing that seven bus routes should be completely axed and a further seven would be severely affected. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Mayor of London is failing Londoners, whether it be through bus cuts, strikes on the tube or more taxes on drivers, and will he contemplate a debate on the subject?

Mark Spencer: I am shocked to hear that 18% of buses might be cut. I think the previous Mayor of London was an enthusiastic supporter of buses and of making sure that the transport links within London worked. That is because the Conservative party recognises that getting people to work is very important. That is why we support transport to make sure that people can get to and from work and that the economy can continue to boom.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Large numbers of people who had flights cancelled over the holiday period have not had compensation, and consumer experts fear that many who had to purchase extra flights and extra hotel nights and incur other costs will not get compensation. Could we have a debate in Government time on the legal loopholes preventing such compensation and on what might be done to prevent a repeat of that?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that; I too have had constituents affected in this negative way. I will make sure that the Department for Transport is aware of his comments. Trying to communicate what rights consumers have is the right thing to do, and I will encourage the Department to give that advice and make sure that it is made as widely available as possible so that constituents such as his and mine know their rights in those circumstances.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The Backbench Business Committee agreed to a debate in my name on the armed forces compensation scheme and war pensions, and on 28 March in that debate the House agreed that we should have a public inquiry into the handling of the issues affecting thousands of our veterans. I followed it up with a written question, and on 25 April I was told that the Department had no intention of holding the public inquiry that this House had agreed to. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time so that we can consider the Government's failure to comply with a resolution of this House?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and I will make sure that the relevant Department is aware of his comments. While I am on my feet, I think it is also worth recognising the 40th anniversary of the Falklands war this week. We all have huge pride in our armed services and I know that, cross-party and across the House, we want to support our armed services. We may disagree on the way to do that, but we certainly share that support.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Joy was unconfined recently in the Cardiff City stadium in my constituency and across Wales when our men's team qualified for the World cup for the first time in my lifetime. Great credit is due to Rob Page, the manager, and to the Football Association of Wales for the great leadership it has shown and the way it has linked the football team to our culture. At the same time, however, it has signed a deal with Viaplay, via UEFA, that will take Welsh language commentary off the free-to-air provision in the years to come. Would it not be a shame if, after such a wonderful sporting and cultural achievement, the great jewel of our Welsh language was to be taken off free-to-air television in one of its most popular dispensations—namely, through football?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Wales on their qualification. I hope they will succeed in the group and come at least second. We are of course the party of S4C, which is a great Welsh language channel. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is aware of the matter he has raised and write to her directly on his behalf.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): By way of preamble, Mr Speaker, I wish to congratulate you on the acquisition of your new cat, Clem, whom I had the great pleasure of meeting this morning.

The Tories in Scotland have fought every election since 2014 with the slogan, “Vote Tory to stop an independence referendum”, yet since 2014 the SNP has clearly won every UK, Scottish Parliament and council election. The Leader of the House and his party have repeatedly and resoundingly been rejected by the Scottish electorate, but they think they know better when it comes to what the Scottish people want when choosing their own future. Will he make a statement explaining—I genuinely do not know the answer to this—why he and his Government believe that democratic choices matter unless you live in Scotland?

Mark Spencer: I also believe that democratic results matter. The result of the referendum was to remain within the UK. I understand why the hon. Lady wants to talk about this, because she does not want to concentrate on the terrible record of the Scottish Government. The more they talk about independence, the more we see through their plan to disguise their failing results in education and their inability to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Today is Clean Air Day. Air pollution is one of the biggest threats to our health and causes around 64,000 premature deaths a year. We know that this Government have failed to take meaningful action to tackle air pollution. In my constituency, the PM_{2.5} concentration level is more than

twice the World Health Organisation guideline. Everyone deserves to breathe clean air, and it is beyond me why this Government will not commit to international health targets on air quality levels and will not be ambitious. Can we have a statement on what action the Government will take to tackle air quality?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady will have an opportunity at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions next week to ask the Secretary of State directly. The Environment Act 2021 is a huge step forward in improving our environment, and there is an upcoming transport Bill. The Government are committed to improving our air and, on Clean Air Day, it is worth recognising the progress we have made, although there is further to go.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): On Saturday I will be joining constituents at Summerfest in Cambuslang; we are all excited to see it return after a two-year break. There will be stalls, entertainment and community champion awards to recognise the work of local residents. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating John and Liz Edgar and everyone involved in organising the gala day? Will he schedule a debate in Government time to recognise the value of community-led events and the work that goes into them?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in congratulating John and Liz Edgar. I am sorry I cannot make it to Summerfest, but I will be going to Renfest in the village of Rainworth in July. Up and down the country, community groups lay on events that draw people together and give us an opportunity to socialise, communicate and support each other.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Like the constituents of the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), many of my constituents are unable to register for an NHS dentist, and those who have registered are finding it difficult to access a dentist due to the exodus of dentists to the private sector. One constituent told me, “I cannot afford private treatment, so what can I do?” The British Dental Association has warned “this is how NHS dentistry will die.”

Does the Leader of the House agree that it is simply unacceptable that people in Durham cannot afford to access dental appointments? I echo the call for a debate on the availability of dentists and the inequity of NHS dentistry.

Mark Spencer: I think I am right in saying there is an NHS dentistry debate next week, so I hope the hon. Lady will take that opportunity. The Government understand the challenges we face, which is why we are putting in huge volumes of cash to support our NHS. I look forward to listening to next week's debate.

Ukraine Update

11.43 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): I would like to update the House on our support for Ukraine.

It is almost four months since Putin launched this illegal war, bringing untold suffering to the innocent people of Ukraine. The United Kingdom has stood at Ukraine's side throughout. We have led the charge in the G7, delivering six waves of unprecedented, co-ordinated sanctions that have caused a £256 billion hit to the Russian economy. The UK has pledged over £1 billion in economic and humanitarian support to Ukraine, making us the third largest bilateral humanitarian donor. And we were the first European country to deliver military aid, from armoured vehicles to multiple-launch rocket systems. This has spurred others to step up their support.

This united effort has been vital to back Ukraine, but we are approaching a critical moment. Russia is bombarding towns and cities in the east, and some outside Ukraine are questioning whether the free world can sustain its support and claiming that some are beginning to tire of this war. The people of Ukraine do not have that luxury. Our answer must be clear: we will never tire of defending freedom and democracy. Russian aggression cannot be appeased. It will be met with strength. We know what is happening on the ground in Ukraine. Evidence grows of heinous war crimes: the butchery of innocent Ukrainian civilians, rape, torture and abduction. We will ensure that these crimes are fully investigated and justice is done. Russian proxies are breaching the Geneva convention on prisoners of war, including with the targeting of British citizens. I utterly condemn these actions, and we are working, through the Ukrainian authorities, to secure their release and hold Russia to account. I am in close contact with my Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba.

Allowing aggression to succeed would only bring further conflict and misery, and the war would not stop in Ukraine, so we are committed to stepping up our commitment, maintaining the pressure on Russia's economy, and entrenching our policy of containment and isolation of Russia. In the coming weeks, leaders will meet at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and at the G7, G20 and NATO summits. These meetings are an opportunity to stand with Ukraine and stand up for sovereignty and freedom. Ukraine can and must win this war. We will never backslide on our commitments, however long this conflict goes on. Our determination to defend our principles will outmatch that of the aggressors. The result of Putin's aggression so far has been to unite the free world. We are stronger now than we were four months ago and Russia is weaker. We must maintain this unity. We must be relentless in delivering military aid at this critical time. This includes long-range weapons and other vital needs, and improving the quality of Ukraine's military equipment for the long term to NATO standards. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister launched the UK-Poland joint commission in early April. We are working with Ukraine and other allies to shape its future defence strategy and deter future aggression.

We must also back Ukraine in negotiations. So far, Russia has shown that it is not serious about negotiations. We can never allow Ukraine to be pressurised into giving up territory in a way that we would never accept ourselves. Through the G7 and NATO, we are doing everything we can to strengthen Ukraine's hand. We also need to make sure that our Baltic friends and our Polish friends are involved. Sanctions must be kept in place while Russian boots are on Ukrainian soil, and we must keep increasing the pressure. Today, I have announced our latest sanctions package. This includes Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has repeatedly abused his position to justify the war. It includes Russia children's rights commissioner, who has orchestrated a policy that enables the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russia. And it includes four further collaborators in the breakaway republics, for their collusion in the occupation.

Although our immediate priority must be to help Ukraine win the war, we are also working to rebuild the country as fast as possible, with a new Marshall plan. At the Ukraine recovery conference in Lugano next month, we will rally the international reconstruction efforts, urging all our partners to bring ambitious offers to the table. I am working with Minister Kuleba on bringing new investment to Kyiv and to help reconstruct those towns in the region that have been liberated from Russia's destructive occupation. Russia's efforts to destroy Ukraine will only lead to it becoming a stronger, more prosperous and more united European nation.

We must also end Russia's attack on global food security. The Kremlin is blockading Ukrainian ports, shelling civilian infrastructure and preventing Ukraine from exporting its produce. By driving up food prices and creating shortages, the Kremlin is punishing the world's poorest and most vulnerable. At the same time, it is peddling lies and disinformation, claiming that the problems are because of sanctions. We are exposing those lies and working with our partners to unlock the export of grain and open the commercial shipping routes. We will stand with our friends in the Commonwealth and beyond who are suffering.

In the long run, there must be consequences for Russia's actions. For would-be aggressors everywhere, Putin must not only lose this war but be denied any benefit from it. Any future aggression must be prevented and Russia must be isolated on the world stage. Ukraine must prevail, for the good of its people and to uphold the fundamental principles of sovereignty, self-determination, freedom and democracy. The UK stands with Ukraine for the long haul. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy.

11.50 am

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful for the advance copy of the Foreign Secretary's statement.

Putin's war is now 112 days old. Ukraine continues to show remarkable defiance, but Ukrainians are paying a dreadful cost for the war and they need our support more than ever. We support the steps that the Government have taken, including the recent provision of multiple-launch rocket systems, in co-ordination with our American and German allies. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm what additional steps the Government are considering to

provide Ukraine with NATO-standard equipment? What efforts is she taking to urge other allies to do the same? Will she confirm that contracts have been signed to replenish stockpiles in the UK?

There are deeply troubling reports of not just the military assault but the devastating consequences for civilians, including mass internment and the removal of tens of thousands of Ukrainians to Russia. What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of those reports?

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine remains grave. The latest estimates from the United Nations suggest that 10,000 innocent civilians have now lost their lives in this senseless war, with many hundreds of children included in that number. More than 15 million people in Ukraine are in dire need of urgent humanitarian assistance and protection. That includes millions who have been internally displaced and those who are unable to flee entrenched towns and cities.

Given the scale of the crisis faced by the people of Ukraine, and the hunger crisis that Russia's war is driving around the world, how can the Foreign Secretary justify the decision, announced in the international development strategy, to cut the humanitarian aid budget by 35%? What proportion of the £220 million of humanitarian aid that has been pledged to Ukraine to date has been delivered on the ground? Will she provide to the House a breakdown of the allocations?

One of the gravest consequences of the war has been the disruption of global food supplies. Russia's blockade of Ukraine's Black sea ports, which harbour 98% of grain exports, is driving a humanitarian catastrophe. Global food prices have risen by 41%. We know at home the pressures that this is causing around the world. In east Africa, which is already suffering severe drought, this could lead to famine. The International Rescue Committee projects that 47 million more people will face acute hunger this year. Putin must not be allowed to use hunger as a weapon of war.

What more can be done to facilitate the export of grain via the Black sea or alternative land routes? Will the Foreign Secretary support my call for an emergency global food summit to address this grave crisis, which is exacerbating humanitarian crises around the world? There is shocking evidence that Russia is laying mines in agricultural areas; what more can be done to support those trying to stop that? What diplomatic steps is the Foreign Secretary taking, including at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting next week, to sustain and grow the international opposition to the war around the world?

Labour's commitment to the security of our NATO allies is unshakeable. At the end of June, NATO leaders will gather in Madrid. The summit is an important moment for the alliance to build and sustain unity and support for Ukraine. It is a moment to hopefully welcome new allies in Finland and Sweden, the applications of which we fully support. It is concerning that Turkey has said it is willing to delay their entry by up to a year. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with counterparts in Turkey about the paramount need to avoid delays and sustain unity?

Last week, two Britons, Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner, who were serving in the Ukrainian military, were prosecuted in an illegitimate court despite being

legitimate prisoners of war. This breach of the international law of armed conflict is shameful. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office must urgently support the families of those soldiers who will be in deep distress at this time. The Foreign Secretary promised to do "whatever it takes" to secure their release. Will she update the House on what progress the FCDO has made in this vital task?

Finally, I want to ask about Alexei Navalny. There are now troubling reports that he has been transferred from the IK-2 penal colony without the knowledge of either his family or his lawyer, and that his whereabouts are unknown. Mr Navalny, alongside others such as Vladimir Kara-Murza, has been a towering voice of defiance against the corruption of Putin's regime. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in sending a clear message that his treatment is unacceptable, that the world is watching, and that his voice will not be silenced?

Since the start of Putin's illegal war, all parts of this House have utterly condemned Russia's attack and offered our full solidarity to the people of Ukraine in their struggle for freedom and democracy. It is vital that, as this conflict rages on, we continue to support President Zelensky and Ukraine's courageous people as they face this barbarism.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his strong support for the actions that we are taking to support Ukraine and to condemn Russia for this appalling illegal war. We continue to be in talks with the Ukrainians about what more we can do—we are now supplying, as I mentioned, multiple-launch rocket systems—but what is important is that they do get up to NATO-standard equipment. To develop those plans, we have the joint commission with Poland and Ukraine, and we will be saying more on that at the NATO summit.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right about the appalling forced transfer of people to Russia, including children. That is why, in today's sanctions, we are specifically targeting those who are enabling that appalling practice. He is right, too, about global food prices, and the appalling way in which Russia is weaponising hunger to pursue its ends in Ukraine. We are working with our G7 allies on helping to get the grain out of Ukraine. We are also in talks with the UN. We are doing all we can to facilitate Finland and Sweden's urgent accession to NATO. What Putin wanted was less NATO, but what he is getting is more NATO, as people understand that the Euro-Atlantic alliance is vital to securing security across Europe.

We are in regular talks with the Ukrainian Government on the British citizens, who are prisoners of war; they were fighting legitimately with the Ukrainian army. What Russia has done is a complete violation of the Geneva convention, and we are taking all the steps that we can.

On the future of Russia, it is clear that we can never allow Russia to be in a position to undertake this aggression again—that is to do with internal repression as well as external aggression—which is why we wholeheartedly support Navalny. We are very concerned about the reports that we have heard, and we urge Russia to release him as soon as possible.

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

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The rising price of food in this country and across Europe and beyond reminds us why Ukraine is the breadbasket of Europe. As the Foreign Secretary has said, the port of Odesa, which is ground zero when it comes to exporting grain, is closed. As a starting point, to get that port reopened, may I ask her to use our P5 status at the United Nations to bypass the Security Council and go directly to the General Assembly to look at securing a resolution granting the port of Odesa international safe haven status? We have shown leadership in Ukraine. Let us show leadership in Odesa now.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the very serious issues in Odesa. We are working with the Ukrainians on shore-to-ship weapons to help to protect the port. We are working with the United Nations, through the General Assembly and other mechanisms, to try to secure access to the port. However, it is also important to look at the coalitions of the willing that could take action, and the G7 is important in that; that is why I am having a video call with my G7 Foreign Minister counterparts. Turkey also has an important role to play, and we are also in talks with the Turks. We are doing all we can to get that grain out of Ukraine, because it is vital for the Ukrainian economy and to deal with the very real issue of world hunger.

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

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of her statement. On the SNP Benches, we continue to stand in support of the actions of the Government and in absolute solidarity with the people of Ukraine. The fallout from this crisis has had an alarming impact on other regions. In the middle east alone, Lebanon's wheat flour prices are already up 47%, Yemen's cooking oil prices up 36% and Syria's cooking oil prices up 39%. Chris Elliott from the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University Belfast has said that there are likely to be famines in Africa because of what is happening in Ukraine, and David Beasley, the World Food Programme's executive director, has told the world to get ready for hell.

The Foreign Office's international development strategy, published just last month, locked in aid cuts imposed by this Government on countries such as Syria for years to come, so what steps will the Foreign Secretary take to reconsider those decisions? US President Biden has signed off on a plan to help to export 25 million tonnes of grain stuck in Ukraine by rail because of the Russian naval blockade, with a plan to build silos in Poland. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with American and Polish allies to offer support in the construction and logistical delivery of that plan?

The actions of many in spreading misinformation are having a significant impact, so what action is the Foreign Secretary taking to clamp down further on bots and cyber-troops who perpetuate such misinformation? SNP Members are supportive of the Government's sanctions regime against the Kremlin, which is essential as a component of our response to Putin's heinous crimes in the invasion of Ukraine. With that in mind, I draw the Foreign Secretary's attention to the effect of sanctions in non-Government-controlled areas. Sanctions prohibit

the transfer of certain goods and technical equipment, including water pumps and refrigeration equipment, so what steps is she taking to ensure that humanitarian organisations can better get that equipment into those areas?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the major world hunger issues we face as a result of Russian actions. That is why the UK and our partners have stepped up with the largest-ever World Bank financial commitment to developing countries, to support them in the face of this economic hardship that results from the appalling war in Ukraine. In our aid strategy and aid budget we have moved funding into humanitarian aid and are one of the leading funders into Ukraine, but we are also annually increasing our budget into Africa to support those countries at this very difficult time. I am in regular contact with the United States Secretary of State Tony Blinken, talking precisely about how we can provide direct support, both humanitarian and military, to Ukraine.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The geopolitical consequences of hungry people in poor countries are not lost on our NATO ally Turkey, which is preparing plans to escort merchant vessels out of Ukrainian ports using its resources. What assistance can we give the Turks in that respect, particularly given our long and distinguished history of mine clearance on land and at sea? What naval assets can we offer to assist them in their plan, and will we continue to assist efforts to ship grain overland to Baltic ports and ports in Poland, to extract grain through that route also?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are in talks with Turkey and our G7 allies about all the assistance we can give and all the UK resources that we can deploy, both for the sea route and, as he mentions, the rail routes. There is more that we can do to increase the capacity on those rail routes to get grain out faster, but ultimately to get the full harvest out, we need to use the sea routes as well, and that is why we are in talks with the Turks, and with our G7 allies.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I welcome much of the statement, but can I press the Foreign Secretary a little on the application for Sweden and Finland to join NATO, because it is simply not on for Turkey to threaten to delay the application for a year? Will she make forceful representations to Turkey to make it clear that what it is proposing is simply not on?

Elizabeth Truss: At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, I raised my concerns directly with the Turkish Foreign Minister. I am due to be in touch with him again next week. The Prime Minister has spoken to President Erdoğan as well. We are clear that it is vital that Sweden and Finland join NATO—it will help to strengthen the alliance—and that the Turkish Government need to agree to make that happen.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children is simply unspeakably cruel, so I warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement of further sanctions this morning. Will she confirm that when this is over and Putin has failed, the UK Government will continue the leadership role they have played in diplomatic and humanitarian efforts to reunite these families?

Elizabeth Truss: It is simply unspeakable that the Russian children's rights commissioner has been orchestrating this appalling policy of the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russia. We are clear that we are doing all we can to stop that taking place, and we are doing all we can to support Ukraine. When this war is over—when Ukraine has won this war—we will of course continue to support the country and its families in helping the country to recover and in reuniting those families.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Response Rescue International, a charity that trains dogs to recover human remains following natural or manmade disasters, wants to provide services to the people of Ukraine. Since the UK left the EU, the charity is required to pay £75 per dog for them to be seen by a vet every time the dogs are called to another country to find human remains. The service could be seen as an emergency service, and given that they are going to travel to Ukraine, will the Secretary of State work with other Departments to see whether those charges could be waived?

Elizabeth Truss: We have already made sure that we are providing funding to the HALO Trust for de-mining in Ukraine, and we have allocated a budget of £220 million of humanitarian aid. We will look at the best possible use of the money, and I strongly encourage the charity the hon. Member mentions to apply directly to the Foreign Office, and we will look at that proposal.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and commend the Government on the strength of their response to support the Ukrainian people in their struggle against this Russian aggression. Can she confirm that we will redouble our efforts to support them with humanitarian aid, medical aid and food, as the people of Ukraine are suffering horribly?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm that, and we have already dispatched a significant amount of our £220 million budget. We are doing further allocations to make sure that there is a continued supply of food and medical equipment into Ukraine. We are also seeing organisations such as the national health service donating equipment directly, as well as the British public being very heavily involved, too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Brave men and women fighting in Ukraine have been granted a short period of leave for respite and to refresh before going back to fight again. If their families are placed in Europe, there are no restrictions on their travel, but if their families have come to the UK, there are. Will the Foreign Secretary work with the Home Office to ensure that there are no barriers for people coming to the UK in that short period, so they can spend the maximum time with their families?

Elizabeth Truss: I am certainly happy to raise that issue with the Home Secretary.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. The United Kingdom has led the world in supporting the people of Ukraine through military, diplomatic and economic means, so the world looks to the United Kingdom for the next steps. She said that the United Kingdom is

working with G7 partners to support our Ukrainian friends in the negotiations. That being the case, has she seen any constructive proposals from any counterpart for an effective endgame and next steps? It is absolutely crucial that we achieve that.

Elizabeth Truss: Within the Foreign Office, we have established a negotiations cell, which is working with our partners in the Quad to make sure that Ukraine gets the best possible support in any negotiations. At present, the Russians are simply not serious about negotiations; I suspect that it is only when they are pushed back and pushed out of Ukraine that they will become serious about negotiations. We are clear that we cannot have a repeat of Minsk, where Ukrainian territory was carved up in an unfair peace settlement. We are clear that we are supporting the Ukrainians to maintain their territorial integrity. We need to not only deal with the future of Ukraine, but make sure that any future settlement contains future Russian aggression. That is the position we are taking, and we are working closely with our allies to make that happen.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I attended a chilling meeting yesterday with Ukrainian MPs, Airwars, the HALO Trust—which the Secretary of State mentioned—and the Mines Advisory Group, which all highlighted the challenges of the dangerous mines that Russia has left behind. Their impression was that it will take years to remove those mines before rebuilding can even begin; I welcome what she said about rebuilding. Can she tell me about the wider programme of demining all the affected areas so that rebuilding can start? Not a single brick can be laid in the ground until we can be assured that it is safe to do so.

Elizabeth Truss: We are working closely with the HALO Trust and the Ukrainian Government on demining in those areas. A number of our international counterparts have demining vessels to operate in the sea, as well as land-based support. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that it will take years to get right. Our approach has been to fund the HALO Trust to get on with that work so that we can clear those mines as soon as possible and life can get back to what it should be in Ukraine.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I welcome the statement. There have been six waves of unprecedented co-ordinated sanctions. Can my right hon. Friend confirm their impact on the Russian economy so far?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm that there has been £256 billion-worth of impact on the Russian economy. We have also seen the economy pushed back by roughly 15 years in the availability of goods and services in Russia. That sends an important message to Russia and to the Russian people that their Government's actions in supporting this appalling war are simply unacceptable.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. Her colleague the Defence Secretary has said that "China is watching", which makes the outcome in Ukraine even more important. What engagement has she had with counterparts in Taiwan, who will be feeling anxious as the war in Ukraine continues?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is correct. I have spoken to my Chinese counterpart and made it clear how unacceptable any Chinese support for Russia in this conflict would be. I am very concerned about the recent statement by President Xi on that subject. Of course, we continue to trade with and support Taiwan, and to defend internationally the principles of sovereignty, self-determination and freedom that should govern the international order.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Shaun Pinner, a British citizen and a member of the Ukraine armed forces for many years, was captured while injured by Russian proxy forces. Since then, he has been coerced into making calls to his family to seek a trade for his life, he has been put through a show trial with no independent legal support, and he has been given an arbitrary and unjustified death sentence—all without any access for the Red Cross. He is a prisoner of war, and many of those actions, sanctioned by Russia, are against the Geneva convention. Will my right hon. Friend redouble her efforts to work with Russia to secure Red Cross access to Shaun and other British citizens held by Russian proxies in Ukraine?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that on behalf of Shaun Pinner and the other British citizens who are being wrongly detained. They are prisoners of war; they were fighting legitimately for the Ukrainian army. Those actions by Russian proxies are completely abhorrent. We are working very closely with the Ukrainian authorities to seek the urgent release of those people.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): At the weekend, I had the pleasure of visiting the Ukrainian school in my constituency, which has seen a massive surge in numbers from 250 students to approximately 900 students. It is also employing refugees who were teachers in Ukraine but now live in London, so that Ukrainian pupils can continue their Ukrainian lessons and get their qualifications. Will my right hon. Friend talk to her counterpart in the Department for Education to see if we can give that Ukrainian school any support, financial or otherwise?

Elizabeth Truss: The Ukrainian community in the UK has been a vital part of our response. I was pleased to visit the Ukrainian club in Bolton; I know that there are many such clubs, schools and other institutions around the country. I will certainly talk to my colleagues in the Department for Education about potentially

visiting the school and seeing what more can be done. I am pleased to say that 95,000 people have now been granted visas to come to the United Kingdom, and they are contributing to life in the UK and, of course, to our aim of supporting Ukraine in this appalling war.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and everything that she and the whole Government are doing to support our friends in Ukraine.

If I may return to the issue of getting the grain out of Ukraine, the commitments that my right hon. Friend has made are welcome, but what further reassurance can she give the House that in the talks that she is having and the plans that are being put together, there is an awareness of the severe time sensitivity? With grain stores full now and harvests nearly upon us, if we do not solve this problem within weeks, it will go on for years.

Elizabeth Truss: We are very aware of the critical timeframe that we are operating in. That is why, alongside the talks with the UN, we are also talking to G7 allies and NATO allies such as Turkey to get that done as soon as we can.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary and the Opposition Front-Bench team for their resolute support for Ukraine, which was expressed again today. How is she working with our international allies inside and outside NATO to ensure that their support is unwavering as well?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that the Ukrainian people have the support of both sides of this House, and of all the people of the United Kingdom. When we look at opinion surveys on the level of support for Ukraine, it is significant that the United Kingdom is always near the top of the list, alongside Poland and our friends in the United States. We can see that from the Ukrainian flags flying in towns and villages right across the United Kingdom. That, along with the steps that we are taking by providing the weapons and putting on more sanctions—we put more on today—helps to encourage others that this war can be won. We need to make sure that the Ukrainian people continue to have hope that there will be a better future, and the way they can get that is through the strong support of the international community. I am proud that the United Kingdom has led on the supply of weapons and on sanctions. We will continue to do that and continue to work with our allies to move forward.

Private Rented Sector

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Our homes, whether we own them or not, are where we go to sleep and wake up every day. They are where we raise our children and care for our elderly. They ought to be places of safety and security. For many of the 11 million private renters in this country, that most reasonable expectation does not match up to reality. As I speak today, conditions in our private rented sector are simply not good enough. There are countless tenants living in constant fear of eviction, tenants who do not feel able to demand repairs to mould and damp in their homes, and tenants whose health suffers because of the combination of stress and unacceptable conditions. It is simply not good enough. It is not just tenants the system is not working for—it is landlords too.

While our determination to turn generation rent into generation buy is an unwavering one, and the Prime Minister's commitment last weekend to extend the right to buy will build on that record, we need to help the many people for whom home ownership is out of reach right now. Faced with the escalating cost of living, rent rises and house prices high enough to give the average prospective house buyer vertigo, the need to afford renters additional protections has never been more urgent.

So today we are setting out to overhaul our private rented sector with new proposals. This White Paper, "A fairer private rented sector", represents the biggest set of reforms to this sector in a generation. They are reforms that will deliver a new deal for the private renters of this country—a deal based on fairness, security and accountability. We have kept the proposals focused and distilled them into 12 points of action in the White Paper. They include measures such as the requirement for all privately rented homes to meet the decent homes standard, designed to drive up quality; a ban on section 21 no-fault evictions, designed to stop people having to live in fear of their lives being turned upside down at a moment's notice by an unscrupulous landlord; and the ability to limit rent rises to once a year, maximum, while bolstering the enforcement powers of local councils.

I want to be clear that these reforms do not assume that all landlords are the same. The majority of landlords do right by their tenants and offer them a positive living situation, and we want to support that majority. That is why the White Paper also includes measures that will make it easier for landlords to tackle genuine cases of antisocial behaviour or deliberate and persistent non-payment of rent. The relationship must work for both parties.

These are clear-eyed plans that make it clear that we have really thought about the whole of the private rented sector and considered how it has evolved in the past few decades. That is why the reforms cover the whole gamut, from proposals to formally give pet-loving tenants the chance to request their landlord allow them to live with their beloved animals, to more investigative and enforcement powers for councils and a new property portal that will empower tenants and landlords by helping them with clear, useful information on their rights.

It used to be the case that people rented as a stepping stone to owning their own home, but for the 1.3 million households who are renting with children, that is frequently not the case any more. Those people need more protection, and they need policies that provide them with stability. I cannot think of any other part of life where people would hand over hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds a month for a service, and not be able to demand a certain minimum standard of quality and security from the people providing them with that service. These reforms will recognise that new world and continue to build on this Government's record since 2010. We have already taken significant action to improve private renting, including significantly reducing the proportion of non-decent private rented homes, banning tenancy fees for tenancy agreements signed after 1 June 2019, and introducing pandemic emergency measures to ban bailiff evictions.

This paper has been long awaited by Members from across the House. I recognise and pay tribute to the work of the Public Accounts Committee and hon. Members who have invested extensive time and energy in unpicking this problem and championing renters. I see many of them in the House today.

Taken together, these reforms will be a watershed moment for the private rented sector, but today is not the end of the road. My Department, my right hon. Friend the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary and I will continue to work closely with stakeholders to deliver these changes on the ground and convert these words into deeds. Taken together, these landmark reforms are going to change the game for the renters of this country. I want to work with Members right across the House to make these plans happen in their areas, to promote the responsible landlords who go above and beyond, and to build the UK's reputation as an outstanding place to rent as well as to own a home. Whoever you are and wherever you live in the UK, you should have a right to expect a safe and secure home to live in. You should have a right to expect certainty that you will not be turfed out at a moment's notice. At the most basic level, you should have a right to expect the same peace of mind that owning your home would give. This White Paper delivers on those expectations and more. It sets in motion reforms that will make a fundamental difference to the lives of millions of renters in this country. For that reason, I commend this statement to the House.

12.26 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, although it is deeply regrettable that the Government only published the White Paper that is its subject a little over half an hour ago. If it had been shared earlier, Members might be better placed to question the Minister on precisely what the Government are proposing.

Labour strongly supports reform of the private rented sector and has called for it for many years. Regardless of whether they are a homeowner, leaseholder or tenant, everyone has a basic right to a decent, safe, secure and affordable home. Yet millions of those renting privately live with the knowledge that they could be uprooted at a moment's notice and with minimal justification. Given the size of the private rented sector and its ongoing—indeed accelerating—expansion, this basic lack of stability and

[Matthew Pennycook]

certainty is blighting the lives of growing numbers of families. The cost of living crisis is exacerbating this already harmful situation. In many parts of the country, rents in the private rented sector are surging, and with the Government having decided to once again freeze local housing allowance, millions of hard-pressed tenants are at risk of arrears and eviction.

We welcome the proposals in the White Paper and congratulate all the individuals and organisations that have made the case for change over many years. But why has it taken the Government so long to get here? The commitment to reform the private rental market and ban so called no-fault section 21 evictions was made over three years ago by the Government led by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). In the time since, over 200,000 private renters—not just the young but growing numbers of older people and families on low incomes forced to rent privately because successive Conservative Governments have overseen the erosion of our social housing stock—will have been turfed out of their homes as a result of the Government's failure to act with the urgency required.

Three years on, that urgency is still lacking, and instead of the publication of legislation that we can fast-track through this House, the best the Government can do is to bring forward a White Paper. Renters across the country need emergency legislation, not further consultation. We know that it is not a guarantee, given that renters reform was promised in the 2021 Queen's Speech and not delivered, but we do have a commitment to that legislation in this Session, so can the Minister give the House an indication of when it is likely to be published?

Let me turn to some of the specific proposals in the White Paper. We obviously welcome the proposed ban on no-fault evictions, but we will want assurances that the proposals for strengthened mandatory grounds for possession cannot be abused to unfairly evict tenants and will be tight enough to minimise fraudulent use of the kind we have seen in Scotland. Can the Minister provide any such assurances? We support the introduction of minimum standards in the private rented sector through the extension of the decent homes standard, but we have real concerns about how this might be enforced in practice given that it is not an enforceable standard in the social rented sector, where it already exists. What steps do the Government intend to take to ensure that the standard can be properly enforced and that private renters do not end up bearing the cost of seeking redress?

Lastly, in none of the coverage this morning or in the White Paper itself is there any sign of meaningful proposals to address the problem of unreasonable rent rises. A one-year rent increase limit, the removal of rent review clauses and vague assurances about giving tenants the confidence to challenge unjustified increases at tribunal are simply not good enough. According to Rightmove, private rents are rising at record rates, with average asking rents outside London rising last year by over 10% for the first time. With the scrapping of section 21, the risk of economic evictions via rent hikes is going to increase markedly. Can the Minister tell us why the Government are unwilling to act to properly protect private tenants from extortionate rent hikes?

We will study the White Paper carefully now it is published and we will engage constructively with its proposals, but we will also do whatever we can to ensure they are not watered down come the legislation. We are going to continue to urge the Government to bring that legislation forward as a matter of urgency, because renters have waited long enough for the protections that they deserve and rightly expect.

Eddie Hughes: I guess I should begin with an apology, saying I am sorry that the document was available at such short notice, although there is going to be considerable opportunity over the next couple of months for me and Members right across the House to discuss its content. I look forward to doing that either in formal settings or in the Tea Room with Members from all parties, right across the House.

But I am not going to let the hon. Gentleman rain on my parade on a sunny day like this. He is looking very serious, but I know that, deep down, Opposition Members welcome this legislation. They may be disappointed that it has taken a while to get to this point, but they may remember—it feels like a distant memory now—that we have had two years of a global pandemic in the meantime. The Government have done everything they could to support renters during that period. We have given furlough payments that have allowed renters to continue to occupy their properties and keep arrears as a result of the pandemic to a limit. We have also invested heavily in things such as discretionary housing payments to help people where arrears have been built up. So we have been doing an awful lot of work in the past two years and I think he should acknowledge that.

As I say, this is a White Paper; it is not the legislation. We have the opportunity now to discuss, as Members of Parliament and with stakeholders, what they think about the legislation and perhaps see if there is an opportunity to improve and enhance it, provided they are reasonable with their suggestions, before we get to the legislation.

On when that might happen, hon. Members will appreciate that our Department has an intense legislative programme. We have the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill. As you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill has already life in the other place, so progress is being made with our legislation. However, clauses have been sent for drafting and work is already under way. People are beavering away on the construction of that document, so I hope we will see it in quick time. Once it gets to Parliament, I am expecting its passage through Parliament to be pretty smooth and fast because I think it is going to be welcomed by Opposition Members.

On the point about the abuse of mandatory grounds that we are strengthening for landlords, I understand completely the reservations of the hon. Gentleman. I commit to work closely with him to make sure that that legislation is tough and there is not the opportunity for rogue landlords to thwart it in some way, given our best intentions.

On how we might enforce the powers, I fully appreciate that councils are under intense pressure, so we are going to work with councils on a number of pilot schemes so we can test what the best way is for them to enforce good-quality housing within the private rented sector, and then we can develop best practice and I hope share that across the country.

On rent rises, one of the things we should appreciate with regard to the cost of living is that, if somebody is forced to move tenancy, perhaps because of a no-fault section 21 eviction, on average, that costs approximately £1,400. So if we can limit the number of times people move, we are going to make sure that they do not experience those unfortunate and unnecessary costs. However, as a Government, we are clearly not committed to the idea of rent control. We have seen that experiment carried out recently in some places in Europe and all it does is stop investment in properties. That is the last thing we want to do.

This White Paper commits to a fairer private rented sector for both tenants and landlords, and I look forward to working with Opposition Members to deliver it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, can I refer you to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests?

Rents are rising because of a shortage of properties in the market as landlords flee from it. Has the Minister considered that these measures may have the very reverse effect of that which he intends?

Eddie Hughes: I always love to hear from my right hon. Friend. His powerful oratory suggests some things sometimes that may not necessarily be quite the case. The English housing survey tells us that as many landlords are talking about selling some of their stock as are talking about buying new stock, so I think the equilibrium within the market is likely to be marginally less dramatic than he has suggested. Clearly, as a Government, we will be keeping a watchful eye on these things to make sure there are no unintended consequences. Given the work we have put in to reassure landlords and the consultation we have had during the creation of this White Paper, I think he may find that they are less frightened of the White Paper than his oration might suggest.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): While also welcoming the content of the White Paper as outlined now, I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) about the further delay before legislation—the consultation and pilots—when there is pressing urgency. The Minister does not need to wait to get on with an urgent review of enforcement capacity. Whether it is about substandard accommodation or illegal evictions, we know we have a problem of capacity in local government, housing legal aid and the police supporting people facing illegal evictions. Can he undertake to review that capacity urgently and take steps to deal with it while we wait for the legislation?

Eddie Hughes: As I say, given the other challenges within the Department, I am not sure what our capacity is for that. However, I will commit to meeting the hon. Lady to discuss her suggestions in more detail in very quick time to make sure that I fully understand what she is proposing and see what the capacity might be for that.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool has some of the worst private sector housing stock in the entire country, so I welcome the £1 million housing enforcement pilot, which alongside the measures outlined today will make a real impact. May I thank the Minister

for working so closely with Blackpool Council so far to devise the pilot, and will he meet me to discuss the £30 million package that his Department is working on for housing-led regeneration within Blackpool?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend is an incredible champion for good housing standards in his constituency. Our Department has carried out a deep dive of housing conditions in Blackpool, where we have some of the worst housing conditions. With our commitment as a Department and as a Government to levelling up across the country and ensuring that across the UK we are delivering high-quality housing, I look forward to working with him further and meeting him to discuss his proposals.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I also refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the reforms that are being proposed today. However, a lot more needs to be done to protect renters. Homelessness is about to soar, due to the cost of living crisis, and LGBT+ people are disproportionately affected by homelessness and at heightened risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. Apart from the reforms announced today, what are the Government actually doing to protect especially the LGBT+ community from homelessness?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. Obviously, the Government are committed to spending £2 billion on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in the next three years, but I completely accept the point she makes about the LGBT community. We work very closely with charities in that sector to ensure that we understand the challenges they face, and they certainly inform our policy formation to make sure we are offering the support we can.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It would be good to see some security restored to the private rented sector, 35 years after a Conservative Government introduced no-fault eviction, but housing in the UK also has a crisis of affordability and disrepair. The social housing sector, although far from perfect, is better placed to tackle all these issues, but it has been weakened in favour of the private rented sector over many years. What plans does the Minister have to rebalance the housing market and restore social housing to its previous role as the leading provider of decent homes?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Gentleman refers to the fact that a Conservative Government introduced the legislation 35 years ago. Perhaps he has forgotten that, just occasionally, the public vote for a Labour Government, so they have had the opportunity to repeal it during their time in power. I know it does not happen very often, but when they occasionally get the levers of power, they could pull them. However, the hon. Gentleman will also be aware that we have introduced the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill to the other place. That is going to make its way through Parliament and make significant changes to how the social housing sector is managed and regulated. Our intention is to drive up standards across the social and private rented sectors. Our ambition is to reduce by 50% the number of non-decent homes by 2030, across all tenures.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Nearly a quarter of my constituents live in the private rented sector and they simply cannot afford to do so. They do

[*Rachael Maskell*]

not want to be in the private rented sector, but there is not enough social stock and buying is too expensive. Therefore, they are trapped. Now not only are they seeing section 21 evictions, but, with rental costs the highest in the north, at £945 per month on average, people are having to leave the area, which impacts on the economy as well as on their lives. Will the Minister reconsider the issue of rent controls because the pace that rents are rising is forcing people out of my city?

Eddie Hughes: I have to be blunt and say, “Under no circumstances”—that is simply not a Conservative policy and it is not something we are going to pursue. The White Paper contains some things that will be helpful to the hon. Lady’s constituents, such as abolishing rent review clauses. Abolishing section 21 means that people should not have to move property so frequently and will save money that way. The No. 1 thing I would say, however—I keep apologising for being such a cheerleader for my boss—is that, since the Secretary of State took his post in September, he has been championing the idea that the Government should build more social housing and more properties for social rent. That is an invaluable contribution that will help her constituents.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Like other Members, I endorse the direction in which the Government are going, but there are a lot of gaps that they could have addressed in the White Paper, only the summaries of which I have had time to see so far. Does the Minister agree that a key element of giving greater security, transparency and power to tenants is to ensure that letting agencies which act on behalf of landlords work to the highest standards as well? Could he commit to looking at a code of conduct for letting agents, as has been done in Wales?

Eddie Hughes: We have approximately 19,000 letting agents in this country and they need to belong to one of two landlord redress schemes. My understanding is that that is working quite effectively, but I am happy to meet and discuss any proposals that the hon. Lady might have. She is well informed in this area. I often see her in the Chamber discussing all things housing, so I value her contribution.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for his statement.

Points of Order

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday in the Chamber, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said

“in Labour-run Wales, a strike by train staff has been avoided.”—*[Official Report, 15 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 328.]*

and she went to say that that would avoid disruption. However, I have been contacted by Transport for Wales to advise passengers not to travel as strike action will seriously disrupt services. Would it be possible for the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley to correct the record, so hardworking passengers in Wales are not further inconvenienced by inadvertent misinformation to the House, by Labour, which is prioritising paymasters over passengers?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): First, can the hon. Lady assure me that she has notified the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley?

Sarah Atherton *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I thank her for the point of order. She has put her comments on the record. In a way this is an extension of the debate yesterday. It is not a matter for the Chair but, as I say, she has put her point of view on the record.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance on how we could also clarify the fact—this was alluded to yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—that Transport for Wales staff, who provide many if not the bulk of services in Wales, are not involved in next week’s industrial dispute, so any action is as part of wider action during that dispute?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order, which rather plays into my view that this has been an extension of the debate that took place yesterday. Now everybody’s views are on the record, so I suggest we leave it at that and move on swiftly to the Select Committee statement.

Select Committees and Contempts

COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Sir Bernard Jenkin, representing the Committee of Privileges, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Sir Bernard Jenkin to respond to those in turn. I emphasise that questions should be directed to Sir Bernard Jenkin, not to any relevant Minister who might be here. Interventions should be brief, not a wider comment, and the in form of a short question to Sir Bernard. Those on the Front Bench may also take part in questioning.

12.47 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend the report that the Privileges Committee has published this morning dealing with the powers of Select Committees to summon persons and papers, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity. I am making this statement on behalf of the Committee, because the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is no longer Chair of the Committee. He was discharged from it on Tuesday because he has recused himself from the new matter referred to the Committee, concerning the conduct of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). However, the hon. Member for Rhondda was in the Chair during all proceedings on the report published today, and I pay tribute to the effective way in which he chaired the Committee, enabling us to come to a unanimous conclusion on this somewhat vexed matter.

Today's report is the second we have issued on this subject. A year ago we published our original proposals with a draft Bill. Both reports relate to the matter referred to the Committee by the House as long ago as 27 October 2016, namely,

“the exercise and enforcement of the powers of the House in relation to select committees and contempts”.

Our earlier report set out different potential options for addressing the issue of recalcitrant witnesses. Its preferred option was legislation, and the creation of a criminal offence of refusing to obey a summons to attend a Select Committee meeting or to provide it with papers. A draft Bill was attached to the report. Following extensive consultation, including further written and oral evidence, the Committee now reaffirms its conclusion that

“if the House wishes to address the problem of recalcitrant witnesses, then legislation is the only appropriate means to do so.”

A revised version of the draft Bill is annexed to the report.

On the role of Select Committees, the report notes that

“select committees have a right to scrutinise matters of public interest beyond the main bodies of government.”

It adds

“in considering government policy, it is legitimate to look at the effects of policy failure, or to identify emerging areas which need policy oversight. For that legitimate function to be effectively performed, Parliament needs appropriate powers.”

Explaining the intention behind recommending that Parliament legislates to empower Committees, the report asserts that

“topical inquiries involving non-cooperation by witnesses will continue to occur from time to time.”

and that

“individuals who feel that they have little to lose will test the ability of the House to enforce their attendance as witnesses or their production of papers.”

The report notes that while cases are few,

“it is undoubtedly a real problem”,

which the Committee's proposed legislation “is intended to address.”

The Committee's report concludes that, ultimately, and perhaps realistically,

“the decision before the House in relation to powers is between accepting the status quo or introducing new powers by means of legislation, accepting there will be a role for the courts. A primary benefit of legislation is that it would put Parliament's power to sanction beyond doubt.”

The other option—that the House should reassert its historical powers to fine and imprison through Standing Orders or by resolution—is rejected outright by the Committee on the grounds that the powers have effectively become unenforceable. A new word that I learned in studying the matter is *desuetude*.

The report analyses the consultation responses and makes modifications to the initial proposals as well as mounting a defence of them where it feels that criticism was misplaced. It clarifies some points, such as that the draft Bill does not seek to criminalise contempts of the House as such, and that the criminal offence will be that of failing to comply with a summons to attend a Committee or to produce papers without reasonable excuse rather than giving unsatisfactory responses to questions when attending a Committee. It revises the draft Bill to substitute a maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment in place of the original proposal of two years' imprisonment, and to give Mr Speaker the power to issue the statutory summons. It calls on the House's Liaison Committee, which I chair, to develop a protocol on the treatment of witnesses to ensure that all witnesses get fair treatment. I will ensure that that occurs.

Now that the Committee has published its report and recommendations, it will be for the House to consider the proposals and make any final recommendations. I am happy to take questions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for his statement and congratulate the Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on their work on this important issue. As we all know, Select Committees play an essential role in holding the Government to account, and it is right that they have the powers to function properly, so the Opposition welcome the Committee's report and recommendations. Will the hon. Member expand on his preferred timetable for any potential legislation to be brought forward?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I could give the short answer of “as soon as possible,” but, realistically speaking, I suspect that the Government will find difficulty in providing time for the draft Bill that we have annexed to our

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

report. I very much hope that they will introduce it soon. In the interim, we can do much to improve Select Committee procedures to ensure fairness for witnesses and to include some of what is relevant in our Standing Orders. That is much easier to do and, in the absence of legislation, if we used our traditional powers, that would make them more credible as well as less likely to be challenged by the courts were we to ensure that our procedures are human rights-compliant.

My view is that Select Committees are not for jumping on private individuals in the manner of some kangaroo court and prosecuting them for wrongdoing, and I doubt that we would get consent from the courts for a statutory process if that is how we treat our witnesses. We really need to copper-bottom and copper-plate the treatment of witnesses so that they always get fair treatment and are never unfairly treated.

Select Committees are not prosecuting bodies. They are not there to find fault with individuals. They are there to improve Government policy and scrutinise Government Departments. Occasionally, they have to carry out that function by looking at independent bodies, private sector bodies or charities. However, their job is not to regulate the private sector but to oversee and scrutinise the public sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the Select Committee statement.

Backbench Business

Grenfell Tower: Fifth Anniversary

[*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, Session 2022-23, CP 863.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we come to the important debate on the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, I remind Members that, under the terms of the sub judice resolution, they should not refer to active legal proceedings in the debate. That includes proceedings on inquests.

12.55 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and I especially thank those MPs from across the House, including Back-Bench MPs from the governing party and all the Opposition parties, who supported its application. It is essential that we have a moment like this in the House to remember the events at Grenfell, to mark the worst domestic fire in living memory, to commemorate the 72 people killed and to acknowledge all those whose lives were changed for the worse that day. Such a debate is an important moment of reflection. It should also be an opportunity for the House to show that it is learning the lessons of that atrocity by taking the action needed to prevent it from ever happening again.

I ask the Government for an annual debate in Government time when the House can receive and debate reports on progress made on the Grenfell fire inquiry recommendations and to discuss changes to our justice system and the changes that must be made to make homes safe if we are to show that lessons are truly being learned. If we allow the memory of Grenfell to slip away, there is a real risk that the changes needed to prevent another Grenfell will slip away with it.

I want to focus on two areas: the need for justice for all those killed, for the survivors, for the bereaved families and for the wider community; and the changes that we need to ensure that it never happens again. Five years on from the fire, it is clear that bereaved families and survivors feel deeply let down by our justice system, and they have every right to do so. They are rightly asking, “Where are the criminal charges? Why are those who made the decisions that turned Grenfell into a deathtrap still walking free, and why, five years on, have those who ignored residents’ warnings not been held to account?”

The deep sense of injustice goes all the way back to day one of the atrocity. Hours after the fire, a public inquiry was announced, even though families had wanted the criminal investigation to go first. I remind the House that, while bereaved and affected families were mourning their loved ones, seeking a new place to live and trying to continue to bring up their children and look after their parents, they had to launch a public

campaign over the nature of the public inquiry to stop it from being done to them rather than with them. They were initially refused the simplest of demands for the public inquiry to be led by a broad-based panel; a demand to help them have trust in it. There had to be protests, marches and petitions signed by more than 150,000 people to get the House to even debate such an inquiry panel before it was belatedly granted. As shadow Justice Secretary during the fire and its aftermath, I was privileged to work with the families as they campaigned for that simple demand, but I remember feeling sick to my stomach that their energies had to go into fighting for something that should be a basic right.

From the very outset, the confidence of the survivors and bereaved family members in the justice system was damaged and it is clear that it has not been repaired. As Grenfell United said this week:

“For 5 years we’ve had to endure a justice system that protects the powerful. A system that prevents justice. Whilst this system exists, we face the same unachievable battle as the many before us. From Aberfan, to Hillsborough, justice has been denied & #Grenfell is no different. They left us to search for answers, they mocked us publicly. Now, they stand in the way of justice. We must pave a new way forward. We must hold those responsible to account.”

We know that this experience of our justice system is not a one-off. Hillsborough and Bloody Sunday are just two examples of when the state blocked the truth and justice for years, sowing distrust and undermining justice.

Going forward, one way to show that lessons have been learnt would be to make changes, so that families do not have to fight for years more than necessary in inquiries to get justice. For many, the history of inquiries in this country often gives the impression that they are there to slow down justice and deny justice. We should implement the Hillsborough law, backed by the Grenfell families, as a matter of the utmost urgency. It would not address all the issues that led to such appalling treatment of the Grenfell families, but it would ensure that in future the scales of justice are not so tilted against ordinary families and in favour of public authorities who hold all power. But of course, true justice will only be done when those responsible, be they politicians, officials or company decision makers, are fully held to account, including through the criminal courts.

We have heard a lot in recent days about ensuring that this atrocity never happens again, but the Grenfell families believe that, five years on, another Grenfell is a very real possibility. Already at the inquiry there has been a mountain of evidence of how profits were prioritised over safety, how privatisation and deregulation watered down building standards, and how cuts and austerity contributed. All that must be tackled if the words “never again” are not just platitudes from politicians. The lessons from the inquiry must be implemented in full, however uncomfortable that is for the Government. But there are already deep concerns that lessons will be ignored and that they already are being ignored.

The Government, so far, have failed to implement a single recommendation directed at them from the first phase of the inquiry. Worse still, they are actively rejecting some of the recommendations. One key recommendation from the inquiry’s first phase was to make it mandatory for owners of high-rise flats to arrange personal emergency evacuation plans, known as PEEPs, for disabled people. Of the 37 disabled people living at Grenfell, 15 lost their lives—41%—yet the Home Office recently rejected that

recommendation. It is a total scandal that once again profits seem to be being put before life, with the Government labelling this recommendation impractical and too costly. That breaks a previous Government promise to implement the recommendations in full. What is the point of an inquiry if the recommendations are then rejected?

Peter Apps, the journalist who has perhaps best covered housing and fire safety in the aftermath of Grenfell, says that that happened after the Home Office had one-to-one conversations with building owners and ignored its own consultation responses. No wonder Edward Daffarn, a Grenfell resident who warned of a catastrophic fire months before it happened, says that the Government are playing Russian roulette with people’s lives.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I am sorry that I will not be able to make a speech in this debate as I will be in Committee.

Does my hon. Friend agree that it was quite extraordinary that plans for people with disabilities to leave in the event of a fire were not already in place and legally required in the first place? It is even more extraordinary that, with the evidence that emerged during the inquiry that such plans were needed, the Government, having said repeatedly in this House that they would implement the findings of the Grenfell inquiry in full, are now backtracking and putting at risk our most vulnerable people, which we find quite unacceptable.

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I hope that after this debate the Government will revisit their position and their rejection of that important recommendation from the first phase of the inquiry.

That is not the only concern about fire safety measures not being addressed. Government officials did not heed coroner advice after the Lakanal House fire killed six people in 2009. It was followed by an even more deadly fire. We cannot allow the same to happen after Grenfell. Yet as David Badillo, the first of many firefighters who went into Grenfell Tower, wrote this week:

“Apparently 72 lost lives is not enough. There is still no requirement for a second staircase in high rises. No requirement to fit fire alarms in all high rises. No national strategy on how to evacuate high rises.”

The figure revealed this week by the Fire Brigades Union, of 221 firefighter positions cut since Grenfell, represents a serious failure to change course after the loss of 11,000 firefighter roles between 2010 and 2017. Of course, a failure to sufficiently address the housing safety crisis is another reason why we have to take with a healthy dose of scepticism claims that lessons have so far been learned. Even on the ground in Kensington and Chelsea the situation is not yet resolved. Three Grenfell households are still to be rehoused, while 50 more have replacement homes unsuitable for their needs in numerous ways. After five years, it is unacceptable that people are still being treated as second-class citizens.

More widely, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people are still at risk in unsafe housing. Work is still to be completed on 111 buildings that are over 18 metres tall and have exactly the type of aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding identified by the Grenfell inquiry as a leading cause of the 2017 atrocity. Some 640,000 people are still living in buildings with that exact type of cladding. But that is just the tip of the

[Richard Burgon]

iceberg. Last week, after accessing Government figures, LBC reported that almost 10,000 buildings in England are unsafe due to dangerous cladding and other associated fire risks. Those shocking figures include at least 903 buildings over 18 metres tall with cladding systems that need to be removed. A study last year estimated that between 6,000 and 8,900 mid-rise residential buildings, between 11 metres and 18 metres in height, require remediation, partial remediation or mitigation works.

As well as the danger to their lives, as End Our Cladding Scandal has so well documented, there are the financial costs, with many living in unsafe homes that they cannot sell and facing bankruptcy because their house has plummeted in value. This is affecting their physical health and their mental health. Surely, five years on from Grenfell, one of its legacies should be an end to all unsafe homes.

I want to conclude with the words of the families in a statement made this week:

“We don’t want our 72 to be remembered for what happened, but for what changed.”

Those are their words. We need more than the apologies of politicians. We need more than an inquiry. We need to see justice properly done and we need real change to the practices, cultures and policies that led to so many people needlessly losing their lives five years ago.

1.9 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The last few days have been very intense, emotional and difficult for my constituents as we remember the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives so horrifically and so needlessly. You will never be forgotten.

It has been my great privilege over the course of the last few years to get to know many of the bereaved and survivors. They have borne so much with so much dignity. It was humbling to spend time with them at Westminster Abbey on the anniversary on Tuesday, and a few days before that at Al-Manaar mosque in north Kensington in my constituency. Their individual accounts of what happened to them that evening are truly harrowing. I do not think that any of us can imagine the pain, anguish and suffering that people went through that night, or indeed the pain and anguish that relatives, friends and the community continue to suffer from.

On the morning of the anniversary, I went to Grenfell Tower. It was 7 o’clock in the morning, but there were already students from the neighbouring Kensington Aldridge Academy there, paying their respects. KAA, as it is known, lost five students in the tragedy. In total, 18 children died, their lives cut horrifically short.

We will never be able to right the wrongs of the past, but we can ensure that there is a lasting legacy from Grenfell. I am very clear that that legacy must be that everyone has a right to be safe in their homes, and that the voices of all residents and all communities need to be heard.

Last week we had a debate on building safety and social housing. I will not repeat the remarks that I made then, but I did say that I had been very frustrated over the last five years at the speed at which many of the changes were being implemented. There is no question but that we have made progress. We have enacted the

Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety Act 2021, and lots of developers have said that they will contribute towards the cost of remediation. However, there is a lot more to be done, and it needs to be done quickly.

One of the first things that I did when I got to this place was to give a speech on Grenfell. It was January 2020, following my election in December 2019. I called then for all the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry to be implemented, and to be implemented at speed, and I reiterate that call today.

What we collectively need to do is to ensure that a tragedy of this kind can never be allowed to happen again, and I am determined that I will do what I can to ensure that such a tragedy does not happen again.

1.14 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), whose constituency includes the area of Grenfell Tower. Of course, for 13 years I represented the constituency of Regent’s Park and Kensington North, including Grenfell Tower, and I knew it and the people living in it well. When the phone calls began in the middle of that fateful night five years ago, it was a personal horror to me as well.

The inferno engulfed Grenfell Tower just days after the 2017 general election. Parliament had not reconvened, but Ministers and MPs gathered in Westminster Hall for a special meeting, for which an official parliamentary record could not be provided. The newly elected Member for Kensington in 2017, Emma Dent Coad, was plunged into probably the most challenging set of circumstances that almost any newly elected Member of Parliament has had to face outside of wartime. She went on to make the case over the following two years, and she continues to do so outside this House. We should commend her for coping so well with that extraordinary challenge.

Sarah Jones: I believe that Emma Dent Coad is with us today, watching from the Public Gallery. I also came to Parliament in 2017, and this has absolutely been the defining issue of my entire five years. What happened was such a huge thing for those of us who were new, and I can only imagine how she managed to cope with the challenges she faced.

Ms Buck: I thank my hon. Friend and agree very strongly with her.

That gathering of parliamentarians, which is not on the parliamentary record, was very intense indeed. We pressed Ministers very hard for answers. In addition to the obvious shock that everybody was still feeling, there was an absolutely overwhelming demand for urgency not only in response to the catastrophe that happened in north Kensington but in relation to the wider lessons, which I will come to in a moment.

In the days that followed, including the day on which we gathered, it became immediately obvious that there was a failure of epic proportions on the part of the state, and particularly the local council in Kensington, and those of us who went to the Grenfell area to offer support in the immediate aftermath could see that. During that parliamentary debate, I asked what we were going to do, immediately and urgently, to deal with the

homelessness crisis faced by hundreds of people. That quickly became a larger number, because over the following days there was an evacuation of residents from the Lancaster West estate surrounding Grenfell Tower. Having been the Member of Parliament for that area, I knew well the sheer scale of the homelessness diaspora resulting from Kensington council's behaviour, and indeed of the wider homelessness problems in London.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, people were sleeping rough. How was that allowed to happen? We discussed the issue, yet it was allowed to happen. It is important that we remember that five years on, because the way in which the institutions of the state failed the survivors, the relatives and the wider community set a tone for the whole of the following five years. Understandably, that fed into a deep and profound sense that they could not rely on the institutions of the state to offer them support and justice. One of the things that we have to do today is recognise that epic failure and collectively apologise for it. I am ashamed. Anybody who went down to north Kensington over those following days could not believe their eyes in seeing a failure on that scale.

Homelessness was one of the first issues raised, but it took months—it took years—for the housing needs of Grenfell survivors, relatives and the community to be dealt with, even though they were recognised within hours of the fire. The second immediate issue raised in Parliament on that day was the need for justice—the need for those responsible to be held to account for what had happened. We did not immediately know exactly who was responsible—which components of the system, from building design and maintenance to the emergency response—but people knew that there was a need for justice.

I do not think anybody would now say that the passage of five years means that justice has been served. That is not in any way a criticism of the inquiry, which has been profoundly rigorous in going about its work, but justice delayed is justice denied. Five years is far too long for the community to wait for justice. Urgency was the prevailing tone in the immediate aftermath of the fire, but five years on, the promise of urgency and the commitment to urgency have been denied. The community has been let down profoundly as a consequence.

Building safety has been a dominant theme in Parliament in the intervening five years, but we need to reflect again on emergency planning. The fact that it failed so catastrophically in Kensington tells us something quite profound, which we continue to raise in other contexts: there is an institutional belief that these kinds of things cannot happen here. There is a complacency about risks that should have been shattered comprehensively, forever, by what happened five years ago, but it has not. Again and again, we see the expectation that we should drive towards a deregulatory approach to services and a de minimis public sector, even though the capacity of the public sector, which failed so badly on that day, is so essential to ensuring that such things cannot happen again.

Within days and weeks of Grenfell, it became quickly apparent that hundreds of thousands of people across the country were living in buildings where such things could happen again—in some cases, they still are. That possibility has dominated our discussions in this Chamber. Ten days after Grenfell, I had to attend a meeting of

desperate and frightened residents of a six-block, 22-storey estate in north Westminster that overlooked Grenfell Tower and had been covered with the same form of cladding. In many ways, they have been the fortunate ones: they went through terminal upheaval as the cladding was removed over the following winter. However, 10,000 buildings continue to be covered with some form of cladding. The people in them live with that risk. In many cases, they also live with the reality that they face financial ruin and are trapped, unable to move.

I completely recognise that the Government have taken some steps in their legislative programme to implement proposals on fire safety and building safety, but so little has been done compared with what is needed.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I have been in this place for only five years; the Grenfell fire and its aftermath have been a defining part of my term. A number of buildings in my constituency are still wrapped in unsafe cladding. Despite many years of promises that leaseholders would never have to foot the bill for fire safety and remediation work, and despite the Fire Safety Act and the Building Safety Act, leaseholders are still being burdened with thousands of pounds of debt to pay for all the fire safety and remediation work to be completed.

Ms Buck: I totally agree. So many people still live with the fear, the risk and the stress of having to contribute financially. As we have said again and again, so many of the people who bear the burden of cost and risk are the very last people in the chain of responsibility to have had anything to do with the circumstances in which they are trapped.

Five years on, as the inquiry continues its work, the Home Office's decision not to implement the inquiry's recommendation

“that the owner...of every high-rise residential building be required...to prepare personal emergency evacuation plans”

sends out the worst possible signal, particularly to survivors and to the north Kensington community, who are looking to the inquiry for answers on the long road to justice.

This is the fifth anniversary of an avoidable tragedy of epic proportions—a tale of corporate malfeasance, incompetence, indifference and institutional inertia, even after the Lakanal House fire had given us all the signals that Government action was needed. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East, I pay tribute to Peter Apps and *Inside Housing* for years of painstaking work in following the inquiry, reporting on it and giving us the information that we need to follow what would otherwise be a very complex story.

The chains of reporting by Peter Apps make salutary reading for every Member of this House, because they lay so bare what has gone wrong. For example, contractors and developers knew that the cladding system would fail. As Peter Apps has reported:

“In an email exchange...designers of the tower's cladding system wrote: ‘There is no point in “fire stopping”. As we all know; the ACM will be gone rather quickly in a fire!’”

It is worth reading the dozens of reports that have been put on record in the inquiry, which give us revelations of that kind.

[Ms Buck]

Five years on, I pay tribute to the survivors, the relatives, their representatives, the mosques, the churches, the community and Grenfell United, who have done such extraordinary work, in the aftermath of this tragedy, to hold the community together and support people, their dignity and their campaign for justice. But five years on, there is not yet justice.

1.28 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I can only agree with the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) about the complacency that infused the entire safety system and the emergency planning. I hope that the Moore-Bick inquiry will address that point in the fullness of time, although it is taking so long, which is what I want to address today. If my comments today have a theme—I appreciate that this is possibly controversial—it is about learning, not necessarily blaming. There may be people to blame, but we need to learn.

It is terrible for survivors and for victims' families and friends that we are here five years on, but there is still no closure or resolution for them. As every hon. Member knows, people come to see us after a terrible accident or mistake with the words—echoed by the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who so capably opened the debate, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan)—“I just want to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.” The living victims of Grenfell still feel as far as ever from that confidence, and I dedicate my speech to them.

I will set out the two main recommendations made in the submission to the Grenfell inquiry that I co-authored with the right hon. Nick Raynsford, former MP for Greenwich and Woolwich and a former Minister for housing and for fire and rescue services, who is now chair of CICAIR, the Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register; Kevin Savage, a leading figure in the building control profession; and Keith Conradi, current chief investigator of the health services safety investigations body, which arose from a recommendation from the Public Administration Committee, which I chaired, and previously chief investigator of the air accident investigation branch of the Department for Transport, who therefore brings a wealth of expertise to the panel of drafters of our submission on the question of safety systems and safety management, and accident investigation. The inquiry has not yet published our submission, but has given me permission to place copies in the Library. I hope right hon. and hon. Members will find it helpful.

Our submission is addressed not to who should be blamed but to some of what should be learned. The remit of the inquiry includes “the scope and adequacy” of the relevant regulations, legislation and guidance. The Building Safety Act reflects in large part the recommendations of the review commissioned by the Government from Dame Judith Hackitt, called “Building a Safer Future”. I thank her and Peter Baker, the chief inspector of buildings, who leads the new building safety regulator; they have both been extremely helpful with our submission, although they may not agree with all of it. We have presented our submission to Ministers, but they are, naturally, awaiting the outcome of the Grenfell inquiry before responding formally.

The Building Safety Act establishes the new building safety regulator based in the Health and Safety Executive. It is responsible for a wide range of activities, including overseeing the safety and performance of all buildings and taking responsibility for control and approval of higher-risk buildings—currently defined as buildings of a height of 18 metres or more, or comprising more than six storeys. It also deals with residents' complaints, oversees a new competence regime for people working on buildings, advises on the need for changes to building regulations, and oversees and reports on the performance of building control bodies.

We looked carefully at the Hackitt review recommendations and how they have been interpreted by the Government. We recommend, first, that there should be a new, independent building safety investigation body. The interim Hackitt review did not consider how future fires should be investigated, and this seems to me to be a gap in the thinking so far. Under the new regime, investigations will still be carried out by the Health and Safety Executive or by new public inquiries. The length of time that the Grenfell inquiry is taking is yet another example of how public inquiries are likely to leave survivors and their families feeling betrayed for far too long, even though I am certain that, in the end, the Moore-Bick inquiry will be of great value.

There is also a problem that we discovered after Ladbroke Grove: investigations conducted by the regulator can turn out to be conflicted, because the cause of the failure might be a failure of Health and Safety Executive oversight and its regulation. That is not a criticism of the Health and Safety Executive; it is a criticism of the system. The Health and Safety Executive, of which the new building safety regulator is a part, should be precluded from any possibility of having to investigate itself, because it is inherently conflicted. Many, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), feel that the inquiry into the Buncefield fire was conflicted for exactly that reason, with the result that the inquiry was less authoritative than an independent investigation would have been.

Our proposal for an independent building safety investigator is based on the Rail Accident Investigation Branch of the Department for Transport, which in turn is based on the AAIB—the air accident body. That is what the Cullen inquiry recommended following the Ladbroke Grove rail crash. In rail and other sectors, including aviation, this approach is much quicker, much less costly and more effective than public inquiries, because these bodies acquire a permanent body of expertise and experience.

Like a public inquiry, an accident investigation body establishes the causes of a major incident, but these independent bodies seek not to find who to blame, but to learn from failure for the future. In the case of Grenfell, there may well still be people to blame and to prosecute, but people who make mistakes are very often blameless because they are part of a defective system or failing safety culture. There are many instances of aviation accidents where pilot error has been a contributory factor but the pilot is not blamed for that failure. We have all watched the wonderful film “Sully” about such a failure. These independent bodies make safety recommendations to regulators and to the Government, who are accountable for ensuring that they are implemented.

The hon. Member for Leeds East complained about delayed prosecutions having to defer to the judicial inquiry. Unlike with a public inquiry, the regulator may still conduct a parallel investigation to the safety investigator's to establish responsibility and, if necessary, to prosecute those at fault, as the Civil Aviation Authority prosecuted the pilot in the Shoreham air crash. The crucial point is that the regulator cannot force the accident investigation branch to reveal witness statements except by High Court intervention. That is essential in accident investigation, because it creates a safe space for those giving their account in which they can talk freely and be completely candid, whether or not they think they are to blame. That speeds the whole process of investigation and engages survivors and their families and the bereaved. There is no safe space for candour under the Building Safety Act, and this must change.

Our second principal proposal concerns building control. We propose a new regulatory system for building control. We propose that approved inspectors, who are the private sector, and local authority building control, which is the public sector, should both be regulated on an equal basis, as in any other safety-critical profession. There is currently no licence regime or register for local authority building control and no dedicated independent scrutiny or regulation of its service, yet the failure of local authority building control appears to be one of the factors that led to the Grenfell disaster. Ironically, the proposals that have been brought forward seem to treat the private sector with more suspicion than the public sector, even though it seems that the public sector is what failed in the case of Grenfell.

Building control bodies are responsible for checking building work to verify that it complies with building regulations. Building control work can be carried out either by private firms, known as approved inspectors, or by local authority in-house building control bodies, which have a statutory duty to provide building control services in their area. To be approved to provide building control services in the private sector, authorised inspectors, unlike local authorities, must be licensed by CICAIR. Approved inspectors are subject to a code of conduct, regular auditing and a complaints and disciplinary regime leading to suspension of their licence if they are acting improperly or seriously underperforming. Local authorities opposed being subject to the same oversight and inspection regime. There is no credible case for accepting that.

Those are the two recommendations that we submitted to the inquiry. I have not spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who is in his place on the Treasury Bench, so I do not expect him to respond in detail to these proposals. I thought it would be helpful to the House if I laid them out. I repeat that the full text of our submission is now in the House of Commons Library. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will take an interest in it.

1.39 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When I think of Grenfell, which I often do, I think first of the people who died; not just that they died—72 people, including 18 children—but how they died. I forced myself to read the accounts of what happened—the phone calls made that night, the people waiting for rescue that never came. It is harrowing. They are well documented, partly

through the inquiry and partly through what the families themselves have done. I cannot look at the pictures of the building in flames, but nevertheless I cannot get them out of my head because they were everywhere when the fire happened.

Next, I think of all the thousands of people whose lives were changed by the fire: the survivors and their families, and the wider community. It was a very mixed community in Grenfell, with many people of middle eastern and north African descent, often second and third generation, who had settled in the area and had wider families not only across Kensington but in my constituency of Hammersmith and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who spoke so well earlier. These are big, close communities and this has had an effect on the whole area, and indeed the whole of London and beyond.

I also think of the scandal of the negligence that has been revealed, in its infinite complexity, leading up to this one event. The breadth and depth of the mistakes that were made and the things that went wrong are affecting hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people across this country. Too many people have insulted all these groups of people by the way in which they have responded over the last five years. That includes the Government, the building industry and other industries involved, local authorities and other social landlords, and private landlords. Everybody has failed on a catastrophic level by causing the problems that now have to be dealt with, but the Government bear a particular responsibility, not only because they created the climate that enabled much of this negligence to happen but because they have not stepped up to the plate in tackling it.

When I say that people have been insulted, I mean, for example, why did we not have a full-day debate in Government time on the anniversary? I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for securing this debate, but it is a Backbench Business debate on a Thursday afternoon, and I think that a full-day debate on the anniversary is the very least that could have been done. People have also been insulted by the response in terms of rehousing—or failure to rehouse—people from Grenfell and the surrounding damaged properties. People have been waiting for years in temporary accommodation or hotels. Other examples include the lack of a proper memorial and the pace at which the inquiry has gone. None of this shows respect, in my view, and at the end of it, people have not been held to account.

Also, we have not what I would call a permissive response from the Government, and that is what I want to spend most of my speech talking about. The Government have been asking experts to tell them the full extent of the problems, and then responding. Every step of the way, everything has had to be dragged out, whether it is money, concessions or legislation, in order to get only a very little distance down the road to where we need to be. Let me just run through some of those issues on which we are failing.

We know a lot about cladding and insulation, but determining the types of cladding that have been banned—whether they have been banned in the sense of being removed from existing buildings or not being allowed to be put on to new buildings—and what types of buildings are affected has been done in a very slow and erratic

[*Andy Slaughter*]

manner, and the most recent changes are pretty de minimis, frankly. The Government have now decided that hotels, hostels and boarding houses over 18 metres should be included in the ban, but what about residential and other buildings that are under 18 metres—and indeed, under 11 metres? What about other buildings that might be at risk, possibly because of their function or because of the people who live in them or go to school in them, such as hospitals or hotels? There is no comprehensive response.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman is completely right in what he is saying. The 18-metre limit is a completely arbitrary distinction. Far more people die in fires in low-rise buildings, especially houses of multiple occupation, than in high-rise buildings. The 18-metre limit is a media-driven preoccupation, and I could even say that the preoccupation with cladding is a media-driven preoccupation. This whole process has been driven by public pressure, not real risk assessment, which is what we need. That is why we are proposing the reform of building control.

Andy Slaughter: I very much thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he has put it very clearly and succinctly. I started with cladding and insulation—I have quite a long list—because that is where we have seen some activity. As I said, it is not the correct activity and it has not been done quickly, comprehensively or logically enough, but there has been a focus on cladding, then on cladding and insulation, and then on other matters that relate to cladding. It has spread out very gradually and slowly from there, but I just make the point that when we drill down, we find that there is still a long way to go, and it is impossible not to conclude that the reasons for that are partly financial and partly that the Government are overwhelmed and do not have the support they need.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I guarantee that owing to the panic to designate certain buildings unsafe because of their cladding, a vast amount of cladding has been removed, at vast expense, that it was probably not necessary to remove, perhaps because it was installed differently or it did not have an air gap or it was associated with flammable windows. There are all kinds of reasons that have not been taken into account because there was a blanket categorisation of cladding and height. That was understandable very early in the crisis, but it is not understandable five years on.

Andy Slaughter: Again, I entirely agree. Every month, more comes to light. That is true in my constituency, as I am sure it is in other Members' constituencies. I am dealing with one case at the moment where the cladding is not flammable but there are no fire breaks behind it. That cladding still has to come down, at huge cost. These things are interrelated. The solutions that have been suggested are really inadequate. We are an outlier—in a bad way—in terms of international practice, because the standards that we were enforcing and those that we are now enforcing are not of the best.

Another example is the design of buildings. It is only in the last few weeks or months that the issue of single staircases in new build high-rise blocks has really taken

hold, and planning authorities have begun to look at that. Directly abutting Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West estate in Kensington and Chelsea are my constituency and two major opportunity areas: the White City opportunity area and the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation. I mention that because high-rise buildings are mushrooming across that area. How high are they? In the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation area, which is just outside my constituency to the west, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), there is one 55-storey block already being built and three more in planning at the moment. So four buildings over 50 storeys high with a single staircase are being planned.

In my constituency, there were similar applications for 46-storey blocks, and I am pleased to say that some of those developers are now lowering the heights, perhaps by 10 storeys, and putting in additional staircases. But this has involved catching things in the nick of time, and some single staircase blocks are still being built now. Why is this important? It is important because of the failure of the stay-put policy. It is not just a question of design and how the buildings are constructed. Almost every high-rise residential building in the UK in recent decades has been built on the basis of the stay-put policy.

Office buildings with more than five storeys are required to have a second staircase, but a 55-storey residential block can be built with a single staircase because we rely on stay-put. Well, stay-put is undoubtedly a cause of the number of fatalities at Grenfell. More pragmatically, people will not stay put any more—I have encountered this with fires in my constituency since Grenfell—and I do not blame them. If we do not have a stay-put policy, we need evacuation plans, we probably need alarm systems and we definitely need a second staircase if we are to evacuate buildings. The excuse for having a single staircase is that everyone will stay in their flat while the fire service deals with the issue. Sometimes that works, but who would now rely on it working?

Personal emergency evacuation plans have been in the news again recently. They simply are not being done, and the Government do not intend to implement them. Yet, as the Mayor of London said in his briefing, 41% of disabled people in Grenfell Tower died in the fire.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am alarmed by what my hon. Friend says about a 55-storey building having a single staircase, which I believe would make it impossible both to fight a fire and get people out. Why was the building given permission, and who authorised it? Was there a fire assessment in advance of permission being granted?

Andy Slaughter: Most of these buildings are in the planning process, and some have been withdrawn and resubmitted, as I hope is the case with this one. Fifty-five storeys and a single staircase is the proposal as things stand. There are many other examples across west London and the country, not necessarily of that height but 40, 30 or even 20 storeys. Grenfell Tower had 24 storeys, so we are talking about buildings of more than twice that size.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend alluded to the number of disabled people in Grenfell Tower. If the recommendation on personal emergency evacuation plans

is not implemented, and the Government have chosen to reject it, what impact will it have on the many disabled people living in high-rise buildings? What trust and confidence does it give them if their Government are choosing to reject such an important recommendation to ensure they are safe and secure in their homes? The Government are saying these people's lives do not matter by saying they do not need personal emergency evacuation plans.

Andy Slaughter: I could not agree more. The truth is that the Government have put it in the “too difficult” column, along with other things. It is not that they have an argument for why they do not need such plans; it is because they are saying, “Well, it will be too difficult, too expensive or take too much time, and we have other things to do.” That is extraordinary. I have long-term concerns about disabled people, or indeed young families, living in high-rise blocks, which are unsuitable accommodation. There is a much wider debate about the type of housing we build in this country, but this issue seems to be glaringly obvious.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The Government can be forgiven for one reason, which is that there is no systemic safety risk management in the building sector that differentiates between different forms of safety mitigation. In the Manchester airport fire, in which an aircraft caught fire on the runway and many people died, the initial reaction was that there had to be better evacuation from burning aircraft, but nothing changed. One or two extra over-wing exits were built into aircraft, but nothing fundamentally changed. The problem was that the probability of a fire was much too high, and that is what had to be addressed. Until we have a totally comprehensive safety management system, which does not yet exist in building control, we will never have the safe buildings we want.

Andy Slaughter: I agree that we need safer systems and that we need to plan. There has been a free-for-all for too long in the building industry, where there has been a gold rush to acquire sites and build whatever it can get away with—the envelope has been continually pushed.

I slightly disagree with the hon. Gentleman because a lot can be done. My local authority has done about 1,000 PEEPs. Anyone can ask for one. They are not proactively given but, nevertheless, they are quite effective in assessing people's needs, providing equipment, linking people with neighbours and making sure they have proper notifications, alarm systems and things of that nature. A lot can be done, and it would save a lot of lives. It just needs to be institutionalised across the board.

I will speed up a little. I have mentioned cladding and insulation, design, construction and the height and use of buildings, but I have a couple of other points. One is the cause of fires, and the predominant cause is electrical safety malfunctions. We see that in everything from lithium batteries to white goods. The Grenfell fire was caused by a fridge-freezer. There is a lack of electrical safety all the way down the line from manufacture to retail.

The Minister will be pleased to hear me speak favourably of his Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, which makes provision for five-yearly electrical checks on social housing in

the same way as for private rented housing. That is important, although I am not quite sure what it means. Does it mean checks on appliances, wiring or systems?

Secondly, there seems to be a lacuna because a single block could contain different types of flats. The first flat could be rented out by the local authority, and such flats are not covered at the moment but will be in the future, as I understand it. The second flat could be a private flat rented out by the leaseholder, which is already covered, and the third flat might be owned by a resident leaseholder who does not have any checks at all, as far as I can see. There is inconsistency and a failure to nail down what the problems are.

Regulation has failed. Desktop surveys are another horror we have encountered, but they are still happening. In their most recent announcement, the Government said they will rely on the discredited BS 8414 test, so regulation is still not working properly. Management and maintenance is not working properly, and it certainly did not work in Kensington and Chelsea through either the council or the tenant management organisation. Even simple things such as fitting door closers and making sure fire doors are of an adequate standard are still not being done.

A lot has rightly been said about how non-cladding costs are still falling on leaseholders, but they are also falling on social landlords. The National Housing Federation and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, have made this point time and again, but the Government never respond—perhaps they will today. If we require social landlords to bear the extraordinarily high costs, billions of pounds, of remedying defects in the buildings they own, that money will simply come out of their capital resources, whether borrowing, balances or rents, that would otherwise go towards maintaining their existing properties and building new properties. There is a crisis in the social housing market, as even fewer social homes will be built over the coming years because the money has to be diverted into fire safety.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will allow one more intervention. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's speech arrived late, so I am letting him deliver it paragraph by paragraph.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The point I wanted to make is that this is partly a problem of building control. In particular in relation to high-rise buildings, the problem is that the Building Safety Regulator will draw on established building control bodies to carry out its function. The Select Committee pointed out that this creates a new conflict of interest, because the BSR both regulates and then carries out the building control inspections. The danger is that we do too much defensive regulation, which costs a great deal of money and is not of public benefit, and then we do not do the right regulation, which actually mitigates the biggest risks. All that gets lost in the wash in the present system.

Andy Slaughter: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments, because he is going through the practical steps that need to be taken rather more methodically than I am. I accept his concentration on getting the regulation right, but it is not the only thing we have to

[*Andy Slaughter*]

get right. As I began my speech by saying, this is a real crisis across the whole industry, government, the regulation and the tone that has been set. I hope that, coming out of things such as the Hackitt review, that will change, but I do not see sufficient change yet. The progress has been glacial on correcting the many, many defects. Nobody says that it is easy; its complexity and extent mean that it will be very difficult. However, I do not see that sense of urgency, because hundreds of thousands of people still live in unsafe buildings.

I pay tribute to the all-party group on fire safety and rescue, of which I am a member. I pay a particular tribute to the late Sir David Amess, its chair for many years. It warned about many of these problems time and again. It is not right to say that the Government have not been warned. Unfortunately, they ignored much of this. There has not been justice for the Grenfell families. We know which companies were responsible—Rydon, Arconic, Celotex, Kingspan and many, many others. These companies continue to manufacture and make great profits, and, as far as I know, they have not paid a penny in compensation. I would like to know what the Government are doing about that and what is happening in terms of civil damages for the people who suffered as a result of Grenfell, and I would like all this to happen a little more quickly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North mentioned Peter Apps and *Inside Housing*. They have done a fantastic job and, frankly, the Minister could do a lot worse than simply reading through the articles it has published in the past few weeks. The one that sits most firmly in my mind is the one that asks, “Could it happen again?” I know it is well intentioned but, “We must never let this happen again” has become a cliché. I would rather the Minister focused on that article and read it. It is a long article, but it goes through, step by step, all the problems that there are with high-rise buildings, and even not so high-rise buildings, in this country, which mean that Grenfell could happen again, any day. It could happen again and we have to come to terms with that.

I have not done this for some time, because of the covid emergency, but I recently took part in the silent walk, which was an incredibly moving event. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North, the sponsor of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), the shadow Minister, the shadow Secretary of State and others were there to witness the thousands of people who monthly walk through the streets in absolute silence around Grenfell Tower not only to remember people, but so that the Government know they are not going away. Somebody else who is not going away is the former Member for Kensington, who is in the Gallery and who of course was there with most of the Kensington Labour councillors on Tuesday. I know that she continues to take just as strong and powerful an interest in this as she did when she was the Member of Parliament for the area.

Let me conclude by saying to the Minister that I hope he will come on the silent walk one month. I hope he will talk directly—[*Interruption.*] I think he should listen. I am happy to wait until he has finished his

conversation, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was addressing my comment directly to him. I was saying that I hope he will visit Grenfell and the families. I hope he will come on the silent walk. I hope he will understand not just the absolute thirst for justice, but the fact that what they want to come out of the terrible events that happened to them is that, sooner rather than later, everybody living in a high-rise block in this country, be it social housing, private housing or whatever, can feel safe when they go to sleep at night and feel safe for their children. Is that honestly too much to ask? It is not what we are getting from the Government’s policies at present.

2.5 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for securing this important debate, and I echo his call for an annual debate in this place. It is great to see Emma Dent Coad in the Gallery listening to this debate today, and it is good to be in the debate with the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan).

I think we all remember that awful morning five years ago in June. I felt physically sick as I watched Grenfell Tower burn. Whenever I see images of that charred building, I cannot help but think about the innocent children, women and men who died that night, and the panic they must have felt as they realised that they would not survive. My thoughts, like those of everyone in Durham, I am sure, are with the 72 people who died and their loved ones, now and always. The Grenfell fire did not just take lives; it tore a warm and loving community apart. It is to the immense credit of the survivors and local residents that they have found the strength to rally together and fight to ensure that lessons are learned and that justice is done. They have my complete solidarity. Before I move on, I also pay tribute to the heroic efforts of the firefighters and emergency responders who worked tirelessly that night. I will never forget the image of the exhausted firefighters slumped outside the tower as they gathered their energy once more. Firefighters regularly risk their lives for our safety, and we should never forget their service.

We should not forget that those who died in Grenfell that night were primarily minorities, asylum seekers, migrants, the disabled and the poor. These are the people that our society values the least, and for the residents in Grenfell the value placed on their safety was nowhere near enough. The leadership of Kensington and Chelsea Council, which was at the time the richest borough in the country, with hundreds of millions of pounds in reserves, chose to use combustible cladding because it was marginally cheaper than the safer alternative. When concerns were repeatedly raised by residents that the building was unsafe in the weeks leading up to the fire, they were ignored. As Grenfell resident Lee Chapman told the inquiry:

“as residents in a so-called ‘social housing block’, we were treated as sub-citizens”.

In 2019, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said,

“Grenfell Tower would not have happened to wealthy Londoners. It happened to poor and mainly migrant Londoners.”—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2019; Vol. 667, c. 390.]

Sadly, he was right. And what upsets me most about the Grenfell fire is that it was all so sickeningly avoidable. These 72 people did not lose their lives because of a

faulty fridge—they died because those in positions of power were more committed to austerity, to deregulation and to privatisation than they were to ensuring that human beings were safe, and because certain companies were motivated by greed over decency. I despaired as I read how a building that was home to so many people came to be wrapped in a material that manufacturers knew was highly flammable. I was disgusted to learn that private contractors celebrated as corners were cut and money was saved.

It is staggering how many times fire building safety regulations have been watered down and stripped away by Governments in the name of the removal of red tape and the reduction of burdens on businesses, while key processes to regulate and inspect fire and building safety have been privatised, thereby lowering standards and weakening precious protections. As the Fire Brigades Union has pointed out, since 2010 the slavish commitment of Conservative Governments to pursue austerity at whatever cost has seen a staggering 20% of frontline firefighter jobs lost, including those of at least a quarter of fire inspectors. Listening to this, can anyone honestly say that the path of deregulation, privatisation and austerity has made society safer?

Most troubling of all is the fact that five years after 72 people died as a result of corporate greed and institutional failure, so little has changed. So far, no one has been prosecuted, safety regulations are still inadequate and less than 1% of buildings have had their dangerous cladding removed. Like many in this House, I anxiously await the full findings of the inquiry and the outcome of the ongoing criminal investigations. Until those inquiries are complete, the response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy is defined by a few powerful numbers: five years, 72 dead and zero convictions—a reminder that we can never stop fighting for justice.

2.11 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I welcome this debate and the work done by many Members of Parliament to bring it forward and by the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) in particular to secure it. We had a debate in Government time in 2019, after the general election had been announced, and the Prime Minister spoke for the Government on the issue of Grenfell; it seems a bit strange that we now have to rely on Back-Bench Members to get a debate on the fifth anniversary of Grenfell. This debate should have been held in Government time.

The fire was obviously appalling in every conceivable way. I went to Grenfell the day after the fire and met many of the firefighters and others who had risked everything to try to save life. Their trauma was palpable, as was the trauma of police officers, local people and many other community groups that, as my friends have pointed out, came forward to help and support people and to provide food and comfort for them. The horror has not gone away. The trauma of losing loved ones—children, parents—has not gone away and will never go away. We should pay tribute to all those who did so much to help and provide support.

In particular, we should pay tribute to the firefighters who risked everything to try to save life. I remember just like it was two minutes ago their telling me, “We work to save life; it is not our job to carry dead bodies out of buildings.” They knew they had to do it and they did it.

I have been on a number of the silent walks, and it was interesting that at the walk on Tuesday evening the silence was broken, as we walked under the bridge in Ladbroke Grove, to cheer and applaud the firefighters for the work they have done. That was absolutely the right thing to do because the firefighters are the absolute heroes of the occasion.

Tuesday’s silent walk was silent, dignified and very respectful, and it was very moving, for that and many other reasons. But Ministers and local authorities should not take that silence as some kind of consent to what has happened. Underneath that silence there was a wave of anger through the crowd. Five years on, nobody has been prosecuted. Five years on, people are still suffering the trauma. Five years on, people feel they have not had the support that they should have had. The speeches at the end of the silent march indicated all that. People from Grenfell United spoke, but I think the most powerful speech was by Lowkey—he is from the area, in the area, of the area and part of the area—who gave the strong message that the people of Grenfell will not tolerate another five years of silent marches and waiting for something to happen.

The only regulation that appears to have come out—the one that deals with those with disabilities—has not been properly implemented. Let me quote from an article written by Emma Dent Coad, the former Member of Parliament for Kensington. We should thank her for the huge amount of work that she did, just a few weeks after being elected to this place, to represent her people. Now, as a councillor and leader of the Labour group on Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council, she is still doing great work. She wrote in *Tribune* that

“the Fire Brigades Union have serious concerns about the government’s refusal to implement the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 recommendations in relation to Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans”.

She went on to say that it appears that somebody thinks people with disabilities are “a nuisance” that would get in the way of dealing with a fire rescue. A disproportionate number of people with disabilities died in Grenfell Tower. Saving life has to be an absolute priority, and those with mobility problems should have the highest possible priority in being helped and saved.

I am sure that, eventually, the inquiry will show the many failings of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, but I hope it will also recognise the strength of the community support that, as other Members have pointed out, came from churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. All came and did everything they could to provide support.

After Grenfell, there were concerns throughout the country about flammable cladding around buildings. I am sure that every Member of this House has been contacted by residents who live in high-rise blocks wishing to express their concerns. My own local authority immediately inspected every single block and building in the borough and took remedial action where it was required on local authority-owned property. Generally speaking, across the country the response of local government to the cladding dangers has been far better and far more efficient than that of the private sector, and has shown far more concern about it.

Many people in this country are now either very frightened or very frustrated by the situation in which they find themselves. As the hon. Member for Leeds

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East pointed out, 10,000 buildings around the country have cladding that needs to be dealt with. Many people live in private sector leasehold or shared ownership properties and thought they had bought or moved into a place that was safe, but the regulations now indicate that it is not. As a result, they are being saddled with very large bills and cannot move on, move out or do anything else. The Government seem incapable, unable or unwilling to bring some comfort to those people's lives.

I have in my constituency many fairly new developments where the cladding has been deemed unsafe. It was not deemed unsafe when the buildings were constructed, but it now is. Let me quote a letter from residents who live in Drayton Park in my constituency:

“We need your support to push the developer Galliard homes to carry out what they have recently pledged the government to do in terms of removing inflammable materials and providing us with the EWS1 fire safety certificate. They have not confirmed to us what exactly they are going to do”.

The letter goes on to point out that the insurance costs for the whole building have increased from £81,084 in 2016-17—pre-Grenfell—to £233,367 in 2021-22 and now £403,000 for 2022-23. The fire insurance for the individual writing on behalf of the residents has gone up to £600 per year. He cannot afford that and he cannot afford to remortgage, either. He is not alone in feeling completely stuck because of the situation he is in through no fault of his own and which is not of his own making.

At the very least, we require Government action to deal with the issue of dangerous cladding on buildings and, if necessary, to pay for it and get the money back from the developers, the builders or the owners of the freehold, as appropriate. The worst thing is not to be able to give some comfort and security to people who live in those buildings.

I spent some time in another building called Highbury Gardens, where the same issue has arisen. Many young people who moved in, bought leases on those flats and had children now want to move. They want a bigger place—they have more children and so on. That is all part of normal life, but those people are completely and utterly stuck. They cannot sub-let their flat. They cannot rent it. They cannot move. They cannot do anything, and this has gone on and on and on. Meanwhile, their insurance costs have become very, very high indeed.

I hope that this debate will serve as an opportunity. I look forward to the Minister's reply in which he can bring both some news for us on the progress of the Grenfell inquiry and what will come out of that, and some comfort to those people living in blocks of flats where, apparently, there is dangerous cladding.

I will conclude by quoting from Emma Dent Coad's article that was published in *Tribune* on the anniversary of Grenfell. She said:

“While we suffer under a government with zero strategic vision, or indeed any vision whatsoever aside from its own survival, we must work towards a future where specialisms, professional organisations and industry do not compete, but work together positively. Only by listening to each other, between those categories”, can we look at the failure of fire safety

“and the ongoing neglect of people with disabilities and social housing residents”.

Surely, if anything, Grenfell was a wake-up call to the two Britains that exist—those who have, and those who live in social housing that is badly maintained, not very well looked after and badly designed, who are the ones who have suffered.

The silent walk for Grenfell shows the unity of a community of people of all backgrounds, all ethnic groups and all languages coming together, wanting to see real justice within our society. We owe it to them. I do not want to be here in five years' time, on the 10th anniversary of Grenfell, and say that we are going through the same thing. I do not think that there will be silent walks for another five years. By that time, people will be extremely angry, and those walks will become extremely loud and very noisy. Do not underestimate the anger and the frustration of the people of Grenfell for the way that they were treated then and for what has happened to them since.

2.22 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on securing this debate and extend my welcome to Emma Dent Coad, who I know is in the Public Gallery today.

I wish to open my contribution by paying tribute to the family and friends of the victims and survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, the residents of north Kensington and members of the emergency services.

This week, as we know, marks five years since this horrific event—one of the worst disasters in modern times. The disaster unfolded in north Kensington and left the community traumatised and 72 people dead. We need truth and accountability to ensure justice for the 72 people who tragically died five years ago, and their families.

As with many of this Government's policies, their response showed the disregard that they have for working class lives. We should never forget that the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) accused the 72 people who died at Grenfell of lacking common sense. The Grenfell Tower fire shows the way that working class communities are treated in this country. Residents had warned about health and safety issues for years, and were ignored. Grenfell Tower would not have happened to wealthy Londoners. It happened to mainly migrant and black Londoners and now, five years on, we have seen no accountability from those responsible for this horrific tragedy—or to call it what it was, social murder.

In the five years since Grenfell, the chief executives of the four biggest building companies linked to the fire have collectively received £50 million in pay, bonuses, shares and dividends—a point that was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—yet the people and families who still live in buildings with flammable cladding are being asked to pay for its removal themselves. That cannot be right. This Government are failing to protect people. Their own statistics show that less than 1% of those who have applied to the Government's 2020 building safety fund for buildings 18 metres or higher have had their dangerous cladding removed. That is not just dangerous, but a disgraceful indictment of this Government. This disaster has shown us, in the worst possible way, the deadly

nature of Britain's housing stock—a housing stock built against a backdrop of deregulation, where a culture of chasing profits and cutting corners was, and still is, prioritised over building safety and people's lives.

In this place today, we have to question how such a disaster was allowed to unfold, and remind ourselves that political rhetoric such as “cutting red tape” has real world consequences. Over the past 40 years, the dominant ideology of deregulation and allowing market forces to decide what is in the best interests of this country has not worked, with devastating consequences. At the forefront of this economic failure is the housing sector, with the fire at Grenfell Tower being the worst example of what happens when the interests of the market are put first and people's lives a distant second. This is a rotten political culture that puts profit over people, that outsources work to companies that carry out these deadly construction decisions without oversight, that has a Government who are slashing local authority budgets, making them less able to monitor rogue landlords and homes that are unfit to live in, and that forces cuts on our emergency services. It is this rotten culture that leads to disasters like the Grenfell Tower fire.

I stand with the FBU in its call for the Grenfell inquiry to recommend reversing the disastrous deregulation that led to this fire, and insist on investment in our fire and rescue service and the implementation of the recommendations that have already been made. I also stand with the FBU and the victims and survivors in their call for contractors and senior politicians to be held accountable for the part that they played.

In the face of the injustice and struggle that has besieged the survivors and the family and friends of the victims at Grenfell Tower and the wider north Kensington community, I would like to pass on from the people of the Jarro constituency our solidarity in their fight for justice. History will remember your strength and determination to make sure that such a disaster can never happen again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For the final Back-Bench contribution, I call Margaret Ferrier.

2.27 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on securing today's debate and on circulating the briefings to help ensure that Members were well prepared to speak.

Tuesday marked five years since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, and I want, first and foremost, to pay tribute to the 72 people whose lives were lost—men, women and children who were taken from their family, friends and neighbours far too soon and in the worst way. For those who knew them and loved them, their grief will never leave them. The trauma suffered by the survivors also weighs heavy here today. I cannot even begin to imagine how difficult this anniversary is for them every year, with the painful memories and emotions with which they have to live. On this anniversary, I have been keeping the survivors, the victims and their loved ones in my thoughts, and I am sure that the people of Rutherglen and Hamilton West have been doing the same.

What is so striking about the events of 14 June 2017 is the way that it resonated with so many of us, and the way that it still does today, half a decade on. London immediately entered a collective mourning for its lost residents. The entire United Kingdom mourned, and, as inquiries and investigations began, we all realised that the UK was sitting on a ticking time bomb. The disaster could have happened in any number of similar buildings across the nation.

Late last year, Channel 4 aired a documentary on the events at Grenfell, which was deeply emotional. I spoke in Westminster Hall not long after it aired, and I will reiterate today one of the key messages that I took away from the programme. It was desperately sad to understand that residents in Grenfell Tower felt that this had happened precisely because they were living in social housing. They felt unseen and unheard, overlooked until the very worst happened, because of the outdated stigma that exists around council housing and the people who might live there. Having learned what we now know, the fact that it was social housing was a huge contributing factor in why costs were cut and existing concerns were not addressed.

As I have said before, social housing is one of the great privileges of living in the UK and it should see investment reflective of that. No one should have to live in a home with potential safety risks just because it is a council property. While the Building Safety Act is a necessary milestone in improving the building safety system, the job is not done. There is work still to do and, for so many, justice to be done.

Grenfell Tower and the surrounding community were just like many areas of London and indeed the UK: dynamic, talented, culturally diverse and economically deprived. As Imran Khan pointed out at the Westminster Abbey memorial this week, 85% of those who died that night were people of colour. That is not an accident or coincidence; it is symbolic of the many levels of discrimination that the UK still grapples with. It is important to recognise that fact, to think about all the reasons behind it and to acknowledge it so that we do not see it repeated.

Imran Khan also said that many of the survivors and the families of victims have told him personally they have little faith in the public inquiry or the political appetite to act on its findings. They despair at the inquiry's reluctance to face head-on so many aspects of this tragedy that are crucial to understanding what happened: the impact of race, class and disability. Even that service at Westminster Abbey faced criticism from some families of the victims for its lack of inclusivity of families from different cultures or faiths.

On Monday, *The Times* published a short note, penned by Natasha Elcock of Grenfell United, Kamran Mallick of Disability Rights UK, and Sarah Rennie and Georgie Hulme of CladDAG, in which they highlighted that 40% of disabled residents died that night. None had evacuation plans. The note pointed to the Government's refusal to place a legal duty on building owners to provide personal emergency evacuation plans for disabled residents following the inquiry. That shows lack of regard for disabled people. What message does that send?

I hope the Minister will respond to that point in his closing speech, and I hope that it will be a substantial response. This is 2022, and the world has moved on

[Margaret Ferrier]

from the times when a disabled person was seen as less important. They are just as entitled to respect as anyone else, and to peace of mind in the safety of their homes.

Grenfell Tower still stands, a looming presence, a husk of the building it once was both physically and sentimentally. It represents something much larger than its physical size—the ignored red flags and warning signs predating the tragedy by years, the awfulness of that summer night in 2017, and the inequality and injustice that led to the fire.

The failure to look at similar tragedies and learn from them is one of the hardest pills to swallow. In fire after fire, we know that cladding was the contributing factor. The Garnock Court fire in Irvine in 1999 was a moment of realisation in Scotland and led to the immediate removal of that cladding on all buildings. There were also the fires in Knowsley Heights in Merseyside in 1991 and Lakanal House in London in 2009. The all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue raised concerns in this area for years with a number of Ministers, but they fell on deaf ears.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to our late colleague and chair of the APPG Sir David Amess, who was a vocal advocate for fire safety and championed the cause regularly in this Chamber. The APPG, of which I am a co-vice chair and which is chaired by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), has today provided a statement setting out its position on current policy. I hope the Government will take note of the points made and consider them closely.

Nothing will ever bring back those lost. Nothing will ever erase the pain for those who loved them. But the Government cannot ever allow this to happen again. Whatever recommendations are made, they must be implemented whatever the cost. In memory of the 72 victims of Grenfell Tower, whatever happens to the building now must be agreed with the survivors and the bereaved. It should be a fitting tribute, a memorial that keeps in clear focus the events of that dreadful night so that it is never, ever forgotten.

2.34 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I start by echoing the sentiments of everybody in this debate. Everyone has spoken respectfully and it has been quite humbling to sit and listen to the memories of people, and I am not just thinking of the survivors themselves.

The truth is that the inquiry so far makes really quite difficult reading, because it lays bare the level of incompetence, cronyism and indifference shown at both a corporate and governmental level. It is becoming clear that the manufacturers who made the cladding knew it was flammable, but ignored the tests proving it. There are claims that fire tests were rigged to look better and texts from employees seemingly openly joking about the mistruths their companies told. Overall, the inquiry is littered with evidence of a complete lack of knowledge, experience and regard for safety among those responsible for the tower's refurbishment.

As if residents living in a highly flammable building was not bad enough, we now also know that the organisation responsible for maintaining the building

also utterly failed in its duty to do so. With a backlog of hundreds of incomplete maintenance jobs arising specifically from fire risk, it failed to repair and inspect fire doors. As a result, on that fateful night, smoke and fire ran rampant throughout the place.

For years, residents repeatedly complained about how unfit the building was, and specifically about the risks of fires. Yet they were ignored and palmed off time and again. It has been said by a few hon. Members, particularly the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), and by the survivors themselves, that had the residents been majority white and wealthy the response would have been completely different—and they are absolutely right. The fact that that is held as an open fact that everyone is aware of, whether we talk about it or not, shows just how deeply embedded the problem is.

As the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, the treatment of survivors after the disaster is grotesque in itself. At every single stage, from when the fire first started right through the five years until now, those people have been failed at every single turn by the very people who should be helping them.

The reason often given, which is quoted throughout the inquiry, is cutting costs; I think it was the hon. Member for City of Durham who made that point. Time and again, we see the company saying that flammable material was used because it was cheaper—it was to cut costs. Because of cost cutting, the council inspector responsible for ensuring the safety of the project had 130 other projects to keep an eye on at the same time. Our emergency services are stretched beyond their limit in the name of cutting costs.

If someone told me that this fire happened in 1917, and that we were here as a memorial to remember the tragedy that instigated health and safety laws, I could believe that—but it did not. It happened in 2017. We are supposed to have health and safety. We are supposed to have standards. Yet, five years on, it seems that nobody, particularly in Government, is actually that bothered by it. There has been no accountability, and the companies are still receiving profits from this entire saga.

Right now, we have half a million people still living in a building with some form of unsafe cladding. Officials still do not know how many buildings of four storeys or more could be at risk. The Government are yet to implement the majority of the recommendations from phase 1 of the inquiry, and as we have heard they have already rejected the idea that building owners should be responsible for evacuation plans for disabled people.

While I accept, and I truly do, the warm wishes and the real desire to never see this kind of tragedy happen again—I do appreciate the sentiment—no matter how well-intentioned they are, words and platitudes do absolutely nothing. This tragedy started long before any fire. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith has said, if we are to be serious about this, and if we are to respect those who lost their lives, what is required is action, because it is action that makes the difference. We should take that action, learn from history, as we are supposed to, and reflect and respond, because otherwise—I agree with the hon. Member—as things stand, I fear there is every chance this will happen again.

2.40 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a privilege to respond for the Opposition in this important and timely debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for securing it and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. In so doing, they have given the House not only the opportunity to appropriately mark the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, but a chance for us to properly reflect on its aftermath and what could be, but is not yet its legacy.

It has been an excellent debate, and I thank all those Members who have taken part. We have had a series of incredibly well-informed and powerful contributions. On behalf of those on the Opposition Benches, I put on record once again the admiration we feel for the survivors and the bereaved, and for the wider Grenfell community. In the face of unimaginable loss, their pursuit of justice for their families and neighbours and their dedication to securing wider change command enormous respect.

The events of 14 June 2017 were, as many have said today, horrific. The fear that the residents of Grenfell Tower must have felt on that night is inconceivable. The loss of 72 innocent men, women and children is something we must never forget. The fire is frequently referred to as a tragedy. I personally have never been convinced that is quite the right word to describe the horror of Grenfell, because labelling it as such implies that it happened not only unexpectedly, but entirely by chance, yet we know that what happened could have been avoided. It could have been avoided if shortcuts were not taken when it came to safety, if the countless reckless and unforgivable decisions made by some of those within the product manufacturing and construction industry were not taken, and if repeated warnings, including those expressed, as so many Members have said, by the residents of Grenfell Tower themselves, had not gone unheeded. But they were, and it is the survivors, the bereaved and the community who must forever live with the consequences.

Doing so is made all the more difficult by the knowledge that those guilty of wrongdoing have not yet been punished. Many Members have rightly raised that point in the debate. While we can never fully appreciate the grief that those who were directly affected have experienced, I can understand the fury that they must feel as they watch the Grenfell Tower inquiry continue day after day to relentlessly expose a catalogue of malpractice and negligence. While we recognise the need to await the conclusion of the inquiry before it is determined precisely what steps must be taken, I can understand the frustration that they evidently feel—it was palpable on the silent walk on Tuesday—that the prospect of justice feels more distant than ever.

When it comes to the question of justice, it is our responsibility as Members of this House to recognise that the fire at Grenfell Tower was not simply the result of pernicious industry practice; it was also the product of state failure—the failure of successive Governments in presiding over a deficient regulatory regime and ignoring repeated warnings about the potentially lethal implication of that fact. The Government have a duty to ensure that everyone lives in a safe home. Sadly, while there has undeniably been progress toward that end over the past five years—and a quicker pace of progress

over the past nine months, for which I give the Minister and his colleagues due credit—this debate has highlighted the serious concerns that remain.

Time does not permit me to respond to all the pertinent issues that have been raised during this debate, from the failure of the Government to implement all the recommendations from phase 1 of the inquiry, to the ongoing impact of the building safety crisis on blameless leaseholders in privately owned buildings and on social landlords. I therefore want to use the time I have left to pick up two particular issues raised in the debate that are incredibly important for how we go forward: the functioning of the new building safety regime, which was raised in considerable detail by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin); and the extent to which the wider post-Grenfell building safety crisis has been comprehensively resolved.

When it comes to the new building safety arrangements, the Building Safety Act comes into force in 12 days' time, but the practical implementation of the new arrangements is just as important as what the legislation itself provides for, and in that respect, we have real concerns about whether the new regime will be able to function effectively. In particular, we remain unconvinced that the new Building Safety Regulator, which the Act makes responsible for all aspects of the new framework, has what it needs to perform all the complex tasks assigned to it.

Take the issue of indemnity insurance for approved inspectors. The Minister will be aware that as a consequence of a late Government amendment to the Bill, the current Government-approved scheme comes to an end next month, yet there is no sign of an appropriate alternative arrangement being put in place to protect the public and the public interest. Indemnity insurance may seem like an incredibly technical matter, but it is nevertheless integral to the proper functioning of the new regime, and on this and a number of other pressing issues it simply is not good enough for the Government to pass the buck to the new regulator without providing it with the necessary support, as is clearly the case.

The Government will have to do more in the months ahead to ensure that the regulator can carry out its functions effectively, not least because the second phase of the Grenfell inquiry will almost certainly produce recommendations that place additional pressures on it. When he responds, can the Minister update the House on what more his Department is prepared to do to assist the regulator to discharge the duties the 2022 Act places on it?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I would go further than the hon. Member. The concept behind the architecture in the Building Safety Act is still not adequate. There are conflicts of interest for building control surveyors, and there is the complete lacuna of independent incident investigation. Would he undertake to allow Nick Raynsford, Keith Conradi and me to come and brief the Opposition Front-Bench team on this matter, so that they understand our submission to the Grenfell inquiry fully?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member and the other individuals he cites. I agree that there are gaps and deficiencies in the new regime, and I agree in particular that there is a conflict of interest with the Health and Safety Executive being

[Matthew Pennycook]

the body that investigates major incidents. If those incidents were in in-scope buildings, it would be investigating the regulator that sits inside it, but there are also conflicts in building control, as he rightly raises.

When it comes to the wider building safety crisis, alongside its impact on blameless leaseholders, the overall pace of remediation is arguably the most pressing concern we face. It is agonisingly slow. In the debate that took place last week on social housing and building safety, the Secretary of State openly admitted what has been patently obvious for some time to any Member dealing with cladding casework, namely that the building safety fund

“has not been discharging funds at the rate, at the pace and in the way that it should”.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2022; Vol. 715, c. 974.]

Despite Members from across the House having repeatedly expressed concerns about that fact with Ministers over a considerable time, little has seemingly been done to expedite the processing of applications.

The result is that of the 3,462 non-ACM-clad privately owned buildings over 18 metres that have made applications to the fund, remediation works have begun on only 259 and have been completed on just 30. Can the Minister tell us what is being done to expedite decisions on those applications not yet determined? As one would expect, given that it was established earlier and its scope is far more limited, better progress has been made in remediating ACM-clad buildings via the building safety programme, with 78% having been completed, but five years on from the Grenfell fire, how can it be the case that 55 residential buildings still have deadly Grenfell-style ACM cladding on them, and 16 of those have not even begun to remove or replace it?

Of course, in both those cases, the figures I have cited relate only to high-rise buildings over 18 meters. By its own estimate and published figures, the Department believes that there are likely to be between 6,220 and 8,890 mid-rise residential buildings that require full or partial remediation or mitigation to alleviate life safety fire risks. I suspect that the real numbers are far higher.

The bottom line is that if the Government do not accelerate markedly the pace of remediation across the board, we are likely to find ourselves marking the 10th or even 15th anniversary of the Grenfell fire while still bemoaning the fact that some unsafe buildings require fixing. It is essential that the Government continue to be urged to address those failures and the others that have been raised in the debate, because honouring the lives of the 72 involves not just commemoration, but the building of a fitting legacy, as other hon. Members have said.

As Grenfell United made clear in the statement it released on Tuesday to mark the fifth anniversary, the survivors, the bereaved and the community want those who were lost to be remembered not for what happened, but for what changed. Not enough has changed over the last five years and it is beholden on the Government to go faster and, in many cases, further so that everyone has a secure, decent, affordable and safe home in which to live.

2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I thank right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for their moving and thought-provoking contributions in today’s debate. I know that I speak for all Members when I say that the 72 men, women and children who senselessly lost their lives at Grenfell will never be forgotten. It is entirely right that the House has met again just two days after the fifth anniversary of that national tragedy to honour their memory and to discuss our collective duty to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated and that no one ever has to go through what residents of Grenfell Tower were forced to go through on that night or what the bereaved and survivors have had to endure over the last few years.

As a Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, I feel an acute responsibility to do the right thing by the Grenfell community, and I know that feeling is shared on both sides of this House and in the other place. For those directly affected by that national tragedy, life has never been, or ever will be, the same again. The tributes paid this week by the survivors and their families to the victims have brought that fact into the sharpest possible light. As Members have rightly highlighted in their moving tributes today, and in last week’s debate led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the community has consistently shown incredible bravery, resilience and courage in the face of unimaginable loss.

Until the Grenfell Tower inquiry concludes and the police investigation finishes, the search for justice will continue. Five years on, the bereaved are still waiting for at least some sense of closure from that terrible night. Sir Martin and his counsels have been working diligently in pursuit of the truth, and they have already laid bare the opportunities missed by the Government and others, as well as exposing cut corners and wrongdoing on the part of several other organisations. We now need to ensure that we take seriously all the inquiry’s recommendations when it concludes.

I reiterate my humble appreciation of the way in which the bereaved and survivors have stoically campaigned for justice and reform. Their dignity and strength continues to inspire us all. They have been let down. No words and no apology could possibly make up for these failings, but I echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the debate last week when he said that we are sorry. For my part, I am sorry.

We are committed to making things right by fixing the building safety regime that badly failed those at Grenfell on that night through the Building Safety Act, by implementing the toughest and most stringent fire safety standards through the Fire Safety Act, and by putting residents at the heart of a reformed social housing sector through our Social Housing (Regulation) Bill. We are not naive about the scale of the challenges that remain and, as has been rightly pointed out in this debate, we still have a long way to go on several issues.

I do not want to cover the same ground as last week’s debate, but I will mention some of the comments and contributions that were made today. In congratulating the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on securing this debate, I acknowledge that he and I agree on almost nothing politically, but we are united in our

determination to ensure that a tragic event like Grenfell Tower genuinely never happens again. He called for an annual debate, as did the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), and my understanding is that the Secretary of State committed to that during the debate last week.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked why the debate did not take place on the anniversary of that terrible event. Clearly, partly, that was because the Grenfell bereaved and survivors could attend the debate last week. They were invited to, and they did—there were two rows of them in the Gallery—and the Secretary of State and I met them before the debate. It would have been inappropriate for us to have it on the same day that they were holding events in other areas to commemorate it.

Touching briefly on the technical point that the hon. Gentleman made with regard to electrical surveys that will be carried out and whether properties of other tenures will be caught up in that, we are going to consult so that we can understand some of the complexities he described where there are multiple tenures in a single building as to what would be the most appropriate position to take.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) for her support—I am incredibly grateful to her. I have recently done a lot of engagement with the Secretary of State. We have held a number of town hall meetings giving the opportunity for people to come in, for several hours if necessary, to speak to me and the Secretary of State to discuss their concerns and make their case.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for putting on record his recommendations, which I am sure will be given serious consideration.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will my hon. Friend undertake to arrange a meeting between Keith Conradi, Nick Raynsford and me and the Secretary of State? We have not met the current Secretary of State, and we met a Lords Minister who has now changed, so we feel that we need more engagement with Ministers about this. I would be very grateful if he could undertake to arrange that meeting.

Eddie Hughes: I would be very happy to speak to the Secretary of State's diary secretary on my hon. Friend's behalf.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made an important point about the memorial that may follow on-site. The Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission will ensure that the bereaved, survivors and, indeed, north Kensington residents lead decision making on the long-term future of the site.

Members have mentioned the pace of justice, and I recognise the importance of that to the families seeking justice who have already had to wait so long. The police, the CPS and the inquiry must rightly remain independent from Government. The police are keeping families updated and over the weekend issued a public update on their progress. It is also important that those affected by the tragedy can fully participate in the inquiry. As such, we have made a fund for legal expenses available to witnesses and to the building safety review's core participants.

Of the 46 recommendations made in phase 1 of the report, 15 were directed to the Government. The majority have been addressed by the laying of the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 and by the Building Safety Act. The remainder are being considered by a Home Office consultation that runs until 10 August. I urge all Members to contribute to that, not least because it will include reference to PEEPs—personal emergency evacuation plans—and it would be good to get contributions from Members across the House.

With regard to the pace of remediation, the building safety reset announced by the Secretary of State in January is galvanising activity across the board. The industry is gearing up to play its part, and over 45 developers have now pledged to remediate unsafe buildings that they developed. We are working rapidly to turn those pledges into legally binding contracts, and our goal is to get these out of the door before summer recess. In many cases, developers who made a pledge are getting on with it, contacting building owners and leaseholders and lining up surveyors to carry out assessments and prioritise work. For the 11-to-18 metre remediation scheme, in signing the pledge, developers have committed to working at pace with Government to finalise arrangements and commence remediation or mitigation work, as necessary, as soon as possible. We will announce further details of the launch of the 11-to-18 metre remediation fund shortly.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am interested in what the Minister says about the remedial works being done. What compensation will be made available to people who, as I outlined, have paid unbelievably excessive levels of insurance, through no fault of their own, and are seriously out of pocket and unable to continue doing so?

Eddie Hughes: I cannot speak to compensation, but I can say that the Department is in regular touch with the financial services industry to talk to it about the cost of insurance products and to do everything to ensure that it takes a balanced and proportionate approach so that those costs come down.

On the comments made by the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on the work of the regulator, I ask him to meet the Housing Minister to discuss this in detail, because we are very keen to see progress made on a cross-party basis.

As a Parliament, we cannot and will not ever forget the events of 14 June 2017. The moving tributes of the past few days commemorating the lives lost and indeed lives shattered have brought home the responsibility for all of us to do right by the victims. I am certain I speak for every Member of the House when I say that we must never go back to where we were before this tragedy. Our job as parliamentarians is to make sure we never do. The magnitude of what happened at Grenfell Tower demands that we all try to find a way to put politics aside, and I believe we are already making progress in that direction.

When we one day look back at what followed the tragedy, one of the defining parts of the post-Grenfell era will be what we did to replace a broken building safety system with one of the most rigorous and robust building safety regimes in the world. But the job is not done—we know we still have a long way to go—so we must redouble our efforts to finish the job we started

[Eddie Hughes]

and deliver justice for the survivors of the tragedy, forcing the industry to take collective responsibility for the safety defects it created. As Members of this House we can rightly expect that we will all be judged not by our words, but by our actions to fulfil our promise of making sure that everyone lives somewhere safe and secure and that they can be truly proud to call home. That will be our ultimate tribute.

3.1 pm

Richard Burgon: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to this very important debate. I am glad that the Government have committed to an annual debate on this in Government time.

I hear the Minister say that he and the Government will take seriously every recommendation from the inquiry, but I would like the Government to commit to implement every single recommendation, not just to take them seriously. I would like the Government to revisit their decision and overturn their rejection of personal evacuation plans. I would like the Government to help all people hit by the cladding crisis and surely, as we have heard from other Members, the cladding companies should pay. We need a commitment that no one in this country will live in a fire-unsafe home, and we do need the urgent implementation of the Hillsborough law, because the duty of candour from public authorities is so important.

Along with other Members, I was on the very moving memorial walk the other night, and we sensed the unity. I want to pay tribute to Councillor Emma Dent Coad, who has continued to pursue this injustice and advocate for local residents in the community in which she lives.

I want to finish with two brief quotes. One is from the journalist Peter Apps, who wrote in a recent article:

“What has emerged is a profoundly depressing portrait of a private sector with a near psychopathic disregard for human life, and a public sector which exists to do little more than serve or imitate it.”

However, I want the final words of this debate, fittingly, to be from the families, the bereaved and the survivors of Grenfell United, who said:

“We must pave a new way forward. We must hold those responsible to account.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Our thoughts are with all those families affected by this awful tragedy, but particularly at this time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire.

Sharing Economy: Short-term Letting

3.3 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered short-term letting and the sharing economy.

I have called this debate to once again draw attention to the negative impact on our neighbourhoods up and down the country caused by the abuse of short-term lettings. Short-term lettings are when property is let on a nightly or weekly basis usually for leisure and tourism purposes. We are seeing them pop up on a variety of platforms, including Airbnb, Booking.com, Tripadvisor and Expedia. Since the Deregulation Act 2015, we have seen an increasing number of properties, which would otherwise have been rented out on a long-term basis, being turned into basically holiday accommodation. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of Airbnb listings in London alone grew by 378%. Research by London Councils found that by 2019, there were more than 73,000 listings for short-term lets in London across six of the largest online letting platforms. That is equivalent to one in every 50 homes in the capital.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one issue with short-term lets is that they take housing stock out of the market? I have the neighbouring constituency of Kensington, and in the tourist areas, particularly around the South Kensington museums, there are streets that are almost exclusively Airbnbs. Many of those are one or two-bedroom properties, and that is aggravating the housing crisis because young people who would typically buy those properties simply cannot get access to them.

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. With the explosion in the number of short-term lettings, a whole host of problems associated with such lettings have become more widespread across our neighbourhoods. I shall highlight a number of the issues we are seeing, which include increased pressure on housing stock, leading to higher property and rent prices—that is what my hon. Friend referred to. They also include a rise in associated antisocial behaviour, noise complaints and dumped rubbish, and an increasingly unfair playing field in the accommodation sector, which is placing more and more pressure on hotels and private bed-and-breakfast businesses.

Since coming into force, the Deregulation Act 2015 introduced several changes that were designed to free businesses from the burdens caused by regulation and existing laws, including relaxing planning permission in London for short-term lets. When the Bill was going through Parliament, Westminster City Council predicted that homes would be, en masse, turned into lettings for tourists. We knew that those lettings would soon basically be turned into mini hotels, without any of the oversight or regulation that genuine hotels have to adhere to. That is why it was a relief in some contexts to see short-term lettings in London limited to just 90 nights per year under the Deregulation Act, following a sustained lobbying campaign by Westminster City Council. That was not enough, however, and sadly our worst fears have come to fruition.

Without the right tools to enforce the Act our biggest concerns have become a reality for many local people, and many landlords involved in short-term lettings are ignoring the law. Research from 2019 estimated that 23% of 11,200 Airbnb listings in London alone were occupied for more than 90 nights in that year. With the number of short-term lettings skyrocketing, it is clear that we need urgently to get a grip of the situation, because it is becoming unsustainable.

This is obviously not just a London issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) recently highlighted, 4,000 homes have come out of private rent in Devon since 2016, and 11,000 have joined the short-term holiday listings. I know from speaking to colleagues across the country that we are seeing that trend up and down the United Kingdom, particularly in places such as Cumbria and the south-west. This issue affects our whole country, and although problems such as strain on housing availability and the cost to local authorities may be the same nationwide, the diverse nature of the issue means that there will be no one-size-fits-all approach to resolving the problem. What we need, in my humble opinion, is for local authorities to be given the powers to do what they feel is right for their unique areas. For example, here in Westminster we need a licensing scheme much like those seen in other countries. Such schemes are generally set at a local level and ensure that standards are adhered to and that the market is not overwhelmed.

We see key examples around the world. In Lisbon, the city council has implemented containment zones that limit the amount of short-term let accommodation within them. In Barcelona, landlords are required to have their properties inspected and approved before they can be let out. Closer to home, the Scottish Government have legislated for local authorities to introduce a short-term lets licensing scheme by October. It will be interesting to see how that works when it is implemented, and how successful it is.

While such schemes differ from one another, they all suit their local needs, seeking to balance the sharing economy with the rights and amenity of local residents. That is what we should strive for across the UK, balancing tourism with the desire and need of locals to have a comfortable and quiet neighbourhood.

We also see examples around the world where that has been taken further. In Atlanta in the United States, a tight licensing regime has been introduced with strict conditions. For example, hosts in that city have to hold a permit and pay an annual \$150 fee. They face a \$500 fine if a tenant violates city rules. They may have a maximum of two properties, one of which must be the host's permanent residence. That is probably what we need for London.

Across the world, we see that there is a full spectrum of examples and solutions, and it is about finding what works best in a local authority area. As it stands, the spirit of the Deregulation Act is not being met. We are seeing not the rise of individuals opening their spare rooms or their homes while they are on holiday, as the Government had hoped would happen under the Act, but a gradual increase in commercial businesses snatching up properties for the short-term letting market. Here in Westminster, 64% of hosts on Airbnb have at least two listings.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Lady is right to emphasise both the scale and the commercial nature of the problem; a lot of people think it is marginal when, in fact, in some areas it is endemic. Last week, I talked to a local headteacher who said that her school's intake had been affected by a local mansion flat area changing from being long-term accommodation for homeless families into luxury accommodation with a substantial proportion of short-term lets, changing the character and demographics of the entire area. That is why the Government need to act.

Nickie Aiken: I do not often agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I certainly do on this.

We are aware that, in Westminster and across central London, landlords can often skirt around the 90-night rule by posting their property on multiple sites or re-registering it in a location a few metres away. In turn, I am deeply worried that we are witnessing a hollowing out of central London, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) referred to regarding his local area, as properties convert all too easily from homes to holiday lets.

At the start of 2022, the number of properties listed to rent across London was 35% lower than in pre-pandemic times. As I am sure hon. Members will appreciate, the housing market in my constituency and across the capital is already squeezed on both affordability and availability. We currently have over 4,000 households on the Westminster social housing waiting list in the same area that has 7,230 available properties on Airbnb. The average house price in the two cities has risen by £32,000 a year over the past 25 years. The most troubling issue is that, according to SpareRoom, average rents have now risen in the capital by 13% in the last year alone. That is why I find it increasingly frustrating that, while I can easily find plenty of examples of hosts with 50 or even 100 properties available, I cannot find a home to rent on a long-term basis in my constituency in the same areas.

The dramatic increase in the number of properties converting to the holiday accommodation market and away from the private rented sector is ensuring that people are forced out of central London. It is getting so bad that I fear the only realistic possibility of the young finding a property in central London is by playing Monopoly. I do not mean to be flippant, but it is getting that bad. For those lucky enough to be able to find a property, there is an increasing likelihood that they will still find themselves living close to short-term letting properties, no matter where they are. As I am sure it is for many of my colleagues, that is reflected in my mailbag by constituents who find themselves having to live next door to short-term letting properties.

Felicity Buchan: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are other attendant problems with short-term lets, such as antisocial behaviour, properties being taken over essentially for large parties, rubbish being put out on the wrong day and littering the street, and, sometimes, a lack of respect for the neighbourhood?

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of my constituents from Pimlico who wrote to me recently shares that view:

[*Nickie Aiken*]

“There has repeatedly been antisocial behaviour in the Airbnb-type flats in Tachbrook Street. The residents have no interest in the wellbeing of their neighbours. The flats are without doubt let throughout the year and the 90-day rule is completely ignored.”

Post-pandemic complaints have increased in my constituency, with noise, rowdy parties, serious overcrowding, dumped rubbish and even sex work occurring within nightly let properties. From Mayfair to Marylebone and from Hyde Park to Covent Garden, no neighbourhood in Westminster is now free from the short-term let blight.

On the ground, we have seen some pretty clear signals that short-term lets are increasingly causing social damage to our neighbourhoods. A YouGov study from 2019 found that 40% of Londoners felt that such accommodation was having a negative impact on the local sense of community. Worryingly, it also showed that one in five Londoners, when asked, felt that short-term lets had had a negative impact on safety in their local area. If these properties were rented out for just a few days a year, this issue might be manageable. However, as mentioned earlier, we know that is not the case. Local authorities lack the tools necessary to enforce the 90-night rule. As such, complaints are rising and communities are suffering.

On antisocial behaviour, yes, the police and local authorities have powers to tackle it with antisocial behaviour and noise orders, but we do not always have the information needed to identify those involved. Of course, it is very hard for us to make general statements about what we would or would not think was a good idea, because this is a complex issue, but as I said earlier it is about flexibility. It is about giving local authorities the tools they need to protect their local areas. We have to be practical when it comes to enforcement measures. Right now, what continues to frustrate me, and I know thousands of my constituents, including councillors and officials in my local council, is that enforcement is virtually impossible, particularly when we do not know who is undertaking the antisocial behaviour. The lack of data makes it extremely hard for local authorities to identify them and then begin enforcement action.

We need a change in the law to allow local authorities to fine landlords of properties that violate the rules, such as those on dumping rubbish. At the moment, responsibility lies with the tenant, not the landlord, even though the tenant will be long gone after having rented the property for a couple of nights—they have dumped the rubbish and they have gone. What we need is exactly what the former leader of Westminster City Council, Councillor Rachael Robathan, called for in response to more than 2,000 breaches of short-term letting rules—namely, to allow councils to go after the landlord rather than the short-term letter. That would help resolve the issue.

The issue of tax compliance is also of concern. As the home sharing phenomenon becomes more mainstream, an important taxation revenue stream needs to be captured. As it stands, it is possible for landlords to hide their activities from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and to perhaps not tell the truth on their self-assessment forms. If local authorities were able to collect data on what properties are being let out on a short-term basis, HMRC could access that data and ensure that no one was able to avoid paying tax on any money raised.

In 2018, the Government issued a call for evidence on the role of online platforms in ensuring tax compliance by their users, but there do not appear to have been any major developments since then. Ensuring proper compliance would go some way to levelling up the playing field with other parts of the tourism economy. As highlighted by UK Hospitality:

“Between the short-term lets, hotel and B&B sectors, a regulatory mismatch has also occurred in terms of health and safety and taxation.”

I appreciate that there is a degree of self-regulation in the industry, but that is not enough. While hotels and B&B businesses must go through all sorts of checks and regulations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their guests, the same oversight does not exist for short-term letting. For example, while Airbnb insists on things such as insurance indemnity, proper fire precautions and safety certificates for gas and electricity, I have met Airbnb hosts who have not once been asked by a platform to prove that they meet those requirements. If we were able to collect tax receipts from short-term lets, that could and should help in the enforcement of laws. It is not just about tax collection; we also need to make sure that landlords are on the same playing field as bona fide hotels and B&B businesses.

I want to make it very clear that I am not against short-term letting. I absolutely recognise the many positives. As an Airbnb user in the past, I have benefited from being able to rent a home while on holiday. Short-term letting has provided and does provide an innovative and imaginative competition to the accommodation industry. However, the bottom line is that those positive impacts are paired with negative impacts, including lower health and safety standards; unfair competition for other hospitality providers; general economic issues such as mixed tax revenues and less availability of long-term rentals; increased rents and house prices; and pricing ordinary local people out of their area’s housing and rental markets. That is happening not just in central London but across the UK. In many cases, neighbourhoods have changed, with issues including antisocial behaviour, overcrowding of properties and transient communities.

A sustainable approach, hopefully in the form of evidence-based, data-driven regulation and policy making, should address some of those issues. As I said earlier, there is no easy fix, no one-size-fits-all approach, but there are certainly stepping stones that we need to introduce. I hope that the Minister will pay serious attention not just to what I have said but, more importantly, to what we will hear later in this debate from Members of all political parties.

3.24 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). As the Member for the other part of the borough of Westminster, I apologise for covering some of the same ground in respect of locality.

Having set up the all-party parliamentary group on the short lets sector, I am conscious that the issues that the hon. Member describes are having an increasing impact on cities, coastal communities and popular tourist areas across the country. Although it is always deeply unedifying to stand up in Parliament and say “I told you so,” I have to say that we told the Government so. During the passage of the Deregulation Act 2015, we

warned that the changes allowing the 90-day limit in London would be likely to lead to an explosion in short lets and a very detrimental impact on communities—and that is exactly what has happened.

I remember saying in debates on the Deregulation Bill and on two subsequent ten-minute rule Bills—the Short and Holiday-Let Accommodation (Notification of Local Authorities) Bill and the Short and Holiday-Let Accommodation (Registration) Bill—that residential communities are being turned into unlicensed and unmanaged branches of the hospitality industry. The hon. Member has made many of the same points; I will not repeat them, but let me very briefly reinforce them.

As the hon. Member says, nobody is proposing any kind of ban. The sharing economy concept is a strong one. It is a smart and popular idea for people to let out a spare room or let out their home for a couple of weeks when they go on holiday or work abroad: it generates money in communities, generates money for the people who let the properties, and is clearly popular with the people who rent them. The digital economy has created enormous opportunities, and that is one of them.

However, the implementation has changed fundamentally since the original concept: it is now a highly commercial enterprise, as the figures show. A report in 2020—I have cited it previously, but I cite it again—found that just one sixth of the revenue of Airbnb, which is a major player in the field, came from the kind of home-sharing let that was its original concept. As the hon. Member says, we can track the huge shift to whole-property rentals, which has been very significant in London and across the whole country. Research by Tom Simcock of Edge Hill University has found a 423% increase in lettings by “multi-hosts”, owners of multiple properties. That gives an indication of how deeply and increasingly commercialised the sector is.

The impact is felt in the loss of residential property; the hon. Member made that point, and I endorse it. The clear indication is that it is financially advantageous to landlords to move out of the lettings market and into the short-let market, where they can make substantially more income and enjoy significant tax advantages in doing so. All over our borough of Westminster, properties where people could once live are being used just for the holiday industry. That has all kinds of impacts on people in housing need, and on communities.

There is also an impact on the management of antisocial behaviour and nuisance, ranging from noise to rubbish. If people were staying in hotels or in registered hospitality, there would be commercial arrangements for waste collection and they would be making a contribution. None of that applies in this instance.

This morning, entirely by coincidence, I received an email from a constituent on Harrow Road—not the heart of the west end, but the very north of my constituency, at the poorer end. I was told that five identified properties were now being let as short lets; people were coming and going with their luggage all through the day and night, and it was causing concerns about security. It is not necessarily that people choose to behave badly, or that they are acting in an especially antisocial way, but when people are on holiday they act differently. They do not have the same constraints as residents on the hours they keep or the way they act, and they certainly do not have the same sense of responsibility for security. It causes a great deal of anxiety.

It has been said, and I will repeat, that local authorities have their hands tied behind their back when it comes to enforcing against short lettings. Finding properties that are legally let under the short let arrangements but have to be acted on when they breach the 90-day rule is asking local authorities—cash-strapped local authorities—to do the almost impossible. They do not know who is letting. They would have to monitor everything to find that out and then be able to prove that the letting exceeded the 90-day limit. It is completely unreasonable to ask them to do that.

Landlords, particularly the commercial landlords that see the advantages of short let arrangements, are driving a coach and horses through the legislation. This is leading to enormous strains in local communities and a great deal of anger among neighbours, who turn to the local authority to help with enforcement but find that the local authority does not have the capacity to do so. Also, not unreasonably, the hospitality industry, which has had a terrible couple of years with covid, feels that there is not a level playing field, given its members’ responsibilities in terms of health and safety and taxation. They are being undercut, not by individuals letting out a spare room, but by major players in the corporate hospitality sector exploiting a loophole.

It is essential that the Government wake up to this problem. It is spreading across the country and the implications are profound. The Government can act very quickly, without excessive regulation, just to make sure that people who let out these properties are licensed to do so and that we know who they are. If we know who they are, we are in a better position to act when they breach the rules. We have been asking for this for seven years. It is a cross-party issue—cross-party in the local authority, Westminster, and cross-party in Parliament. The Minister must wake up and act to protect communities and to protect us against the loss of valuable residential property before it is too late.

3.32 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) on their speeches today. I want to take the debate outside Westminster and highlight the impact this issue is having elsewhere in the country.

Members in all parts of the House know that this industry is growing at a rapid pace in tourist destinations. York, the most visited place outside London, is certainly experiencing many of the problems that have been described this afternoon, and on a matching scale, although our city is slightly smaller. We know that in York there are about 2,000 Airbnbs already, predominantly in my constituency, but they are increasingly becoming an issue on the outskirts of the city and in the more rural villages. In the city centre, we often find streets—family streets—where there are five or six Airbnbs, and it is having a serious impact. Everywhere I go across my constituency, I have constituents come up to me to talk about Airbnbs and holiday lets—or, as they are increasingly being called, party houses. They are not in keeping with the character of our city. There is a clash of cultures between families, who just want to get on with everyday living, and the predominantly weekend culture of parties, which in the summer never stops.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

We are not seeing this just in existing properties in the city. Increasingly, we are seeing it in new developments in York. Developers are putting predominantly luxury accommodation in the city, but many of the properties are being bought as investment assets. That is an issue we all have with what is happening in parts of the property market. Of course, if they are vacant, suddenly the lights go on and people think, “Why don’t we turn this into a short-term holiday let?” We are seeing an increase in that in the new estates.

I certainly had concerns about this in relation to proposals for the York Central development. It is an incredible development, with 2,500 homes proposed for the site. In my discussions with Homes England, there was a recognition that this could become a party city right in the middle of York, because local people will not be able to afford to live in those luxury homes. They will therefore end up just going straight into the hands of the companies that are running the Airbnbs. Also, the numbers in the new developments go into the Government’s housing numbers, so the Government are ticking off their lists and saying they are achieving their housing targets, but those houses are actually just switching over to become Airbnbs. They are part of what I call the extraction economy—not the shared economy—because people are taking that property and wealth out of our city, and nobody gains. In fact, everybody loses. That is why it is important that the Government get a grip of this now and bring forward the legislation that is needed to regulate this area.

Ultimately, these are homes that we desperately need. We have all spoken about the shortage of housing in our constituencies, the fact that social housing waiting lists are rising sharply and the availability of property to buy is just not there. Every single time a property comes on to the housing market, in come these owners of Airbnb, cash in hand, hoovering up the properties ahead of people who have saved meticulously for their mortgage. And they are offering over the market price for those properties. I heard of one incident in York where they offered £70,000 more than the market price for the property. As a result, local people were not able to move in. I speak to young couples and families—as we know, people are now much older before they can even think about purchasing a home—and they are saying that they save and save and try to enter the market, but every time they are beaten to the post by people who then turn the properties into Airbnbs.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend has probably seen the advertising—for a while there was advertising on the London underground—saying how much more money people could get by taking advantage of short-term lets. This is creating a powerful incentive to do exactly what she is describing.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The average rental price in York is extortionate—not compared with London but certainly compared with elsewhere in the north—at £945 a month for private rented accommodation. On Airbnb, that same property could go for £700 for a weekend. As a result we are seeing a frenzy among landlords who are saying, “Actually, I could get a lot more money out of an Airbnb property, so I’m going to issue a section 21 notice, evict my

current tenants and then turn the property over to an Airbnb.” As a student city, we have more than 40,000 students in York, but many of the homes in the student areas are also turning themselves over to Airbnb. This means that we have a shortage of student accommodation as well as local people not being able to get into housing. The impact on the housing in the city is escalating.

Some of these places are being marketed not just as holiday lets; they are deliberately being marketed for stage and hen parties. This is becoming an issue that impacts not only on our city centre, because those parties are being taken out into the community. I have one cul-de-sac in the Groves in York where there are three of these Airbnbs in a little courtyard, and they advertise for 30 people to go and spend their weekend there. It is at the end of a family residential street, and people in my community have told me that the noise goes on all night. These are working people; they are working shifts and have jobs to do. Their children are going to school and perhaps sitting exams at this time of year, but they are having sleepless nights. On top of that, they are trying to shelter their children from the profane language. People are half-clad in the streets. Women do not feel safe down some of the back alleys in the Groves, where a lot of children play. It is turning these wonderful little communities in York into nightmares.

People do not feel safe in their own home anymore. In fact, I heard from one family who put their house on the market and moved out of the city, which was the only way they could escape the party houses that were increasingly in their area. They wrote to me about the impact it was having.

With the increase in Airbnbs, we are seeing the disappearance of York’s ability to house its own local community, which is having a severe impact on the local economy. We have heard about the tourism sector, but traditional B&Bs are losing out because they follow all the rules, pay their duty, follow health and safety and all the other things. They are in direct competition and, of course, they are covering their costs, so they are being pushed out. Guest houses are the same.

We are therefore seeing deregulation of the whole visitor economy, which does not benefit the location and has serious implications for local businesses. I challenge those who say this is good for the economy, because what we are seeing is an extraction economy. Many people purchasing houses in York are not from York. They are from London and the south-east predominantly, so they are seeing the opportunity as a holiday destination. They have no connection to those communities, so they are taking out of those communities, not feeding into them.

When I hear the expectation that there is going to be a 30% a year rise in the number of Airbnb properties over the next decade, according to Airbnb’s own research, it fills me with terror, so it is important that we get on top of this issue now. That increase is going to make it far worse, year by year, across our communities, and it will fuel our housing crisis even more, which will give the Minister the biggest headache of all. We are standing up to say we need this to be addressed.

I know the Minister has an interest in social housing, but we are seeing these people go cash in hand, along the same line as right to buy, and say, “If you buy your home and go through that process, we will be back to

give you even more money in exchange for your property.” That is why it needs to be regulated, and regulated tightly.

Airbnb is having a profound impact on our community and services in the city. This is not particularly thought about, but our economy is now struggling to recruit the people it needs. Airbnb is escalating and fuelling the housing crisis, which is impacting on care workers and NHS staff being able to find property in the city. It is impacting on the hospitality sector. Of course, the people coming to our city often use those services and want hospitality venues to be open, but the sector cannot recruit staff. The people who would have been in those properties cannot afford to live in the city anymore, so they are being pushed out. Airbnb is having a negative impact not just on the housing environment but on the local economy. The deregulated system is not working.

We have heard about the impact on children and the community. When section 21 notices are issued, children have to leave their school and go elsewhere. That is having a negative impact across the area.

We have heard about people’s weekends of misery. When Friday comes, they do not know who will come off the train with their trolley bags and wander up the street. They do not know whether they are going to have a peaceful weekend or a party to endure and, of course, the other antisocial behaviour that goes with it. Some of the things I have heard are quite horrific. This is not what our city is about and it is not what my local people want our city to be about in the future. That is why we need to address this.

As the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster mentioned, there is also a loss of local revenue involved here. York is losing about £2 million in council tax, and many of these escape under the bar in terms of being a “small business” so they are not paying small business rates. Across the country we do not have the 90-day limit either, so we are talking about this loss throughout the year, along with the implications it is having. This has escalated in York during the pandemic. York has been seen as this fantastic place, two hours away from London and an amazing city to live in, with good schools and all the rest of it, but people have then realised, “Ah, but it is also a really good destination for staycation.” That has been incredible for our recovery, and I am not knocking it at all, but people have also seen the chance, over the lockdown period and particularly since, to come to invest in Airbnbs. That is why we are seeing this sudden growth in the city, which has taken it by shock and surprise, and has had that negative impact there.

I know that the Government have been on a path to look at a registration scheme on Airbnbs. I do not knock them for that, but the world has changed rapidly. I just say to them that we need to move on from that now and look at a full licensing scheme. A registration scheme would simply have serious deficiencies. We have heard about the benefits of a licensing scheme in Lisbon, and Scotland is introducing one. I also point the Minister towards what has happened in Nice, which has a stringent licensing scheme, but one that works incredibly well for those residents. A licensing scheme could help local government have sufficiency in resourcing to support this.

Both hon. Members have mentioned having a different class of housing so that a separate revenue could be charged from that, but we could also look at doubling

council tax or even at having a multiplier on council tax, at the local authority’s discretion. This could be one way of looking at how we can build that revenue back into the local area. Of course these people will then pay for those services—currently they are not—such as refuse collection and even parking schemes, which have an impact on areas. We could also limit housing, and we have heard from hon. Members how advantageous that would be to a local area as well. Nice has not only a strict fines regime to deal with significant antisocial behaviour, but the right to remove licences and to grant licences. It is looking at how it can place conditions on licensed properties. There would be real advantage, not in the Government holding those powers, but in giving them to local communities, through their local authority. It would make landlords themselves have more responsibility as well for the properties that they let, including through a third party—an agency—and it would bring in greater controls.

Finally, let me look at the speed with which we need to bring this in. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is before Parliament, and it talks about opportunities associated with things such as second property reform. As we have heard, for many people we are talking not just about a second property, but a third, fourth and so on. I have heard that some have more than 100 properties; this is a very highly organised industry. It would seem appropriate that the Government could table an amendment or new clause to that Bill to look at this issue and address the matters before us. If we do not act now, the housing issues that the Minister and his team are trying to resolve, which are complex and growing, are going to just get worse and worse. Therefore, I would really welcome more discussion with the Government about how we are going to move this rapidly into legislation to end this nightmare for our residents. Given the number of Members from across the House and their communities that this has an impact on, may I suggest to the Minister that he holds a roundtable with us so that we can discuss these issues at length? I think that across the House we all share the view of what we need to achieve, and I am sure that we can find the right solutions for government and for our communities.

3.49 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Like many other aspects of our online lives, this started as a good idea: take a list of people who want short-term accommodation and use the internet to match it with a list of people who can provide it. Unfortunately, what we see today has become a grotesque distortion of the original idea. As has been mentioned, the vast majority of properties that are offered as short-term lets are not spare rooms in somebody’s house: they are whole properties being offered on a commercial basis. That is regrettable, because the process has become a driver for the removal of accommodation from the private rented sector into the short-term-let market, mainly catering for leisure uses. It has resulted in appalling consequences for the local housing market. Now, in effect, we have operators operating unlicensed hotels, but rather than the accommodation being in one building it is spread throughout an entire community in a pepper-pot fashion.

This is a problem throughout Scotland, but it affects some parts more than others. The highlands in particular has a very great problem, but probably the biggest problem of all is in our capital city, Edinburgh, the city

[Tommy Sheppard]

I am proud to represent in this House. In 2019, fully one third of all the Airbnb listings in Scotland were in Edinburgh. In some of the wards, particularly those in the city centre, one fifth of all accommodation is listed on Airbnb. By the way, that is just Airbnb; there are other operators, so the scale of the penetration of short-term lets in Edinburgh city centre is probably even greater than that.

By the end of the previous decade, the situation had reached crisis proportions, which is why the city authorities, working with the Scottish Government, decided to act. I will say something about that in a moment, but first let me describe some of the consequences of the process for my local community. With this penetration of up to one in five properties being available for short-term lets has come a hollowing out of the local community, particularly in some of our historic areas, which we want to see thrive. It is impossible for people to get to know their neighbours if they change every week. The people who come—there used to be people who lived there on a permanent basis—no longer send their kids to local schools. They do not even use the local shops, because they tend to arrive and get an out-of-town supermarket delivery to the door. They play no role in building the local economy or in community cohesion. As a double whammy, they provide a great deal of disturbance and inconvenience to the people who are left to live there.

I repeatedly have casework on this issue. Just this week a local councillor, Finlay McFarlane, brought to me the case of a resident who has lived off the Royal Mile for more than 20 years. She is currently finishing her PhD thesis but is unable to do so because most of her block is now short-term lets, with people coming in to have parties, on week nights as well as at weekends, with the constant confusion, noise and disturbance that results. In her words, it has become “almost uninhabitable”. That is a common problem.

As well as the loss of homes, there is another consequence for a city such as mine that relies a lot on tourism and where tourism is very important. A number of bona fide hotel operators have come to me and pointed out that people are running unlicensed hotels on a commercial basis, without having health and safety standards, without meeting all the other requirements and without paying taxes. Hotel operators are being undercut as accommodation providers by people using the short-term-let sector. It is, then, grossly unfair in distorting the tourism market as well.

As has been referenced, we are trying to do something about this in Scotland. The law changed last year: from 1 March, the law has come in to create a new framework for the operation of short-term lets in Scotland, of which my own city is determined to take advantage. The key thing is to bring in a licensing framework, with the local authority being the licensing body. In order to operate a let on a short-term basis, one will require a licence. That will be the law from 1 October this year for anybody trying to enter the market as a new operator, and by 2024 it will be a requirement for everybody operating a short-term let to have such a licence, and it will be unlawful if they do not have it.

There is another important component to the legislation in Scotland. That is the ability of local authorities to ask for permission to designate a short-term-let control

area within their boundary, where there is a particular need for housing stress or where there is a particular problem of abuse. The City of Edinburgh Council has taken the unusual step of asking the Scottish Government to designate the entire city as a control area. The council took that decision, with every party on the local authority supporting it, and after an extensive consultation involving 5,600 responses where more than 88% of respondents said that that was what they wanted. The Scottish Government have agreed to that. What that means is that, in order to let a property that is not currently let on a short-term basis, a person will require not just a licence, but planning permission. They will have to apply for and get a change-of-use planning consent as a condition of getting the licence if they are in a control area.

That is what will happen in Edinburgh, but it will take some time. It is important, as with other matters, that planning decisions are consistent with the local development plan, which means that they have to be evidenced and backed up, so we do need to make amendments and get them bedded in. I am confident that, in the years ahead, my city will be able to get control of this. If these measures do not work, I can assure Members that there is an appetite for going further and making sure that we get other measures that do work.

In conclusion, I shall reiterate what colleagues have said on a cross-party basis. This is not a matter of saying that there should not be short-term lets, or trying to do down people who want to rent out a spare room—far from it. It is simply saying that if people wish to do this on a commercial basis, then they have to operate on a level playing field, with the same obligations and the same consequences as anybody else who tries to run a business. They have to take cognisance and be respectful of the local community and the conditions in which they are trying to make that money. I hope the situation in Edinburgh and in Scotland will improve dramatically, and I commend these measures to the UK Government, because they may want to consider following Scotland’s lead and doing this in other parts of the UK where it is so urgently needed.

3.57 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on securing the debate and on her opening speech, which set out the issues really well. We have also had excellent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck). What has been noticeable, as we have just heard, is the consensus here. We may be small in number, but we all recognise the issue and we all recognise that it needs to be tackled. The fact that there are not many people in the Chamber may be because it is not a controversial proposal.

Britain is a fantastic country, with a wealth of exciting places to visit: our remarkable cultural heritage; our world-class attractions and events; our incredible scenery; our coastal towns and vibrant cities, and our amazing capital city. But the tourism sector has really suffered as a result of the pandemic, and its recovery has been much slower than other sectors. VisitBritain found that the UK’s tourism sector lost a total of £146 billion over 2020 and 2021—around £200 million per day.

The tourism sector in the UK is recovering at a slower rate than that in Europe and the USA. We have tourism recovery plan targets and a review of destination management organisations gathering dust on the shelf. Despite that, we know that we will recover. People are already returning to big events. In Manchester, last week, we had one of our biggest weekends ever, with lots of huge events around the city, with hotel rooms packed, bars packed, and Airbnbs packed. The inbound tourist trade is picking up as well. Domestic or tourist visitors want somewhere affordable and convenient to stay. Short-term lets have helped many people to do this, encouraging people to holiday domestically in the UK and housing people from abroad. That is generally good, notwithstanding the difficulties for some hotel operators that were identified by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). We want those holidays, those visits and those day trips to continue and to grow.

However, short-term letting is only a good thing if it is sustainable and strengthens, rather than weakens, communities. As we have heard today, in many places, housing supply, local services, safety and wellbeing are affected by the trend towards short-term lets. Properly managed, short-term lets can have real benefits: they can increase housing options, especially at peak times—I have used Airbnb for Labour party conference accommodation, so I know how it can add capacity when all the hotels are packed out for conferences—they can ensure that empty rooms can be used efficiently and they give people an opportunity to make a little extra money.

A residential property that is being used for Airbnb, however—I use Airbnb as a kind of shorthand, but it is the clearly the market leader in this area—can cause the kinds of issues for residents that we have heard articulated so well today, and can take that property out of the residential housing market.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions Airbnb. In the town of Deal, which I represent, there is a particular problem of Airbnbs that are not registered. Does he agree that having a registration system for Airbnbs would be a sensible move to protect coastal communities and tourism in areas such as mine?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I was hugely generous, and so was the Front-Bench spokesman, in allowing that intervention, for obvious reasons.

Jeff Smith: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I will come on to registration, but clearly we do need to look at the options.

We have heard about the problems caused, with residents citing health and safety concerns where temporary residents are not familiar with or do not care about safety rules. There are issues with short-term rentals being used for parties, and we have heard about noise and antisocial behaviour. However, the longer-term concern, which I think is probably the more significant, is around the sustainability of communities when too many residential properties become short-term lets. I will talk about that in a second.

In London, as we have heard, the law currently allows short-term letting of residential properties for a maximum of 90 nights in a calendar year without planning permission. Since 2017, Airbnb has automatically limited entire

home listings in Greater London to 90 nights per calendar year, to encourage compliance with that law. By February 2020 two similar platforms, HomeAway and TripAdvisor, had also implemented a cap. The Mayor of London has encouraged other platforms to do the same, but there are easy ways around those rules, as we heard earlier, and many properties are still being let out on a short-term basis for more than the permitted 90 nights. When the 90-night limit is exceeded illegally, the issues are compounded and likely to grow and grow.

Outside London, there is no specific limit on how long a property can be let out on a short-term basis, and it is up to local planning authorities to judge whether the letting amounts to a material change of use and requires planning permission. As well as the difficulties that we have talked about for residents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North pointed out, the complaints about antisocial behaviour are putting pressure on local authorities and their resources, already overstretched following years of Tory and coalition Government cuts to local authorities. That puts huge pressure on local enforcement teams.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) is calling for the introduction of a licensing scheme, making it mandatory for anyone renting out their property on a short-term basis to have to register it. That would make it easier for local authorities to tackle some of those issues and the law-breaking that might arise. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North for her consistent campaigning on this issue and her work over a number of years, calling on the Government to give local councils more powers to manage how properties are used for short-term rentals. Those are all proposals that must be looked at seriously by the Government.

I know from my own constituency in south Manchester the problems that occur when houses become party let houses. It used to be in my area that it was only the student houses in multiple occupancy that became party houses and posed a real problem for long-term residents, but now a lot of our houses are let out by Airbnb and are causing real difficulties for the long-term residents with noise, litter and disturbance.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East talked about control zones. When I was a councillor in Manchester, we introduced an article 4 direction to limit the number of HMOs that could be permitted in an area, and that kind of innovative approach is something we need to look at. It would be interesting to see how the control zones in Edinburgh work and how we can learn from them.

As well as the kinds of problems that my constituency and other urban areas are experiencing, the prominence of second homes and short-term lets is causing a housing and public services crisis in popular tourist destinations across some of the more rural parts of the UK. Cornwall, Cumbria, Northumberland, the west country, Shropshire, parts of Yorkshire, the Scottish highlands, as we have heard, and rural Wales have all suffered. To thrive, communities need investment, employment opportunities and, in many cases, thriving tourism industries, but they also need affordable homes for local people. Accelerated by the pandemic, many of these areas have seen house prices soar and availability drop as wealthy outsiders buy up second homes, often for buy-to-let, and then they discover that owners can often get more money from a short-term let than from a long-term tenant.

[Jeff Smith]

Properties that were previously for permanent rental are being turned into Airbnb holiday lets, which impacts directly on the affordability and availability of local homes, particularly for local first-time buyers and private renters. It also means that houses are left empty for large chunks of the year, reducing permanent populations. That can have pretty disastrous impacts on the local community, such as: school closures, because families are forced out and schools become unsustainable; cuts to transport services and buses; and health and other services disappearing as demand drops.

It seems pretty clear that the Government need to explore whether and how local authorities can be provided the powers to tackle this issue. We have heard a few examples. We can introduce licensing regimes for second homes and short-term lets, we can consider giving councils greater discretion over council tax regimes and we can look at allowing local authorities to levy more premiums or surcharges on second homes and long-term empty properties, if they believe it is needed in their locality. Some local authorities are backing calls for more powers in planning to recognise short-term rentals as a different use class, meaning that people who want to use their home exclusively for Airbnb would need planning permission. Local authorities could control how their local areas operate in a number of ways.

It is welcome that the Government committed to launching a consultation on the introduction of a tourist accommodation registration scheme in England. So far, we have seen no sign of it. It was promised in early 2022. We are mid-June, so we have probably passed “early 2022”. I would be very happy if the Minister could confirm when the consultation will open and how long it will run for. While we continue to wait for it, I welcome the news that the Labour Mayor of London has just launched his own consultation on the issue. I encourage everyone in London affected by this issue to participate before the consultation closes on 4 July.

The rise of Airbnb is just one example of the emergence of the sharing economy. Many businesses have become everyday fixtures of our modern lives. At their best, these platforms can be about reducing waste, pooling space, skills and items, and making life easier and more sustainable, but it does not always work like that, and when it becomes commercial, it can cause difficulties. When Airbnb and similar websites first emerged, it was about individuals occasionally making a bit of extra income on their spare room or own property, but things are very different now. A large part of the short-term rental market is now a wholly commercial enterprise. Residential properties are being used as letting businesses without the required planning permission, local authority oversight or protections for neighbours and communities. We clearly need to respond now to that different context.

Let us learn from the examples we have heard about from abroad. Let us look at the changes in Scotland and elsewhere. Airbnb has said that it is willing to work with the Government on regulation to ease some of the challenges to which it is contributing. It published a healthy tourism commitment and the “Short-term Lets Registration White Paper”, which calls for the introduction of a simple nationwide registration scheme for the short-term lettings sector.

The willingness is there from stakeholders. The political imperative is there, I would argue, and the political consensus is there that we need to get a grip of this. The need is certainly there, as has been well articulated today. It is now time for the Government to act, to start to tackle this issue and to get the balance right for our communities.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for the opportunity to debate this important issue. It is a matter of considerable interest to many hon. Members across all parties and I am grateful to have heard some of their contributions today. Although short-term and holiday letting to paying guests is not a new phenomenon, it is clear that there has been rapid and significant growth in the market over the last decade or so, driven by the proliferation and popularity of online platforms such as Airbnb—other platforms are available.

Many hon. Members will have seen first hand and heard from their constituents as to the challenges and, on occasion, the benefits that that growth has brought to communities, the tourism industry and the wider housing market. Today’s debate has been an invaluable opportunity to hear about the picture in different areas of England, and indeed Scotland.

We can all agree that the sharing economy makes an important contribution to the wider economy. Some estimates suggest that short-term let hosts and guests contribute more than £3 billion to the UK economy. The sharing economy also benefits consumers, who enjoy a greater choice of accommodation at a range of competitive prices. Obviously, for households who have unoccupied or underused accommodation, it provides an additional source of income. Of course, an increased number of tourists in any area will have a positive knock-on effect for local businesses, particularly tourism and hospitality businesses, which will see more footfall and more spending.

Despite those myriad benefits, there are major drawbacks for certain local areas as hon. Members have highlighted. It is a particular issue in hotspots such as the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster; in York, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) highlighted; in rural areas, such as the south-west and the Lake District; and in Edinburgh, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) highlighted.

It has been argued that the growing number of short-term lets is affecting housing supply. Some people are rightly concerned that landlords may be prioritising short-term letting activity instead of long-term tenancy arrangements. Today, the Government published a White Paper for private renters, “A Fairer Private Rented Sector”, which sets out our plan to fundamentally reform the sector and to level up housing quality in this country. Our hope is that that package of measures will help good landlords in the market.

Another concern about short-term and holiday lets is the reports of noisy neighbours and the antisocial or nuisance behaviour of guests. Indeed, the Greater London Authority has reported that in the five London boroughs with the most Airbnb listings, there have been complaints related to short-term letting activity. Westminster reported

194 complaints of noise, waste and antisocial behaviour over just one year. Local authorities have a range of powers to enable them to tackle such issues, including being able to serve abatement notices if they believe a statutory nuisance is taking place; powers to tackle noise under the Noise Act 1996; and powers under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to act on nuisances such as litter and garden rubbish, as well as noise.

As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, a further issue in London is that some short-term lets are regularly in breach of the 90-day rule that we have heard about. She has done a valiant job of lobbying Airbnb to take an industry lead and has encouraged it to accept a registration scheme, to provide local authorities with full disclosure of properties in their area, and to enforce that rule.

For those unfamiliar, if London properties that are liable for council tax are let out for more than 90 nights a year, that represents a material change of use for which planning permission is required. That rule was introduced in the Deregulation Act 2015 and gave Londoners similar freedoms to residents in the rest of England, where there are no restrictions. Prior to 2015, Londoners could not let out their homes on a short-term basis. The rule means that Londoners can rent out their property when, for example, they are away on holiday. In practice, however, as we have heard, local authorities say that they are struggling to enforce when there are breaches because of a lack of data on where the lets are located and who runs them.

This brings me on to what steps the Government are taking to improve how the short-term lettings sector operates. There is currently no definitive source of data on short-term lets, and much existing evidence is largely anecdotal. Much of the publicly available data also predates covid-19, so we really need to get an up-to-date picture of how the market is operating today. In the very near future, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport therefore intends to publish a call for evidence to help us do precisely that. After this debate, when I see the relevant Minister in the Tea Room, I will be nudging him in the right direction. Getting an up-to-date picture of how the market is operating will be vital for developing appropriate ways forward that not only preserve the benefits of short-term letting but address the challenges. When the call for evidence is published, the Government will welcome responses from those who have spoken today so that, when working out what the Government should do next, we can take advantage of the valuable knowledge imparted today.

Rachael Maskell: It is my understanding that DCMS will be looking at a registration scheme, not a licensing scheme, and there is a world of difference between them. Given the Minister's departmental interest in this issue, could there be a roundtable to discuss the impact of this and the difference between licensing and registration? Would he advocate or facilitate such a roundtable with, for instance, the Members here and Members with a particular interest in this issue?

Eddie Hughes: I do not know if I can facilitate that, but, trust me, I am definitely going to advocate it. I think the idea of a roundtable with the relevant Ministers from my Department and DCMS would be an excellent idea. That would give colleagues from across the House

the opportunity to engage, and it would be delightful if the hon. Member for Edinburgh East could contribute to it as well. I fully appreciate the jurisdictional element, but it would still be good to have his input.

Another prominent call is for changes to the planning system. I recognise that the creation of a new class for short-term lets appears an attractive way to limit them. However, this would also create challenges about how a new use class would be applied and effectively enforced. That said, I know that the Scottish Government have made changes to their planning system and the Welsh Government are consulting on making changes to reflect the new world created by short-term holiday lets. I would remind Members participating in this debate that the spread of second homes and holiday lets across England is not a consistent picture and clearly varies region by region. Nevertheless, we are speaking with the Welsh Government about the progress and implementation of their planning proposals, and I can assure Members that we will keep this area under review.

I want to mention briefly the action the Government are taking through the tax system. We have strengthened the criteria under which second properties are considered as commercial holiday lets and assessed for business rates, rather than council tax. From 1 April next year, holiday lets will be required to demonstrate that the property has actually been let out for at least 70 days in the preceding year. This will ensure that only genuine holiday businesses that bring tourists to destinations across the country and contribute to the economy can access the rate relief for small businesses.

Today's debate has also touched on the impact that short-term lets have on the housing market, so I want to mention what steps the Government are taking to address the challenges in our housing market. They include making the dream of home ownership a reality, as well as delivering a significant number of new affordable homes, so that everyone can access a safe and secure home that is affordable to them. We are investing £11.5 billion in the affordable homes programme, which, if economic conditions allow, will provide up to 180,000 homes across the country.

We are also adopting new measures to support people getting on to the housing ladder. Since 2010, over 758,000 households have been helped to purchase a home through Government-backed schemes, including Help to Buy and the right to buy. On top of this, our First Homes programme offers homes to local first-time buyers with a discount of at least 30% on the full market value. Local authorities also have the discretion to apply additional eligibility criteria to First Homes through the plan-making process, including deeper discounts of 40% or 50% where buyers can demonstrate a local connection in order to prioritise local residents and key workers.

I want to close by once again thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster for bringing this important debate to the House. The Government are acutely aware of the issue, and I can assure colleagues that we are paying close attention to it and giving it careful consideration both in my Department and in DCMS. As highlighted at the outset, we recognise that the sharing economy can be beneficial for local communities and businesses, but we are equally clear that those benefits cannot come at the expense of our ultimate priority of ensuring that everyone has access to a decent, safe and affordable home.

4.20 pm

Nickie Aiken: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken today. There may have been few of us, but quality rather than quantity was clear in the speeches we heard. The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and I have worked on this issue for several years, particularly since the Deregulation Act 2015, and we know the effect that short-term letting is having, particularly on our borough of Westminster. She highlighted an Airbnb-type short-term letting in Harrow Road, one of the poorest areas in Westminster, and social housing is being abused like that. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) highlighted another tourist area where short-term letting is having an effect on the local community and affecting local people. That is why we need some sort of registration or licensing scheme that local authorities can use to tackle the abuse of short-term lets.

I was interested to hear from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) about what is happening in Edinburgh, a city close to my heart, where I was brought up. Particularly in the summer, in August, Edinburgh becomes a tourist hotspot, and we must ensure that we protect local people who live in those areas for 12 months a year. I will be keeping an eye on what is happening in Edinburgh, and I will be fascinated, because the licensing scheme being introduced there is probably one of the answers for places such as central London.

As I said, this is not anti-Airbnb or short-term lets; this is about being pro-local areas and ensuring that key workers can remain in areas that are tourist hotspots, and that people who live in such areas for 12 months a year have the quality of life and amenities they deserve. I am sure that with a registration or licensing scheme for local authorities that want it, we can protect our neighbourhoods and ensure that they remain pleasant places to live.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered short-term letting and the sharing economy.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Social Security (Additional Payments) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

4.22 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I want to ask a few questions about the situation we find ourselves in. I am confused about what is going on, and I wonder whether the Government have a clue about what they are doing. Four weeks ago, the Chancellor stood up and made an announcement about the uprating Bill, saying that benefits would be uprated and additional social security payments would be made. That happened four weeks ago. There was already a massive delay to get to that point, and it should have happened far earlier than it did.

In the three weeks since that announcement, nothing happened until yesterday, when the Bill miraculously appeared. Yesterday was the first time we saw it. We have only just seen the money resolution, yet the Government have decided that it is so urgent, despite hanging around for three weeks and for a number of months before that, that we have to get through every piece of business on the Bill—Second Reading, Committee, and Third Reading—all in one day on Wednesday. If this absolutely has to be done right now, why did it not have to be done two weeks ago? If it had been introduced at the time when the Chancellor made his statements, or even shortly afterwards—remember that he had months to come up with those statements—we would not have to rush business through and get through everything in one day.

The business of the House motion is written to allow us to table amendments for Committee in advance of Second Reading, which, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, is not common practice—it is very unusual. I have no problem with being able to table amendments in advance of Second Reading, but we are now in a bizarre situation where amendments for Committee should technically be submitted by the close of play tomorrow—I hope that there might be some leeway—whereas we have until Tuesday to table amendments to the Second Reading motion in order for them to be considered by the Chair.

If the Government had organised the legislation properly, we would not have to consider it in one day. I appreciate that the Minister in her place now is not responsible for the Bill, but, at some point, I would really like some commitment from the Government that when we come to the windfall tax Bill, which is the other half of this piece—we have an overview of it, but we have no idea exactly what will be in it, and we have not seen anything to do with its drafting—we will not be expected once again to make decisions in the course of one day.

It is not acceptable for us to make such a huge decision in one day without having had adequate time to table amendments, to properly consider the motion or to scrutinise the Government's extremely restrictive money resolution, which is fairly unusual in its drafting. I wanted to raise my dissatisfaction with the Government on both the delay and the rush with the Bill. It makes for poor scrutiny.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank the hon. Lady for raising those points. As she said, I am not the Minister responsible for the Bill, but I am happy to respond. This is a crucial piece of legislation and, as she said, there is urgency in getting payments out. There is a complicated set of requirements, so officials have taken some time to ensure that they get the details right.

The hon. Lady is right that the Bill will be debated on Wednesday and, given the short notice, the Leader of the House has made arrangements for Members to be able to table amendments as flexibly as possible. She slightly contradicted herself by saying that there has been a delay and that now the Bill is being rushed. It is important to get these things right, but, given the factors out there in the economy, it is also important that people can access these payments as quickly as possible. Of course, I will feed her thoughts back to my ministerial colleagues and to the Leader of the House, but I hope she can appreciate that the Government are trying to be as efficient and flexible as possible in helping Members when we come to debate the Bill next week.

Question put and agreed to.

Professional Medical Indemnity Insurance

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

4.28 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Minister on the Front Bench. She and I have vied in the Chamber a few times, but we are on the side. I hope that we will be on the same side on this issue.

I apologise for the topic being niche, and I obviously have a declared interest. As a very part-time practising healthcare professional and a very full-time MP, I have been under considerable pressure on two issues relating to professional medical indemnity. The whole of the medical and dental professions seem to be on my back at various times. All registered healthcare professionals in this country are required to have indemnity insurance to be allowed to practise. As my hon. Friend the Minister will be aware, her Department has a couple of consultation documents relating to indemnity and it is, I understand, currently considering responses. Bearing in mind the time available—that has lengthened, but I assure her I am not going to fill the time, much to the relief, I suspect, of Madam Deputy Speaker as well—I will raise two key issues. They are from my own personal experience, and particularly from the experience of other medical and dental professionals who have been pressing for action.

I have a closer link than most with the first subject, having been a board member of Dental Protection, which is a subsidiary of the Medical Protection Society. I obtained my own personal indemnity cover through Dental Protection for many years, from when I first started practising in the United Kingdom. Later, I moved from discretionary to contractual insurance indemnity through MIA insurance and, more recently, through Densura, which is part of Lockton.

As I am sure the Minister will be aware, there is a distinct difference between the two types of organisations offering indemnity. Dental Protection is one of the three discretionary mutual membership organisations. They are not insurance companies. There are now several contractual insurance companies, such as the British Dental Association and Densura. They are insurance-based companies and they source their indemnity through huge multinational insurance companies, such as the Royal and Sun Alliance.

I understand that Dental Protection and the Medical Protection Society still maintain their cover as discretionary. That allows them to apply discretion to accept or reject any particular case that is brought to them. I realise that that is not commonly used, but it is a major and important contractual difference, in that that does not apply to the insurance companies, which are bound by contract. I believe that that discretionary section should not be allowed. In effect, discretion means that, if a self-indemnified professional is challenged and sued, and seeks assistance from their indemnity provider, it is possible for Dental Protection, MPS or either of the other mutual societies to use their discretion for whatever reason and decline the indemnity for the professional.

I reiterate that that is uncommon, but I can recall a number of cases in discussion with the professional media over past years. I also reiterate that, although it is uncommon, it is damaging. One particular case sticks

[Sir Paul Beresford]

in my mind. A dentist was abandoned—that is exactly what he was, abandoned—by his indemnifier. Despite considerable financial difficulties, he funded his challenge to the claim through the courts. He won the case. Despite that victory and despite being awarded costs, I very much doubt that he recovered 100% of his costs. It should also be remembered that, if a claimant has a genuine claim and indemnity is withdrawn, there is a reasonable possibility that the claimant, particularly if the claim is large, will not receive the appropriate reimbursement if the clinician has insufficient funds to meet it. That has happened.

I understand that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has announced, following the Paterson breast surgery inquiry, that professional medical indemnity will be reformed and that discretionary indemnity will, as I hope, come to an end. I reiterate yet again that, although it is uncommon, the cases I know of or have been told about would have been covered by the insurance indemnity providers by contract. Those have been rejected by mutual indemnity societies exercising their discretion, resulting in both patients and professionals being distinctly disadvantaged. I therefore anticipate, as indicated by the Government in 2018, that discretionary indemnity will be ruled out of order and abolished. I certainly hope so.

The second area on which I wish to touch is the subject of a consultation document, published at the end of January, entitled “Fixed Recoverable Costs in Lower Value Clinical Negligence Claims”—a mouthful if ever there was one. I understand that the consultation concluded on 24 April. This is particularly relevant to dentists, who remain the principal group who purchase their own indemnity cover, through subscription or premium, as the case may be. Increasingly inflated claimant legal costs will, I believe, seriously increase the cost of that indemnity.

It has been brought to my attention that a number of claimant solicitors have been grossly inflating their costs because it is seen, to put it bluntly, as an easy cash cow. Some of those cases have been challenged by costs draftsmen, and when that happens it is not uncommon for the claimant solicitor to reduce their bills by 20% to 30%. To my mind, that suggests that the bills are being inflated, to put it simply and bluntly, as a try-on.

I have obtained a large number of examples, but will draw the Minister’s attention to only two, which I consider to be classic examples of opportunistic abuse of the system. One case, which concluded in 2019, resulted in a claimant award of £9,250 and a clinician solicitor cost of £10,042.80. The claim submitted by the claimant solicitor, however, was nowhere near that £10,000. Instead, it was for £87,297.89. The second claim, which also goes back to 2019, resulted in damages of £5,000 for the claimant, and the indemnity legal costs were similar to those for the first case, at £8,225.40. The claim for the claimant solicitor costs, however, was £72,886.23. That is quite outrageous.

Not all claimant solicitors are grossly inflating their costs—I must rush to point that out—but they are sufficient now to drastically affect indemnity subscriptions or premiums. Annual indemnity cover for the average full-time NHS dentist now costs in the region of £4,000. Many pay more. It is a substantial sum, especially to an

NHS dentist at a time when the profession is under huge pressure, with a shortage of dentists and a considerable number of vacancies. The prospect of rapidly increasing costs to a beleaguered profession calls for prompt ministerial action. I await.

4.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for securing this important debate. It is a niche area, but it is also a very important one relating to patient safety. Indemnity cover supports professionals in carrying out their practice. Even in the safest healthcare system in the world, mistakes will happen and it is important that patients are covered. Like my hon. Friend, I declare an interest: as a practising nurse, I have to have indemnity cover in order to maintain my registration.

Patient safety is the priority. Our focus is on making the NHS the safest healthcare system in the world. We are redoubling our efforts to deliver that, including in underpinning quality and safety. The national patient safety strategy, which was published in 2019, sets out exactly how we aim to do that. It is also important to learn the lessons when things go wrong. We want to make, and are making, changes to the culture of the NHS, to learn from mistakes and to be honest and open when mistakes happen.

There are legal requirements in place. All regulated healthcare professionals in the UK must hold adequate and appropriate indemnity to be able to practise. Healthcare professionals both in the NHS and in the independent sector need to have that in place. As my hon. Friend has said, the type of indemnity varies: it could be discretionary or it could cover all eventualities. Sometimes, when a claim is made where discretionary indemnity is in place, it is not paid out.

Most staff in the NHS benefit from state indemnity for clinical negligence. Decisions about state indemnity arrangements are a devolved matter, and they vary across the four nations. Broadly speaking, however, where state indemnity is in place in primary and secondary care, it provides cover for NHS professionals carrying out NHS work. Patients can be assured that, if something goes wrong, it will cover them, and cover is available to provide compensation where needed.

For work that is not covered under a state indemnity—many professionals, including dentists and GPs, provide NHS services under an NHS contract rather than being direct employees—discretionary indemnity is available. There have been problems with that, which the Paterson review very much highlighted. Although the Government did not accept all the recommendations in the Paterson review, we accepted a number of them partially. I am concerned about some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised in his speech, so we will be reviewing the Paterson recommendations shortly. I am keen that, where we have introduced measures in the NHS to improve an indemnity, the independent sector takes them up. We want to give the independent sector a chance to make those changes, but if it does not, we will have no hesitation about taking action.

Sir Paul Beresford: The Minister is absolutely right that every medical practitioner has to have indemnity. If a case arises in which there is a challenge to the clinician,

if the indemnity is covered by a society that has discretion, and if that discretion is exercised, the cover that is insisted on by law is annulled.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have looked into reform: between 2018 and 2019, we consulted on whether to change the legislation to require all healthcare professionals to hold regulators' insurance, rather than the discretionary indemnity. Unfortunately, covid came along and disrupted much of that work, and the response to the consultation was not published, but I am very happy to look at it again.

My hon. Friend is right that there is a gap in the system, not only for patients who may need compensation to deal with whatever outcome has happened as part of their care, but for healthcare professionals who need cover for a specific reason. Publication of the consultation that we ran in 2018 and 2019 was delayed, initially because of Paterson and then because of covid, but we hope to publish it fully this year. I will take the response very seriously; I hope to work with my hon. Friend on it so that, if changes to legislation are needed in relation to discretionary indemnity, we can make them.

The gap in the market that means that discretionary payments may not pay out will sometimes affect healthcare professionals admitting when mistakes have been made and learning from them. It does not help patients either. I very much take on board my hon. Friend's points and am happy to work with him, because we remain committed to supporting healthcare workers across England in the clinical negligence sphere.

In 2019, in our response to concern about the rising costs of clinical negligence we touched on fixed recoverable costs—the second point my hon. Friend talked about. We recognise that costs are a significant part, albeit not the largest part, of lower level compensation payment to patients. Very often, legal fees make up a large percentage of the cost, and although we are improving patient safety we are not seeing clinical negligence costs fall in parallel. There is no correlation. To manage the rising costs of clinical negligence, we have consulted on

fixed recoverable costs and capping them for the lower level of compensation payments. Such measures would not cap the compensation paid to patients, but they would cap the cost of the lawyers. We would do this in part to reduce costs, so the money could be spent on frontline services for patients instead, and in part because we recognise that legal costs can increase the cost of insurance for healthcare professionals who need indemnity cover.

The consultation on fixed recoverable costs finished recently and we are working our way through the responses. We hope to introduce measures fairly soon, and I will set out the detail as soon as I can. The Health and Social Care Committee carried out a review of patient safety and the cost of clinical negligence, and this is one area where, when I was before the Committee a few months ago, we promised reform. I am very committed to doing that.

We are also committed to acting on the recommendations of the Paterson inquiry, which looked at discretionary indemnity and highlighted the points my hon. Friend made about potential gaps in clinical negligence indemnity, in particular in the independent sector. I am committed to ensuring that lessons are learned from the inquiry, that the report is taken up and that we address those gaps. We have to look across healthcare, both the national health service and the independent sector, and consider a range of options. We will build on the work that we were doing before the inquiry and the consultation we started then, but also take forward the inquiry findings.

I hope that I have reassured my hon. Friend that by introducing the changes to fixed recoverable costs for clinical negligence with a value up to £25,000, we will not affect the payments to patients when claims are made, but instead tackle rising legal costs. I am happy to look into the indemnity issue he raises, because there is a gap and I recognise the points he made.

Question put and agreed to.

4.47 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 June 2022

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Low-carbon Off-gas Grid Heating

1.30 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of low-carbon off-gas grid home and business heating.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating today's debate, which I hope will give hon. Members the opportunity to discuss the options available to the owners of rural homes and businesses that are not connected to the gas grid to decarbonise their properties. I hope to hear from my right hon. Friend the Minister how that might be done, always bearing in mind the principles of choice and fairness.

One of the clear outcomes that emerged from the Climate Assembly that was commissioned by Select Committees of this House was that the path to net zero must be fair to people who live in different parts of the UK. Hon. Members will be aware of the need to phase out boilers using fossil fuels in all homes to meet the net zero challenge, and it is the Government's aim to ban replacement natural gas boiler installations from 2035. Most homes are connected to the natural gas grid, and the debate continues as to whether those homes may eventually be powered by hydrogen or whether they will have to resort to electric heat pumps, but little attention has been paid to rural homes and businesses that are not connected to the gas grid. The primary solution proposed by the Government appears to be electric heat pumps, which are very costly and disruptive to install, or biomass boilers, which come with air pollution concerns.

Over 4 million people live and work in our rural communities. Many rural homes and business properties, such as hotels and pubs, tend to be old and draughty; 47% of such homes were built prior to 1949. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, only 3% of off-gas grid homes achieve an energy performance certificate rating of band C, and many rural homes need significant energy efficiency investment if they are to be suitable for electrified heating: for example, they may require replacement hot water tanks and additional radiators, and some homes will need to be rewired or have external wall insulation to accommodate heat pumps. Electricity grids in rural areas will also need to have their resilience improved and built up as heating and transport become increasingly electrified in future.

It is therefore surprising that the Government apparently intend to pursue a "rural first" approach to the roll-out of heat pumps, committing to ban the installation of replacement fossil fuel boilers in rural homes from 2026 and in larger businesses from 2024. By contrast, they aim to start phasing out replacement installations in on-grid homes from as late as 2035. Given the extra cost and disruption of installing heat pumps compared with

existing boilers, rural homeowners will quite reasonably wonder whether this is fair. Under the proposals in the heat and buildings strategy, homeowners off the gas grid will not be permitted to replace an existing fossil fuel system with a new one after 2026. For rural businesses, changes will start even earlier: in 2024—only two years away—for larger business premises over 1,000 square metres, and from 2026 for many rural small and medium-sized enterprises, including those in the hospitality and agricultural sectors. I hope that in his reply, the Minister will explain why rural homes and businesses will be required to switch from fossil fuel so much earlier than their on-grid counterparts.

We should remember that nearly 2 million rural off-gas grid properties will be impacted by these proposals very soon. Most rural off-gas grid homes are heated by oil, which historically has been the cheapest fuel, although hon. Members will be aware of the current price spike. There are hundreds of suppliers of heating oil across the country, enabling consumers to shop around for the best price. There are also liquefied petroleum gas suppliers for those who wish to use gas for home heating and cooking, with some homes using electric panels as well as solid fuels such as peat and coal, but oil is the most commonly used fuel for heating. It will be a significant undertaking to replace oil-fired systems in the normal boiler cycle unless affordable alternatives are available to those who use them. Indeed, I wonder whether the Government have seriously underestimated the scale of the challenge that they have set themselves.

According to the heat and buildings strategy, the current cost of a heat pump for the average off-gas grid home is £12,000. A further £2,000 may be required to fit cavity wall insulation, loft insulation and draught proofing to upgrade a home so that it is heat-pump ready. Rural household incomes are, on average, smaller than urban ones. Although some rural householders will receive limited Government support in the form of the boiler upgrade scheme and the home upgrade grant, many will not be able to afford the cost of heat pumps and the associated energy-efficient retrofit work that is required for them to work efficiently. Put simply, the cost of installing a heat pump could be out of reach for many, and the associated disruption will be extremely inconvenient.

There is a significant policy gap in the heat and buildings strategy in relation to the so-called "able-to-pay" households, which may not qualify for any Government assistance. Many such households may lack the savings and income to pay for a heat pump. The Government are considering using the mortgage market to improve the EPC scores of such homes, and requiring homeowners to make changes at the point of sale of their property or, alternatively, to increase their mortgages to cover the cost of installing a heat pump. However, it would be deeply unfair to saddle homeowners with more debt as interest rates rise, as indeed they have done today.

Some able-to-pay households may receive a £5,000 grant, via the boiler upgrade scheme, towards their air-source heat pumps or biomass boiler installation. However, a maximum of just 90,000 households will be helped under that scheme, which applies to both on and off-grid properties. That simply does not cover the boiler replacement cycle in off-grid homes. There is no support for energy efficiency improvements in able-to-pay households, and it is not clear how they will afford the transition—especially if they are required to change

[Mr David Jones]

their boiler at short notice—or accommodate the significant disruption and time taken for a heat pump to be installed. Notably, the strategy contains very little detail on the Government’s position on the cost-effectiveness of the measures they propose.

A study by Gemserv found that 44% of rural off-gas grid homes that currently use heating oil can be considered hard to treat when the cost of transition is taken into account, and heat pumps are not the cheapest low-carbon heating option for them. The Federation of Master Builders suggests in its national retrofit strategy that hard-to-treat homes should be last to be retrofitted rather than first, to allow the energy efficiency industry to drive down costs and increase its skill base to meet the challenge.

The Government also appear to assume that the cost of heat pumps relative to traditional boilers will halve by 2025 and reach cost parity by 2030. That is ambitious. The heat-pump market is already at a mature stage of development—many thousands are manufactured each year—so it is hard to see where those cost reductions will come from. Delta-EE, the independent analyst and Government adviser, recently published a paper stating that even in an ambitious scenario, reductions of only 34% could be achieved by 2030. That means that rural homeowners will be required to pay a significant premium to decarbonise their heating unless extra support and a more affordable range of choices are provided.

What do rural homeowners themselves think of the proposed measures? According to the Calor rural attitudes tracker, they are not very happy with them: 59% think that it is unfair that off-gas grid homes will see their traditional boilers phased out earlier than those connected to the gas grid; 69% do not think that it will give them enough time; and 83% cited cost, and 64% cited technical constraints, as the main barriers.

Last year, the Prime Minister wrote in *The Sun*, “Boiler Police are not going to kick your door in & seize your trusty combi”. That is a reassurance and it may well be true, but it appears that the only option available for off-grid households after 2026 will be a heat pump. I would suggest that a greater range of affordable, low-carbon heating options will be required if rural homes are to decarbonise fairly and affordably, so how can the Government make the transition fairer for rural off-grid consumers?

First, they should reconsider the 2026 deadline and bring the deadline in line with their plans to phase out all fossil fuel boilers by 2035. The Government should adopt a “heat-pump ready first”—not a “rural first”—approach. All homes from post 1970, both on and off grid, should be targeted first, not just the more challenging, off-grid homes. That will help the Government’s ambition of 600,000 annual heat pump installations by 2028 to be achieved and will reduce the risk of negative installation experiences for rural householders.

Secondly, the Government should provide a choice, not a mandate, on the heating system that may be used. Heat pumps should be installed because householders want them, rather than because they are forced to have them. The Government should also give greater support to other technologies, such as hybrid heat pumps. These run alongside traditional boilers, which, in times of high heat demand, will allow more difficult-to-heat rural

homes to use the traditional boiler element to keep those homes warm. The Government should also incentivise the development of alternative renewable fuels, including bioliquids and biogases such as BioLPG and HVO—hydrotreated vegetable oil. BioLPG is already on the market, but its uptake is hindered by a lack of policy support and by the fact that it is not currently recognised in building standards. These fuels, if adopted, would allow existing central heating systems to reduce their emissions significantly and could see hard-to-treat homes decarbonised more affordably.

I hope that the Government will pause for thought as to how they treat rural homes and businesses in the transition to lower-carbon heating. It is essential that the principle of fairness should be upheld. The Government should give rural homeowners and businesses access to a full range of options to decarbonise their homes and premises. The extent of the challenge is great indeed—too great to rely on heat pumps alone.

1.43 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on bringing this very important and timely debate before the House this afternoon. I will underline and support most if not all of the remarks that he made. He made a very powerful case in favour of the Government pausing, taking a step back and reconsidering their approach to decarbonisation of heating fuel for rural households, for the following reasons. On average, rural households tend to have been built a lot longer ago, so the energy efficiency is somewhat lower. Also, something that we need to bear in mind—we do not do that enough, in my opinion—is the discrepancy between average rural incomes and those of our urban counterparts, which the right hon. Member made very clear in his speech.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak not only about the impact that the transition will have on households, but about the impact on businesses. In recent times, when we have understandably been focusing a lot on the cost of heating for domestic households, the impact that rising prices are having on businesses has often been missed, and many of my constituents have raised it as a real concern for them. I would like to elaborate in a moment on their case studies.

I fully support the right hon. Member’s calls for the Government to pause and reconsider their approach. I was particularly struck by his argument about needing a just and fair transition as we decarbonise the economy. I fully agree that we need to decarbonise our society and economy, but it has to be done in a just and fair way. Otherwise, it is not realistic and will, at worst, place a substantial cost on the shoulders of those who can least afford it. I very much endorse his remarks.

This debate is timely. Rising prices have caused a great deal of concern and worry for households and businesses across the country. Following April’s energy price cap increase, the Welsh Government estimated that some 45% of households in Wales could fall into real fuel poverty. Although the energy price cap offers some solace to those lucky enough to be included in it, it is not applicable to off-grid homes and businesses. They have been exposed and are vulnerable to sky-high prices that are increasing at a rapid pace. This is especially

true in rural areas such as Ceredigion. According to the mid Wales energy strategy proposed by the Growing Mid Wales partnership, as many as 72% of properties in Ceredigion are off the mains gas grid.

My constituents are therefore particularly exposed, both to the recent increases in the price of heating fuel and to any policy changes the Government might bring in to decarbonise their fuel source. We know—but it bears repeating—that prices have typically increased by some 150% over the past year. Eye-watering sums have been quoted for some of my constituents. On top of the fact that so many households and properties in Ceredigion are not connected to the mains gas grid, our housing stock is very inefficient, primarily because it is quite old. In neighbouring Gwynedd, some 56% of the housing stock was built before 1945. In Ceredigion, only 36% of homes reach a C rating on the energy performance certificate standard.

As part of this conversation about how we transition and decarbonise fuel sources for off-grid properties, we seriously have to look at energy efficiency measures. The right hon. Member made the case far more eloquently and persuasively than I could, but I will reiterate that if we are serious about this, we need to improve the energy efficiency of our housing stock. Only 2% of homes in Ceredigion were built after 2012. The vast majority of the housing stock to be built for Ceredigion by 2050 has already been built. We need to renew our focus on energy efficiency measures.

We also need to accept the fact that for many rural households this will entail greater Government support. The case has been made already, but I want to reiterate it. Rural households tend to have lower incomes than our urban compatriots. We cannot afford some of the measures that have been proposed. Many of my constituents would desperately like to insulate their homes, improve the efficiency of their homes and install a number of measures, including in some instances heat pumps—be they air-source or ground-source heat pumps—but they simply cannot afford the cost.

I would like to mention the impact that the current crisis is having on businesses. We need to think about how we include them in our efforts to decarbonise our off-grid properties. One hospitality business in Ceredigion—it is off-grid—has informed me that its energy bills have increased by some 450%. It is, without putting too blunt a point on it, making them consider whether they can continue in business. It is otherwise a very profitable, successful business, but this hike in fuel prices for off-grid heating has caused them to consider their future. I do not think that good businesses like that should be allowed to fail because of the current crisis. As part of the debate, we need to look at interim measures that the Government may wish to consider in order to give them some short-term support. That business is very confident that if it can ride out this current storm, it can return to a very profitable, successful situation.

In addition to businesses, we need to remember the community groups and assets in rural areas and in off-grid properties that are also suffering. This morning I spoke to the people who run Calon Tysul, a community-run swimming pool in Llandysul in the Teifi valley. They informed me that they are now spending as much as £1,500 a week just on fuel to heat the swimming pool, not accounting for the heating costs for the other section

of the facility. They are already having to consider very difficult decisions, which they do not want to make, about scaling back swimming lessons and the like.

That group is in an interesting situation, because it does have plans to decarbonise its heating sources—for example, it plans to instal solar panels, which will drastically reduce elements of its heating and energy bills. The problem is the timescale. The group cannot quite make it through the current six-month period without having to seriously scale back their operation. So my question for the Government is: what interim, short-term measures can we put in place to help organisations such as Calon Tysul, and other community swimming pools and leisure facilities, to see out the current storm?

I fully support the need to decarbonise our housing emissions and the fuel for off-grid properties in general. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has estimated that some 20% of our off-gas grid homes are technically unsuitable for low-temperature heat pumps, but analysis, undertaken by firms such as Equity, found that 44% of rural homes currently using heating oil can be considered “hard to treat” when the cost of the transition is taken into account.

I have already mentioned the age of the housing stock in many rural areas, which is a real issue. As the right hon. Member for Clwyd West mentioned, we not only need to consider the cost of the measures themselves, whether heat pumps or something else, but the associated installation requirements have to be put in place for people to get the best out of the technology. The right hon. Gentleman quoted the heat and buildings strategy and its assessment of the current cost of heat pumps, but for the average off-gas grid home it is £12,000, and potentially a further £2,000 if measures such as cavity wall insulation are included. I realise that the heat and building strategy refers to the cost for the average off-grid home, but we need to reiterate the fact that in many parts of the UK the cost will be far greater.

I think of my own constituents in Ceredigion, where some 35% of homes were constructed before 1900. Over a third of the properties in Ceredigion were built in the 19th century, which is striking. I am not an expert, but I would imagine that the cost of insulating those homes and bringing them up to the relevant EPC rating to allow them to benefit from measures such as heat pumps will be significant. I am not surprised in the least that a whole range of analysis has suggested that households living in such areas will find it almost impossible to afford the up-front cost of many of these measures.

I know I am repeating myself, but it is important to make the point that we need to improve financial support for these households. Many of them will be able to afford other measures—I am not saying they are struggling, as such—but they will not be able to afford the additional cost of retrofitting their homes and installing some of these low-carbon technologies.

I am conscious that I am at risk of detaining the Chamber for too long, but I would like to ask the Minister a couple of questions and I would be grateful if he could address them in his response. We know there are various support measures for hydrogen development, for example, but there are questions about the extent to which they will be applicable to rural off-grid homes. The Minister and I had an exchange in the Welsh Affairs Committee on this point, and I am interested to

[*Ben Lake*]

know his thoughts on supporting the roll-out of local carbon gas alternatives such as BioLPG, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West. It is drop-in technology that could well offer us a short to mid-term solution if we are keen to decarbonise homes in rural setting.

I end by asking the Minister how we can support rural properties, whether domestic households or businesses and community groups, to weather the current storm. I know that there are a whole range of exciting projects in Ceredigion, where we have housing associations retrofitting houses. We have groups such as Llandysul, with some plans in the pipeline, but they face a period of six to nine months of real difficulty. Is there something that the Government could do as a short-term measure, just to see them through?

One couple who live in an off-grid house have contacted me to say that they have been quoted over £1,000 to fill their oil tank. That is more than their monthly income as a couple, and the problem is that they have been told they cannot place orders for volumes less than 500 litres. If it were possible to have some clarification on that point, it would be very welcome, because other households in Ceredigion have also told me that they would be able to afford 250 litres at the moment, but the 500-litre minimum is a stretch for them at current prices, and they cannot quite make it. I appreciate that that is a very short-term measure and that it is addressing an immediate problem rather than something in the future, but if we are talking about a just transition, we need to make sure that everybody comes along with us and that nobody shoulders a disproportionate amount of the cost of what we should all hope will be a shared endeavour.

1.56 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on securing what is an incredibly important debate for many of my constituents, a huge proportion of whom are off-grid. For the sake of total transparency, my house is among those in my constituency that are off-grid.

I will pick up on the points made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), focusing my comments on drop-in fuels and the options that are available for off-grid homes, other than heat pumps. As has been mentioned, installing an electric heat pump in some of the country's oldest rural homes can indeed cost the £12,000 figure that we have had quoted, plus £2,000. However, I have also seen estimates for some particularly unique houses—those built out of forms of cob or, in my constituency, wychert—where the cost of installing a heat pump with all the necessary additional retrofit installations can be as high as £30,000. Of course, those heat pumps only work efficiently if—it is a huge “if”—the house in question has the highest standards of modern insulation. Many older houses do not, and indeed cob, wychert and thatched properties cannot be insulated because of the way they were built—the walls simply cannot be allowed to become wet or damp; otherwise, the materials will come apart.

At a time when the cost of living is rising sharply, it is critical that consumers and businesses across our United Kingdom have a range of technologies at their disposal, so that they are not obliged—this is about choice, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd said in his opening speech—to pick an option that may not be suitable for their property or that, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion mentioned, would be unaffordable. There are clearly many options out there in the marketplace—some are available today, and some are clearly still in development but are close to being scalable to the point of production and wide-scale consumer use.

I have looked at this issue across not just the home energy sector but the transport sector, and I sincerely believe that drop-in fuels have to be part of the solution. An example is renewable liquid gas, which is a liquid fuel that resembles the same chemical and energy content as LPG but can be used as a drop-in fuel for existing infrastructure, boilers and solutions in people's homes and businesses. However, it is produced through technology that utilises renewable feedstocks, meaning it has a low carbon content when compared with conventional LPG. Due to the drop-in nature, renewable liquid gases effectively utilise all of the existing infrastructure to deliver affordable decarbonisation solutions, particularly to the most hard-to-treat domestic and non-domestic properties that are off grid.

As rural electricity grids might need costly reinforcements as electrification marches forward in our country, as more and more people have a greater demand for electricity, not least for their personal transport and their cars, choosing a drop-in fuel solution for home heating and cooking may save not just the taxpayer money, but money and hassle for the citizens of our country as the infrastructure upgrades involved are either non-existent or very minor, as some heating engineers have told me—perhaps one or two filters in boilers having to be swapped out.

However—this is the problem that I bring to the debate this afternoon—there is currently a lack of recognition, particularly for renewable liquid gas and drop-in fuels more widely, from the Government and some suppliers. The key to enabling the supply and production of renewable liquid gas is a supportive political framework orientated to the long-term benefit of many families and businesses in off-grid locations. Are we not all seeking cost-effective and convenient decarbonisation solutions? It is critical that the upcoming biomass strategy explicitly recognises renewable liquid gas to ensure continued funding and development in this area. Affordable clean energy for families and businesses is key if we are to meet the 2050 net zero ambition.

Electrification is not always economically and technically feasible, especially not in the short term. Purchasing or, worse, borrowing to purchase expensive heat pumps and energy renovations is simply not a realistic option for many of my constituents and many off-grid people and businesses across our country, so I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to give us the good news that drop-in fuels and renewable liquid gas can be seen as a core central plank to the Government strategy going forward, so that we can avoid the cliff edge where people who cannot afford it or people whose homes cannot be fitted with it are not left with a singular option that does not work for them in future.

2.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Christopher. I thank everyone who has spoken, particularly the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who opened today's debate and has given us all an opportunity to participate and add our comments.

Like the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), I live in the countryside—I have been fortunate to do so all my life. The options for me and for my neighbours are very limited, when it comes to gas grid homes. Also, many people now use their homes for their businesses as well. We have a high number of small and medium-sized businesses and self-employed people. Many people work at home, perhaps working with other directors in the firm, so there is a real issue for the rural community to perhaps try to do things better.

I have been fortunate to take part in many debates on the greener environment, but it is great to be here to discuss how it will work in the workplace and at home. We must all take personal responsibility for it. It is certainly something I would love to know more about, so this debate is an opportunity to listen to other regional opinions. We will hear shortly the Scottish opinion, which I very much look forward to. Most of all, I look forward to the Minister's response, because he is the gentleman with the answers. Hopefully we will all benefit from that.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings. For us in the APPG, there is more focus than ever on having efficient heating in our homes and looking at how that can be done. At the same time as looking at efficiency, we need to address the issue of a low-carbon commitment. Those are the twin tracks of the debate, and I hope the Minister will respond on them.

We have set a legally binding target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and the sixth carbon budget is another indication of our shared dedication to a green industrial revolution. While we are certainly on the current path in terms of sustainability, some issues have been brought to my attention by the organisation Calor, and I would like to briefly address some of them. Others have mentioned liquified gas. There are options that need to be considered, and I believe that that is one of them.

First, there have been concerns that rural homeowners and businesses will not be able to afford the high costs associated with heat-pump installation, and I believe that is the reality. There is an understanding that Ministers are "hoping" that costs will come down—I am not sure quite how realistic that is. Perhaps the Minister could say whether we are beyond hoping, and that we are looking at the practicalities. We must do that to be honest with people as we move forward.

The average cost of a heat pump in an off-gas grid home is £12,000. I think the hon. Member for Buckingham referred to £30,000—I suppose it depends on location, but the costs could range from £12,000 to £30,000. On the cost of living crisis, there is already an average fuel poverty gap for rural households of £1,213 compared with £856 for urban households. Again, that underlines an issue that every hon. Member has referred to: the clear poverty gap between rural and urban communities, where the cost is high in urban areas but not as high as

it is in the countryside. There is a much earlier transition phase for rural homes, so Calor is asking for clarity on how the Government plan to support that early transition. The Minister has great knowledge, energy and interest in the subject, so we are looking for some answers, which I am sure are already at his fingertips. We look forward to what he has to say.

In relation to Northern Ireland, residential heating is increasingly important. As of 2019, the residential sector accounted for 14% of Northern Ireland's total greenhouse gas emissions, primarily through fossil fuels. That evidence highlights the need for more off-grid gas homes. Great efforts have been made to compensate for the potential lack of progress. The Government's Climate Change Committee has recommended that at least 25% of heat supply in Northern Ireland should come from low-carbon sources by 2030. Why not start in the most residential places—our homes? Some may feel that their home is where their business takes place most of the time.

I know that the Minister, who was in Westminster Hall on a different issue earlier this week, has regular contact with Gordon Lyons, the Minister at the Department for the Economy. I know they are in contact regularly—if not every week, certainly every time an issue comes up—so I would be keen to know whether discussions have been held on the matter with the Minister responsible in Northern Ireland, and what has come out of those discussions. I believe that we can always learn from each other. I certainly would like to hear the Minister's impression of what contact or co-operation he has had with the Minister in Northern Ireland to see how we can take the issue forward.

It has been argued that heat pumps are the most feasible low-carbon system for domestic settings. These buildings are not seen as hard to treat, and energy can be improved at a lower long-term cost. There are countless alternatives to consider for low-carbon homes and businesses, the most popular being solar, heat networks or hybrids. Whether people use one method of heating or two, many want to have the option.

Further to what was said earlier, we rely on hope that the price of heating pumps will go down; the Minister might be able to give us some realistic figures for how that can be achieved, if it can be achieved at all. A heating pump is seemingly the most sustainable way to attain a low-carbon home. However, if that is not the case in the coming years, I believe that the Government must make efforts to incentivise people into becoming more eco-friendly when it comes to heating their home.

Belfast Telegraph, one of the provincial papers in Northern Ireland, reported:

"70% of people in Northern Ireland cut back on food payments, to pay energy bills and heat their homes."

Big decisions have to be made, perhaps more so today than ever before, and I am sure that that percentage is similar across all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; I do not think that we are any further behind or further ahead in Northern Ireland.

We must do more to support people through the transition to sustainable and green energy, as it is a process that we were all encouraged to be part of; indeed, we are happy to be part of it, although I acknowledge that that comment applies within the confines of the financial constrictions that everyone is facing.

[*Jim Shannon*]

To conclude, I am in full support of discussing and putting into action the process of achieving a low-carbon future. However, we must acknowledge that there are some issues that need to be addressed; I think the Minister is the person to give us answers in that regard. Cost is certainly a major factor in this discussion and I, for one, hope that the Minister and our Government can communicate with the devolved nations to make the transition as smooth as possible, so that we can all move forward together. As I always say, we are always better together. Let us share our points of view; I look forward to our doing things better.

2.11 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on securing this debate in Westminster Hall today, because he has brought forward yet another aspect—something that needed to be highlighted—about a growing crisis for people living in off-gas grid areas regarding the need to adjust for the future. Having said that, there are other issues for them right now, which are causing them great difficulty; I will reflect on that in a moment or two.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the need to address rapidly some of the issues in the heat and buildings strategy, with rural businesses having to act by 2024 and hospitality businesses by 2026. There are really tight timescales for those involved, given the circumstances that we face just now. He also rightly talked about the cost of insulation being out of reach for many homes and businesses.

UK Government support is inadequate; the right hon. Gentleman referred to a maximum of 90,000 households being eligible and there is no support for energy efficiency within that. He is absolutely right to call for far greater ambition in that regard. Low-carbon heating and buildings can help significantly in tackling both the climate crisis and the spiralling costs for families, but first they actually need to exist.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) talked about the rural properties occupied by families who are really struggling just now, with 45% of households in Wales in fuel poverty, which is a shocking figure to have to think about at the moment. The worst thing about that figure, which is replicated in other rural communities across the nations of the UK, is that it will get worse. That is just the fact of life that we face at the moment. It is also why the UK Government need to take more action, both to address the long-term issues and to help people in the short term.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the affordability issues, as did the right hon. Member for Clwyd West, and the impact on rural businesses, some of which are being hammered just now; these are successful businesses that are off-gas grid, but they are being hammered by increasing costs. If these businesses are struggling with bills at the moment, where on earth do they find the money to invest in changing to new technology, if there is not more support, which is what the Minister must come up with now? The hon. Member for Ceredigion rightly asked how we can support people and businesses

to weather the current storm. It is worth pausing to consider the fact that inflation is now at 11%. This is an absolute crisis that we are in just now.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) pointed out, absolutely correctly, that the efficiency of heat pumps relies on high-standard insulation. However, in rural communities—this was a point well made—buildings are often older, draughtier and not perhaps the ones that can best cope with new technology. And all the people who live in those buildings and all the businesses that operate in such buildings face a crisis, right now as well as into the future. The hon. Gentleman also talked about drop-in fuels; that is another issue that needs further debate, but I come back to the fact that these things still involve a high cost, and there is a current crisis.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about options being very limited for those who live in countryside areas, which is absolutely bang on the money, and is also true for businesses. A theme is building here, which the Minister and his Government will have to address: this is a growing crisis for all these people. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, Ministers should have the answers, and we need to hear those answers. We need to know what the Minister is going to do, because the hon. Gentleman was absolutely right that hoping that costs will come down is just fantasy; it is not going to happen, so what will be done to address these average costs of £12,000 that we have talked about, or even higher—£30,000? The hon. Gentleman said that we must do more to support people through the transition. We should not only be doing more to support people through that transition, but doing more to support them right now.

I am pleased to be summing up this debate for the Scottish National party, because I tabled a ten-minute rule Bill in recent months dealing with the issues that people in off-gas grid areas are facing at the moment. We need measures across the piece to ensure that households do not have to pay more for their energy because they do not have access to a mains gas supply. The current price cap introduced by the UK Government and Ofgem is based on the assumption that households across the nations of the UK consume energy with a split of 80% gas and 20% electricity. However, that is not the case in rural areas, where if people cannot afford the fuel oil or to have the LPG on, they are using more electricity—they are using more electricity anyway, because they have to.

Across the nations of the UK, one in six households are living off the gas grid, not just those in rural areas; we must be aware of those figures. The rise in fuel costs that those people are facing at the moment is more than twice that of those on the gas grid. If we treat the average household as having to pay £2,000 per year now—as we know, it will be more—those off the gas grid will have to pay £4,416, according to the most recent calculation. Again, that figure is probably out of date; it has probably gone up as inflation rips through the economy. Rural areas have higher transport costs, higher costs of living, older properties and lower than average incomes.

I have to ask, because I have the opportunity to do so, what is the point of a UK energy regulator that is not regulating for people who live off the gas grid? That deficiency has to be challenged by the Government; I know they will lay the blame at Ofgem's door, but the

Government can do something about it as well. We need an urgent review of regulated energy prices and an end to the discriminatory system for people who are off the gas grid.

The Climate Change Committee said recently that it is still disappointing not to see more energy efficiency, or support for households to make changes that can cut their bill. The UK Government have fallen short in that area time and again. As has been pointed out, they can do a lot more to help people, such as by using some of the additional VAT they are getting in or cutting VAT. The Scottish Government have helped 150,000 households that are either in, or at risk of, fuel poverty, and Scotland is way ahead of England when it comes to spending per capita, spending £27 on insulation as opposed to £8. This UK Government need to do more, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister whether he will take action to address these problems—not only the future problems that people off the gas grid will face when they have to make these changes, but the current problems that people are facing across rural areas in all the nations of the UK—problems that are deeply affecting them, their families and their businesses.

2.19 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This has been a good debate about a very troubled subject. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on securing the debate and putting forward comprehensively just what trouble we are in as far as off-grid properties and decarbonisation are concerned. We heard very thoughtful contributions from the hon. Members for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), for Buckingham (Greg Smith) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon); the latter is something of a fixture in these debates but always has something relevant and useful to say, whatever the subject. We also heard a thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who was supposed to be summing up the thoughtful contributions of everyone else, but made one himself.

This is a really thorny subject, because the imperative of decarbonisation heavily hits off-grid housing and businesses. There are, as hon. Members have mentioned, a surprisingly high number of properties in England, Wales and Scotland that are off-grid. I think it is about 1.1 million houses in England, 230,000 in Wales and 550,000 in Scotland. Put together, that is a very large number of homes. Not only do they often have different characteristics from the mass of on-grid housing in urban areas, but they also have limited choices for decarbonisation.

I only have the figures for the split of fuel for properties in England, but we can see straightaway that people are at present heating their homes with arrangements that are as heavily carbonised as they could be: 78% in England are heating with oil, 13% with LPG—slightly less polluting, but still pretty high-carbon—and 9% still with coal. It is imperative that we get all those properties off high-carbon heating arrangements and on to low-carbon heating arrangements as soon as possible.

Far more off-grid homes are poorly insulated and of a lower standard assessment procedure rating than their urban comparators. They are generally larger and more free-standing than properties in urban areas. Therefore,

in the solutions we put forward to decarbonise them, we must take account of those issues, particularly so that we can get the energy efficiency quality of those homes up to the standard where they can take those low-carbon arrangements.

Off-grid properties do not have the same range of longer-term choices available to them. We cannot decide that all the off-grid properties will go on to hydrogen, because we cannot get hydrogen to the off-grid properties. We cannot go for district heating solutions with off-grid properties, because they are generally in too sparse a layout to make district heating efficient or feasible. There is a narrow range of choices for off-grid homes.

I would not be in favour of taking a break in our plans to move to low carbon, as the right hon. Member for Clwyd West suggested this afternoon, to get our choices right. The replacement turnaround time for the types of heating in those off-grid properties—the boilers and other apparatus—is about 15 years. That is slightly longer than for boilers in urban properties, because oil-fired arrangements and so on are often set out differently. If we take that normal replacement turnaround time, and we pretty much start now with replacing those boilers with low-carbon alternatives as they come up for replacement, the cycle will have been completed by the early 2040s. That is within the 2050 target for low-carbon replacements. If we put our plans off, we simply would not replace the boilers as quickly as otherwise. That suggestion assumes that we are being very careful to undertake the replacements with the active will and participation of the people who live in those homes, as the right hon. Member for Clwyd West enjoined us to do—that we are not marching in and ripping boilers out, and demanding they do things on the spot, whether or not their arrangements are obsolete and whether or not they can afford the changes.

I have considerable sympathy for the Government's problem of how to go about decarbonising the sector. The Government have chosen, in the first instance, to go for a heat-pump-first solution—to prioritise heat pumps as the replacement arrangements in those homes. As hon. Members have pointed out, heat pumps do not always work in those homes, and they certainly do not work unless the energy efficiency is substantially upgraded. Given the homes we have in that group, heat pumps might require a whole-house refit, including the gauge of pipes and various other things related to the central heating, in order to work as well as they should. The cost of the heat pump is therefore not the only cost for those off-grid homes. Quite a lot of other work is also required.

I think we can question whether heat-pump-first is the right way to go about this plan. It is not that they should not be a substantial part of the process but, as has been said, a number of other options are available that ought to and could be considered alongside heat pump installation. We might undertake a more horses-for-courses arrangement, because of the variety of off-grid homes that we need to decarbonise.

I am sorry to say that such an approach was not apparent in the consultation that closed just recently, “Phasing out of the installation of fossil fuel heating in homes off the gas grid”. I hope right hon. and hon. Members all got their submissions in; if they did not, it is a bit late now, but never mind—we are making up for it this afternoon.

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

The consultation missed out on providing a realistic appraisal of what alternatives to heat pumps there might be for off-grid homes. The consultation mentioned some, but merely said it would look at and appraise them and possibly consult at a later date. That is not the way to go about it—we our ducks in a row before we start consulting about what we will do on alternatives to high-carbon heating in homes.

As right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, the alternatives are several. Some are very promising, some less so. Certainly, as the hon. Member for Buckingham mentioned, hybrid heat pumps—I have been to see a couple in operation in south Wales—do a very good job of arranging for the boiler to continue to operate, but as an auxiliary to other kinds of heating, which was an air source heat pump in this instance. The pumps do that in such a way that completely redoing the central heating, and so on, in the home is not required. The house can work very well with a combination of technologies working together effectively to decarbonise the heat in the home.

Biomass pellet boilers certainly can be considered in homes, as indeed can renewable LPG. As hon. Members have mentioned, LPG is a drop-in fuel that can be put straight into systems—more or less, but not quite—as they stand. The issue with renewable LPG is whether we can get enough of it to work well in systems if we use it on a widespread basis, because it is a particular by-product of other processes that are limited in total size.

The Government also ought to be considering, just as they should with hydrogen, the best uses for the alternative fuels. For example, what are the lowest-carbon uses for LPG or hydrogen? Do we put all our hydrogen into heating homes, transport and logistics, decarbonising heavy industry, or whatever? The Government must make that choice in terms of the priorities they put forward for those different forms of low-carbon fuels, and bioLPG is certainly one of them.

I would criticise the Government not on their timescale or their ambition to decarbonise the off-grid area, but on the fact that they have not looked properly at the options that could be available to decarbonise those off-grid properties in the most efficient way. The Government will have to work on rectifying that if they are to get public backing for that decarbonisation over the next period. That is essential in getting not only off-grid properties decarbonised efficiently but, in general, our homes heated in a low-carbon way. Certainly, if the wider debate ends up with people marching down the street protesting that the Government are ripping out their boilers in an assault on their liberties—because they do not have a decent option to decarbonise by consent—then we will not have achieved our objectives at all.

In the debate on energy prices, as hon. Members have mentioned, we ought to recognise that off-grid properties are suffering far worse than on-grid properties from the energy price crisis. First, the average bill for an off-grid property tends to be higher, but also the fuels used for off-grid properties are not subject to the price cap. Off-grid fuel price rises have far outstripped those for on-grid customers. That, I think, is something that the Government ought to take account of in their approach towards underwriting and assisting those properties with their energy costs in future.

The issue is not strictly the subject of today's discussion but clearly comes into how we ensure that the public are properly behind the decarbonisation of their properties across the board, and particularly in off-grid areas. I do not envy the Minister the task of getting that right, and I know that it is a real knotty problem, but I am sure that he will be able to provide us with some good pointers to ensure that we decarbonise our off-grid properties in the most efficient way that we can, and with the most public support that we can get.

2.34 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on securing this important debate. I reassure him that decarbonising heat remains a key priority. We recognise that this is a deeply worrying time for most of our constituents, for whom the impact of rising energy bills is perhaps the biggest concern. That applies as much to rural communities as to any other.

I commend my right hon. Friend for his long-standing work as one of the key voices for north Wales ever since we were both first elected in 2005. At the time, he was the first Conservative Member to be elected in north Wales in about eight years, and he has consistently stuck up for his constituents ever since.

We are taking action on bills. The Chancellor recently announced a £15 billion package—as part of an overall £37 billion this year—to help families who are struggling with their bills. However, as we set out in our recent British energy security strategy, which was launched by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State in April, if we are to keep prices down for ordinary households and businesses for the long term, we need to rely on affordable, clean and, above all, secure sources of energy.

Off-gas-grid households and businesses already understand those challenges as well as anyone. Many of them rely on traditional forms of energy such as oil for their heating needs, so they have been particularly exposed to the impact of rising global energy costs. Of course, compared with other buildings, properties off the gas grid are some of the biggest emitters, so transitioning those properties to low-carbon heat is a key Government priority. That will not only put us on track for our different obligations, but it will help to move us off imported oil, build our energy independence and help to protect consumers from high and volatile energy prices.

As Members from all four nations of the United Kingdom have recognised during the debate—showing that we are better together when it comes to approaching these matters—the problem is not necessarily confined to the remoter parts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), and I know that parts of Kent and other counties that might be regarded more traditionally as the home counties also have large numbers of off-gas-grid properties.

As my right hon. Friend very ably said, most off-grid properties will ultimately transition to heat pumps, which are a proven and highly efficient technology. In electricity, they benefit from a secure energy source that is not subject to the same price spikes as oil, and critically, they are consistent with net zero as the electricity

grid decarbonises. Heat pumps have been successfully deployed in high numbers across the world, including in countries that are colder than the United Kingdom, such as Sweden and Norway.

The up-front cost of installing low-carbon heating may be prohibitive for some, however, and I think that is the core of the question before us. That is why we are investing £450 million through the boiler upgrade scheme to provide £5,000 grants towards the cost of installing a heat pump, and £1.1 billion through the home upgrade grant to help lower-income households off the gas grid to upgrade their energy efficiency, save on bills and transition to low-carbon heating. That funding will help to kick off our wider plans to grow the heat-pump market to 600,000 installations by 2028 and to deliver on our ambition to reduce the cost of a heat pump by between 25% and 50% by the middle of the decade.

Alongside our action to remove distortions in energy prices—starting with the launch of our proposals to rebalance energy costs later in 2022—we anticipate that heat pumps will be no more expensive to install and run overall than gas boilers by the second half of the decade. That is why we consulted last year on regulations that would end the installation of high-carbon fossil fuel heating systems off the gas grid later this decade. I reassure my right hon. Friend that we will take every step to ensure that the transition to clean heat will be fair and affordable for off-gas grid households and businesses.

I also reiterate that our continued support for decarbonisation policies relying on heat pumps is contingent on the industry taking action to drive down the costs. By signalling now our intention to take the action later, once the cost of heat pumps is much lower than today, we aim to give industry the long-term confidence to invest and drive the costs down. We will also keep the cost of heat pumps under constant review. Making sure they become more affordable is a key part of Government policy and, well ahead of implementing any regulation, we will set out what additional actions may be needed to support the phasing out of high-carbon heating systems.

I also take the chance to reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West that no one will be required to install an unsuitable technology in their home or business. We know well that heat pumps will not work everywhere, at least not with the current technology. Some off-grid properties are simply too poorly insulated or have certain characteristics that would make installing the technology impossible. We will take care to ensure that that group of hard-to-treat properties will have access to suitable alternatives, such as high-temperature heat pumps, solid biomass and so on, which I will explain in a little more detail.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West raised various points. I believe his central question was: why off grid first? Off the gas grid, there is currently no strategic option to decarbonise heat with hydrogen or other technologies. That is why we are taking a range of actions to bring forward the decarbonisation of this critical group of buildings. If we can make heat pumps affordable, there are considerable advantages in moving forward, including for off-grid households and businesses, even if that means that they will be required to switch from fossil fuel heat earlier than their on-grid counterparts. My right hon. Friend asked me to reconsider the 2026

deadline. Equally, the pace at which we can make heat pumps become affordable will guide our decisions on the right time to introduce regulation and the other actions needed to make a fair transition.

My right hon. Friend asked how many off-grid homes are hard to treat. Our analysis shows that 80% of off-grid homes already have sufficient insulation for a heat pump to work effectively. They have already been deployed successfully in high numbers across the world; I mentioned Sweden, Norway and other countries. On his questions about hybrids and biofuels, along with those from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, we would like to see those fuels become another solution, particularly for off-grid properties that cannot use a heat pump. We are working closely with industry to build the evidence that will inform the biomass strategy mentioned by my hon. Friend, due to launch later in 2022. The strategy will review the amount of sustainable biomass likely to be available to the UK and set out how this can be best used across the economy to achieve our net zero targets.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham asked for some good news. I think I have been bringing quite a lot of good news so far. However, we are also investigating whether hybrid systems could give hard-to-treat properties additional choices and that is an area of active investigation, as we also ask whether they have potential to help us stretch limited bioresources further. I urge my hon. Friend to wait for the biomass strategy later this year. There are key considerations there in biomass production, alternative uses and trying to get a sense of where that overall market will be heading. In time, renewable liquid fuels such as HVO and bioLPG may also play a role, although they are currently in short supply and more expensive for households to use. We need to better understand the scope to expand production of those fuels for use in heat, consistent with very low emissions while remaining affordable for consumers.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) mentioned those not subject to the energy price cap. It is worth remembering that the energy price cap, which predates me in this job, was not introduced to provide a blanket level of protection for all consumers, but was instead a specific protection brought in to remove the penalty for people who did not switch between their grid gas or electricity provider. That was the purpose of the price cap. I do not think it would be fair to say that the heating oil market or the market for off-grid properties is any less competitive. There is a highly competitive market in heating oil companies, and there is the ability for the Competition and Markets Authority to look at the issue. If the hon. Member for Ceredigion has evidence of anti-competitive practices, I urge him to bring it forward, send it on to me or speak to the CMA. That is exactly what the CMA is there for.

Drew Hendry: The Minister is saying that if there is an issue with off-gas grid households, it should be brought to the CMA. Does he support the basic ask to get Ofgem involved in regulating off-gas grid areas? A very simple solution would be for Ofgem to take action directly.

Greg Hands: We have to think about the nature of that market, which I am satisfied the CMA has the ability to regulate. Although it involves an energy product,

[*Greg Hands*]

that does not mean that Ofgem, rather than the CMA, is best positioned to provide the oversight to prevent anti-competitive practices. There is a lot of Government support for off-grid properties, as there is for on-grid ones, including the £400 payment and the £150 council tax discount in England, with Barnett consequential for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Ben Lake: The Minister has jogged my memory. Some farmers have told me they have commercial electricity contracts to service their homes, and are therefore worried that they may not receive the £400 payment. I know the Government are looking at the technical details, so perhaps he could take that point back and ensure that it is addressed.

Greg Hands: Of course, energy prices for businesses attract a lot of very keen Government attention. The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that there was a consultation on the workings of the scheme, which has closed; the Government will respond shortly. Energy costs for businesses is an area of active Government interest. We provide a lot of support for energy-intensive industries, and want to ensure that overall we have a sustainable position, whereby businesses are able to afford energy bills in order to continue the vital work that they do for us across the rest of the economy.

Many of the additional Government support measures, including the warm home discount, the winter fuel payment and the cold weather payment, are also available for those off the gas grid. Energy efficiency measures are a major area of Government investment, with £6.6 billion to be provided over the course of this Parliament. I have already mentioned the boiler upgrade scheme, which costs £450 million, and the home upgrade grant, which amounts to £1.1 billion.

As somebody who used to work in a swimming pool, I was intrigued by what the hon. Member for Ceredigion described as the difficulties facing the swimming pool in his constituency. The great news is that one of the Chancellor's key announcements this year was the reduction of VAT on solar panels. I am sure Plaid Cymru was very supportive of the Chancellor's overall package of measures, which will bring particular benefit to the swimming pool in the hon. Member's constituency.

The use of hydrogen is an interesting question. Decisions will be made in the coming years on where we think hydrogen can be used as a source of heat. We will have to think about our hydrogen production capacity, and the alternative pressing needs for hydrogen, such as decarbonising industry and major forms of transportation, including maritime, heavy goods vehicles and aviation. There are a lot of potential uses of hydrogen, we will need to look at the option of using it to heat buildings before taking a decision, particularly given the other alternative uses of hydrogen.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion mentioned the rules around heating oil providers not providing less than 500 litres. I urge him to speak to the UK and Ireland Fuel Distributors Association, which is a helpful trade body. I think the basic problem is that providing small volumes of heating oil is likely to raise fixed costs, and therefore to make an inefficient market with ultimately more expensive provision. His motive is a good one—to

try to make heating more affordable, in smaller pieces, for constituents who are facing trouble with their bills—but the perverse impact might be to raise the fixed costs of such deliveries, but I urge him to speak to UKIFDA, which is the real expert.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on being the chair of the healthy homes and buildings all-party parliamentary group. We are of course keen to see Northern Ireland, like all parts of the United Kingdom—I stress that it is fantastic to have all four nations represented here today—play its full role in decarbonisation, and to ensure that it is supported during times of high prices. He said that he had learned that I speak to Gordon Lyons, the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy, frequently and perhaps even weekly. In fact, I spoke to him only yesterday about ensuring that Northern Ireland's renewable energy opportunities are boosted. The hon. Gentleman will also know that one of the key reasons that we are taking the approach that we are on the Northern Ireland protocol is to ensure that things such as the VAT cut on solar panels can be enjoyed as much by the people of Northern Ireland as by the people of England, Wales or Scotland. Watch this space; we are always keen to help in Northern Ireland.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), called UK Government support inadequate. Well, almost regardless of what we had announced as the level of support, I could have predicted that he would say that it was inadequate. I remind him—

Drew Hendry: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: Just let me explain what the support is: £37 billion for consumers so far this year and a £450 million boiler upgrade scheme. The hon. Gentleman might talk about fuel poverty, which is a very serious issue, but I remind him that it is of course a devolved issue in Scotland. I have reason to believe that he may know one or two people in the Scottish Government, so I urge him to direct his inquiries on fuel poverty to his party colleagues in the Scottish Government. Of course I am happy to take his intervention, if he will tell us whether he has raised the issue of fuel poverty with the Scottish Government.

Drew Hendry: I am delighted that the Minister has allowed me to intervene. Can I just clear up a couple of things? I raise the issue of fuel poverty in every way I possibly can with every Government, but I think he has forgotten that energy is reserved to the UK Government; he should have a wee look at his brief just to check. My question is this: does he think that £8 per head spent on insulation in England is good compared with the £27 per head spent on insulation in Scotland?

Greg Hands: Insulation is only one part of the picture when it comes to energy efficiency. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has recognised, and reminded us all, that energy is reserved to the UK Government. That is always refreshing to hear. I keep telling people in Scotland, "Thank God it is reserved, so that we don't have to embark on the anti-nuclear policies of the SNP, or the anti-oil and gas sector policies," even though the main emphasis of the oil and gas sector is indeed in Scotland.

On the regulator of the gas grid, as I have said, the CMA can intervene. Gas and electricity markets are considered natural monopolies when it comes to the grid. They are characterised by high fixed costs and start-up costs. For those reasons, these markets fall under the remit of Ofgem regulation. The heating oil market—

Dr Whitehead: On the subject of support for these measures, the Minister does not appear to have spent any time talking about what support there might be for heat pumps. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) would be interested to know how the support that has been put forward so far—90,000 heat pumps installed up to 2025 under the boiler upgrade scheme—relates to the turnover of boilers in off-grid properties. Replacing all of those with heat pumps would take up the entire support scheme for heat pumps in one go, when that support is supposed to be for the whole United Kingdom. By the way, the target of installing 600,000 heat pumps by 2028 will clearly fail miserably.

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman raises a good question. It is born out of a common misconception, particularly in the Labour party, of what the boiler upgrade scheme is all about. He is expecting—maybe because that is ingrained in the Labour party—that it is the role of the Government to come by and install a new heat pump for everybody across the country. That is not the role of the Government. The role of the Government here is to help stimulate the market and ensure that the private sector makes the adjustment and provides the heat pumps. That is what it is about—not dividing up a £450 million boiler upgrade scheme by the number of people in Britain and working out that it is not enough money for every person to get a new heat pump.

The idea is to provide enough stimulus to the market so that it responds, and also to go with the grain of human nature; the phase-out date is 2035, because people's gas boilers will naturally come up for renewal in the course of the next 12 years, and during those 12 years, they will be incentivised to purchase a heat pump, rather than a replacement gas boiler. The idea is to stimulate the market. I remember the response of the market when we announced the heat and buildings strategy. I clearly remember Octopus Energy saying that the grant should quite soon enable the cost of a heat pump to be comparable to that of a gas boiler, and to become competitive over the lifetime of that installation.

Dr Whitehead: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I need to leave a few minutes for my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West to respond, so I will not take a further intervention.

The basis behind the boiler upgrade scheme is not to provide everybody with a new heat pump. The idea is for the Government to prime the private sector to be able to do exactly that. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test says that heat pumps do not always work, but they frequently do. They are the only proven, scalable technology to decarbonise heating, although there might be hydrogen and other technology developments in the future. As I have said, Sweden and Norway have done this at scale. We will ensure that heat pumps can only be installed on suitable properties, and that there is a greater degree of choice for less suitable properties.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test said that off-grid properties are suffering more from the current price rises. If he is saying that off-grid properties are facing a bigger increase in their energy costs than on-grid properties, I invite him to send me some firm evidence of that.

To conclude, I reiterate that decarbonising buildings off the gas grid will be key to delivering on Government priorities. It will protect rural consumers and businesses from high and volatile energy costs, and further strengthen our energy independence. We are taking action, and will continue to act to ensure the transition is smooth, fair and affordable for off-grid households, and rural customers and businesses.

2.58 pm

Mr David Jones: It has been a valuable and interesting debate. As the Minister has correctly pointed out, we heard from colleagues from all parts of the United Kingdom—united, indeed, in that we come from rural constituencies full of houses lived in by people who are feeling the cold and are worried about feeling the financial cold at some time in the future.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his reply. I take some heart from him saying that the Government are not going to fossilise heat pumps as the only solution to the problems we are living through at the moment. This is a period of transition, and periods of transition are always difficult, but I hope that the Government will bear in mind the concerns of people living in rural areas who are concerned about potentially very high costs to replace existing boilers with heat pumps.

One point I take from the Minister's reply that gives me considerable heart is that the Government continue to look at alternatives to heat pumps. He mentioned particularly biomass and biofuels, which I think offer a solution to this problem in the future. I hope that his Department will continue to look carefully at those solutions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of low-carbon off-gas grid home and business heating.

Infant Mental Health Awareness Week

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Infant Mental Health Week 2022.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray—I think for the first time. I am delighted to have secured this debate.

Infant Mental Health Week is an annual opportunity to highlight that human beings are the most underdeveloped creatures on earth at birth. Our brains, and therefore our responses, our reactions and our knowledge, are completely undeveloped. In fact, many people would say that we are born about two years premature. What other animal cannot do anything for itself until it is at least a year old? That is the plight of human beings.

Infant mental health is therefore, without any shadow of a doubt, more important than mental health throughout the rest of a person's life. It is in that critical period when a person is so small and does not know what's what or where's where that their ability to have secure lifelong mental health is laid down.

From conception to the age of two, a secure and loving relationship between a baby and his or her carer literally shapes the way the baby's brain develops. That is when the building blocks for lifelong physical and emotional health are laid down. Like a sponge, the baby's developing brain will soak up the atmosphere around them and the environment that he or she is born into. In the womb, a baby whose mum is terrified of childbirth or is being treated with violence by her partner, or who is misusing alcohol or drugs, will be profoundly physically and mentally impacted by that experience.

Infant mental health, or, more specifically, early intervention in the first 1,001 critical days of life, from conception to the age of two, has been a passion of mine for more than 25 years. I chaired the Oxford Parent-Infant Project in 1999 and set up NorPIP, the Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership, providing parent-infant psychotherapy to families who are struggling to form a secure bond with their babies. I established national charity PIPUK—the Parent Infant Partnership—which went on to establish and support a number of other parent-infant teams right around the country. I also wrote the 1,001 critical days manifesto, which went on to become the First 1001 Days Movement. Infant mental health is a subject incredibly dear to my heart.

Science tells us that a secure and loving relationship with the key carer will shape the way in which the baby's brain develops, with long-term and positive consequences for that baby's mental health. Fundamentally, it is about self-regulation. A baby who is secure in his or her earliest relationships will later on be able to experience anger, fear, jealousy and disappointment, and will be able to regulate their own responses appropriately. It is the earliest relationship between parents and their babies that constructs that ability to self-regulate and hence delivers that pathway to good lifelong mental health.

Research released today by the Royal Foundation shows that 91% of parents and carers agree that early years are important in shaping an adult's life, but only

17% recognise how uniquely important the period from birth to five is. As the Duchess of Cambridge has said,

“Our experiences in early childhood fundamentally impact our whole life and set the foundation for how we go on to thrive as individuals, with one another, as a community and as a society.”

In 2015, the National Childbirth Trust found that one in three first-time dads were worried about their mental health following their baby's birth, and according to the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, up to one in five mums, sadly, suffer due to the lack of focus on support for mental health in the perinatal period. Unfortunately, we do not really have the granular information on perinatal depression among parents and carers that we would need to properly impact-assess the mental health effect on babies, but the mental health of the parent clearly impacts on their baby's development. A good example is that a pregnant mum who, for whatever reason, suffers from stress will produce more cortisol—the stress hormone—in her bloodstream, which will pass through the placenta into the unborn child. The more stressed the mother, the more frequently the foetus is exposed to higher levels of cortisol, and we know that exposure to high levels of cortisol in the womb can lead to modifications in gene expressions before the baby is even born, so even in the womb, the potential for lifelong emotional and physical health is already being determined.

Once out of the womb, being left to cry unattended for continuous, lengthy periods of time, or being terrified by witnessing violence and anger within the family or loud and aggressive behaviour in their environment, will have the same impact on the baby: raising their levels of cortisol. Over lengthy periods, there is evidence that this damages the baby's immune system and will give him or her a lifelong predisposition towards higher risk-taking behaviour. When a baby is born, they have no cognition at all: they can only cry, sleep or look around. They do not know if they are cold, hungry, bored or in pain. They only know that something is wrong, so a baby cries to attract the attention of a loving adult carer. When that carer turns up and takes the time to soothe, change, feed or sing to the baby, the impact of that tender and loving response brings the baby back to a state of calm and reduces their level of stress. This continues until the baby is old enough to understand how to regulate his or her own feelings.

Even more important is the fact that at birth, a baby's brain is only partially formed. It is understood that a baby's brain puts on up to a billion neural connections every minute during the first year of life. Those neural connections are stimulated by the quality of attention of the principal loving carer and the baby's experiences of the world around them, which is why parental attunement and loving attention are fundamental for the healthy brain development of a baby. Simply put, what we do with a baby from conception until the age of two is about building the human and emotional capacity of that infant; what we do after the age of two is almost all about trying to reverse damage that is already done. A wealth of evidence demonstrates that poor mental health, substance dependency and domestic abuse among parents lead to significantly poorer outcomes for babies and young children. Research from the Maternal Mental Health Alliance highlights that the locations with some of the greatest levels of socioeconomic deprivation are

also those where poor maternal mental health is at its highest. When they start school, children from such disadvantaged backgrounds are on average four months behind their peers, and it gets worse from there.

The quality of attachment that a baby has to their principal adult caregiver therefore has a profound impact on their lifelong mental health, and our society's ambition should be for every baby to achieve a secure attachment to that caregiver, be it mum, dad, kinship carer or adoptive parent. Secure attachment is the foundation for good lifelong mental health, its possible effects having an impact on parenting from one generation to the next: if a person was well parented, there is a high likelihood that they will become a good enough parent, and their baby will form a secure attachment to them. Examples of insecure attachment are therefore found where care giving is inconsistent.

Babies who suffer from insecure attachment are not given the consistent, loving care that they need in order to feel that the world is a good place and that people are generally kind. Neglect of a baby has a very damaging impact. The baby with insecure attachment will of course have other chances in life; we never write anyone off. Babies who are insecurely attached in the very early stages will have lots of other opportunities to make good friends and to have other key adults in their lives who might help to turn things around and help them build their own emotional capability, but there is no doubt that insecurely attached infants will always struggle a bit more in later life to deal with life's ups and downs. It will be those babies who might struggle to keep friends and relationships and also to cope without help with parenting when their time comes. This is sometimes known as the cycle of deprivation, where a general lack of good mental health is passed down from one generation to the next.

The most challenging early mental health impact is reserved for babies who develop a disorganised attachment with their principal caregiver. That is where the person they rely on to look after them, soothe them and keep them alive is also the most dangerous person in their life. The person they turn to for comfort might one moment hurt them and the next moment hug them. Such babies often find that making sense of the world becomes very difficult, and many of the most damaging outcomes in society—criminality, suicide, self-harm, sociopathic behaviour—are enacted by those who suffer disorganised attachment as a baby. It should be blindingly obvious to all that whatever we do to invest in giving every baby the best start in life will pay us back a million times over—a billion times over—in terms of general wellbeing, healthy communities and a stronger society.

We had a long way to go before the covid lockdown, but there is no doubt that Infant Mental Health Awareness Week is vital because it shines a spotlight on the huge damage done by two years of pandemic lockdowns: dads and co-partners not permitted to be with mum and the new baby; face-to-face health visits and other support such as family hubs moving to virtual only; wider family and friends unable to meet the new arrival and provide support; babies not able to meet other babies; and an exacerbation of existing problems such as addiction, domestic violence and poor mental health.

Above all else, there was the devastating isolation at a time when we all know that new parents are desperate to get out of the house to go and chat to another parent

about the sleep that they did not get last night, what size nappies the baby should have, what they are doing about weaning, and whether the baby has had its first tooth yet. All the chats, empathy and consolation that new parents give each other were missing during the covid lockdown. A report carried out by the Parent-Infant Foundation, *Best Beginnings and Home Start*, titled "Babies in lockdown", revealed that six in 10 parents were concerned about parental mental health in lockdown, and two thirds said that covid had affected their ability to cope with caring for their baby.

We know that health visitors provide a vital support service to families who are struggling. Every family in England should be offered five mandated reviews from a health visitor between pregnancy and age two and a half as a minimum. Local authorities, many of which are still using phone and virtual appointments to count as reviews, have reported in their latest quarterly data, from May, that 18.6% of babies missed out on their nine to 12-month review and more than a quarter of toddlers missed out on their two to two-and-a-half-year review. That includes all those who got the telephone-only service. There were still many who did not get anything at all.

Data, again published in May, shows that only 85% of children in England were at or above their expected level in communication skills, compared with 89% before the pandemic, and 79% were at or above the expected level in five key development assessments at the review stage, compared with 83% pre pandemic.

A report by Ofsted in April 2022 found:

"The pandemic has continued to affect young children's communication and language development, with many providers noticing delays in speech and language... The negative impact on children's personal, social and emotional development has also continued, with many lacking confidence in group activities"

and

"social and friendship-building skills have been affected."

There continues to be an impact on children's physical development, including delays in babies learning to crawl and to walk. Lockdown has caused many challenges and exacerbated many existing ones.

The early years healthy development review, which I chair, could not have come at a more important time. Since the summer of 2020, the review has focused on ensuring that every baby gets the best start in life. Its vision sets out six key action areas, which were made Government policy in March 2021. The action areas will deliver, first, a joined-up set of Start for Life services for every family in England; secondly, the roll-out of family hubs as a welcoming place, providing physical, virtual and outreach services for every family in England; thirdly, trusted digital, virtual and telephone support designed to meet the needs of the baby and their carers, as well as the development of the digital red book, which will allow much greater continuity of care for every baby; and fourthly, a modern, mixed-skills workforce that will provide much greater continuity of care and that works, with the baby at the centre of everything we do, to deliver wraparound, empathetic support.

Fifthly, we need much more understanding of the impact and potential of early intervention, so we will improve data collection and evaluation, and outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing of babies and their

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

families, and we will develop proportionate inspection of services. Sixthly, these action areas will require real leadership locally and nationally. Fundamentally, we need to ensure that the Treasury will continue to fund the “Best Start for Life” vision in the long run.

I am delighted that the vision is shared cross-party, and I have no doubt that the spokespeople here today on both sides of the Chamber will want to support giving every baby the best start for life. It is a fantastically cross-party issue, and I pay tribute to the many colleagues here today, as well as to those who could not be here, who have lent their support to this agenda over so many years.

The views and lived experiences of babies and their carers have been at the heart of the early years review. From Blackpool to Stoke-on-Trent, from Worthing to Bexleyheath, from Camden to Cornwall, parents have shared with us the good and the bad. My “1,001 Critical Days” podcast has highlighted the mental health journeys of parents and their babies, and an LBC phone-in made clear the challenges faced by so many dads and co-parents, and the particular support they need, which is currently lacking, in their amazing journey to parenting.

Time and again we have heard that every parent wants to know how to be a good parent, where they can access early years support, what is on offer for them and why they might need that support. They want companionship and not to be isolated, and they want to be able to share their stories with parents in a similar situation.

We heard from parents of babies with disabilities that they do not want to be left out, stigmatised and treated as different. We heard from many parents from different ethnic backgrounds, as well as LGBT parents, single parents and foster parents, that they do not want to be treated any differently from other parents either. All parents, of every type, asked for a seamless, joined-up approach to accessing the support they need. Face-to-face support is a priority, but in this 21st century, parents and carers also want access to services virtually when things are urgent, they are pressed for time or they just have a quick question.

Parents also want to avoid telling their story over and over again to different early years professionals, and there is huge support for a digital version of the red book, where parents can keep a permanent record of their baby’s birth experience, first tooth and first photo with Granny, along with all the other lovely records that parents want to have, as well as communicate with the professionals who are supporting them.

The positive to take away from today’s debate is that if we provide support and reach out to make sure that every family knows where to go to get help, and we educate families as to what good looks like, we can transform our society for the better. To end, in this platinum jubilee year, I would like to use the words of the Queen, who said:

“in the birth of a child, there is a new dawn with endless potential”.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at a few minutes before 4 pm. I hope Members will bear that in mind. I call Munira Wilson.

3.20 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate and for championing this issue with such expertise and passion for so many years. It is great to see her commitment and the support she has managed to secure from the Government recently. There is always much more that we can do, which is why we are here debating that today.

I will not take up much time—others can expect to have plenty of time to speak—but I want to touch briefly on the social care system for children and mental health, and how poor mental health affects infants in contact with the children’s social care system.

As we have heard, according to the Parent-Infant Foundation, a major predictor of the effect of an adverse childhood experience on a child’s development is how strong and secure their relationship is with their parents. For looked-after children or for children in kinship care, the relationship with their birth parent may be strained or non-existent. Abuse and neglect by caregivers will sometimes be the reason why babies are not living with their birth parents in the first place.

The foundation notes that this relational trauma can be more damaging than other forms of early trauma. The independent review of children’s social care—the MacAlister review—published a couple of weeks ago makes the same point. As we have heard, safe, stable and nurturing relationships serve as a buffer to adversity, build resilience and support children to develop skills to cope with future adversity in an adaptive and healthy manner. It is vital that the children who are most likely to have suffered early trauma are able to access the therapeutic support that they need.

I want to mention a couple of points. The first is NHS child and adolescent mental health services support for infants. I was struck by a Health Committee report, which found “highly concerning” the findings of a Parent-Infant Foundation survey of CAMHS professionals. Some 26% of respondents had not been trained to work with children aged zero to two, and only 36%—just over a third—agreed that there were mental health services in their area that could effectively work with children aged zero to two. Given that the NHS long-term plan commits the Government to achieving 100% access to specialist support for all children and young people aged zero to 25 by 2029, I would be interested to hear from the Minister how she expects that goal to be achieved for the under-threes.

Outside of the NHS, there are some fantastic voluntary sector organisations that are doing amazing work, and I particularly want to call out to an amazing charity in my own constituency. It is based in Twickenham itself and is called the Purple Elephant Project. The word “Elephant” is there because family bonds within a community of elephants are very strong apparently—more so than among other animals. Elephants display emotion when they are grieving or when the herd is under threat.

The charity was founded by a fantastic, inspirational woman called Jenny Haylock, who is a therapist herself. On their small site—they have just been able to install a beautiful little sensory garden thanks to funding secured from Richmond council recently—they offer play therapy, art therapy and other categories of therapy, including

filial therapy, which is where parents and caregivers are part of the therapy with the children. The whole ethos is that parents and carers come in with the child. Even if the child is having separate therapy, there is a lovely space where parents can go to relax and recharge or have somebody to talk to. The charity is looking after the whole family, not just the child who has suffered whatever trauma. Jenny is also a specialist in adoption support.

I welcome the Government's extension of the adoption support fund until 2025. Several of my constituents have told me how vital it is. We and the Minister are all well aware of how difficult it is to access CAMHS and therapy—that is well documented and we regularly hear examples in the main Chamber. I know that the adoption support fund has been a lifeline for a number of parents in my constituency whose children have needed therapy and support and have used the ASF to buy it in when they cannot access it in a timely manner from the NHS. Although the fund has been extended to 2025, I urge the Government to put it on a permanent footing.

Most of the 150,000 children in kinship care in England and Wales are not eligible for that funding, however. The ASF supports children who were previously in care but who are now subject to a special guardianship order or a child arrangement order, but those eligibility criteria are clearly nonsensical, because the majority of SGOs and CAOs are entered into by grandparents. Again, there are examples in my constituency of grandparents looking after their grandchildren because something has happened to the parents, who are no longer able to care for the children. That stops those children going into the care system, which saves the taxpayer a lot of money. We all know that the outcomes for children who enter kinship care—as opposed to care by people with whom they have no connection—tend to be better.

Kinship carers are unsung heroes. They save the taxpayer money, but they do not have the same rights as foster carers to weekly allowances or the entitlement to the ASF that adoptive parents have. There are almost twice as many children in kinship care as there are looked-after children—many would be in the care system were it not for their kinship carers—but many of them will have suffered the same or worse experiences of early trauma.

I urge the Minister to support Kinship's campaign to widen the eligibility criteria for the adoption support fund. That is probably a matter for the Department for Education, so the Minister might not be able to give me a commitment today—the Chancellor might have something to say about it if she did—but I hope that she will take my request and see whether her colleagues at the DFE will consider widening the eligibility criteria for the ASF so that all children in kinship care can access the therapeutic support that they need.

The right hon. Lady said that every party believes that every child, regardless of their background, deserves the best start in life, and I echo those comments on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Too often, money spent on children's services, the education system and therapeutic support for children and young people is viewed as a cost. To my mind, we should look at those as huge capital investments. We are not investing in buildings or roads, but we are investing in tiny little people who could be our future entrepreneurs, teachers,

doctors and politicians. The return on investment from investing in children is huge, and I do not think that the Treasury fully appreciates that.

If there is another campaign that we can all gather around and make the case for, it is investment in children and young people. Although we would not see the return on investment in one, two or perhaps even three election cycles—it is a long-term thing—I hope that we can all come together to make the case for that investment, which will pay huge dividends. We all want our children to grow up happy and healthy, and to thrive and reach the very best of their potential.

3.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) deserves every credit. She and I came to this House in 2010, and she has spoken about this issue in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber on many occasions since. She will correct me if I am wrong, but I do not think that there has been a time when I have not supported her in such debates.

I do that for a number of reasons: first, because of our friendship as MPs, but secondly, because I fully support and endorse the right hon. Lady on this issue. I am always challenged by her contributions because they are so full of detail and knowledge about the right way to do things. The input of mothers is so much greater than the input of the dad. As a father and not as a mum, I cannot take any credit for how my children turned out; it is really down to my wife. She is the lady who did all the hard work—I was very rarely there—so I recognise the role of the mother in particular is critical, and it moulds the child for the future. For that reason, I am really pleased to come along to this debate.

Munira Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in saying that it is a wonderful thing to see cultural change and dads taking a much more active role? My husband is the primary carer of our two children and is very much the dad at home, and he has been since they were tiny, while I have always been out there working.

Jim Shannon: I was reminded when the hon. Lady mentioned that that I was at a function last Friday for the centenary of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. One of the councillors of my party is a house dad and he looks after two children. I will not mention his name, but he said to me last week, "Jim, I'd rather be working." I said, "You are working, you're just looking after the children. It's slightly different." But yes, the hon. Lady is right; society is changing, and sometimes that is the way it is. I have to say that I do think the role of the mother is much more important. That is just me; maybe I am old fashioned. I just see a slightly different and more critical role for the lady.

A growing body of evidence from the fields of clinical and social science shows that the areas of the brain that control social and emotional development are most active during the first three years of a child's life. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) referred to that, and referred to three to five years as well. That is important. Careful nurturing of a child's social and emotional health during their early years is vital to provide them with the skills necessary to form relationships

[*Jim Shannon*]

and interact with society later in life. It is so critical to get that right in those first few years. The hon. Lady has always said that in debates in the Chamber and elsewhere. I am my party's health spokesperson, so I am pleased to be here, given my personal interest in the issue and as a grandfather with five grandchildren. The sixth is on the way, so we will shortly have a sixth one to nurture and look after. It means that the Shannon name will live on, and more so when the sixth grandchild arrives.

Developments start during pregnancy, and the choices and experiences of the mother during that period can have a significant impact on maternal and infant social and emotional health. With that in mind, Northern Ireland has a dedicated mental health strategy. I know that the Minister is aware of all those things, not just because some of her ancestry comes from that part of the world, but also because she makes it her job to be aware of what is happening in the regional Administrations. Although we have a mental health strategy in place, the pressures of lockdown and covid have greatly impacted child mental health, and any strategy must take that into consideration.

I want to focus on that issue, which the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire referred to in relation to covid. Covid has put extra pressure on what the right hon. Lady is trying to achieve, and what we are trying to achieve in this debate. We have more children than ever who, as we say in Northern Ireland, make strange with strangers. I will try to explain what that really means. The right hon. Lady referred to isolation during covid, and it is as critical and stark as that. Covid babies were literally prevented from seeing other children; that is a fact of life. "Being strange with strangers" means nothing more than not knowing how to act with wee children of their age or how to react to adults who want to be friendly and acknowledge them. Children being strange with strangers, having not seen other children and adults during formative periods of their lives, is a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

Ever mindful that health, education and so on are devolved matters—although the issue for Northern Ireland will be similar to here—I have a major ask of the Minister, which I will be happy if she can respond to. What extra assistance, help, funding or advice can be given to parents whose children were born or were between two and five during covid—those two stark years when life was so different and we could not interact? What can be done to address that issue as we come out of covid and move forward in a constructive way?

Naomi from my office—who is my speechwriter, by the way; I keep her busy and make sure that she is across all these things—and I are of a kindred mind and spirit, so it is easy for us to discuss the issues that I want to speak about, because we look at how to do things the same way. She helps with the creche and the children's church on Sunday morning, and she has told me, based on her personal experience, that it is only after a full year of being back that some mothers can slip back into the main service without their children getting upset. Let me explain what that means, Madam Chair. In the last two years, the covid pandemic put pressures on families like never before, which meant that the children probably did not leave their mum very often. Now that the creche and the children's church is back, the children are able to stay there and their mums are able to leave.

That wee period is an example. In Naomi's opinion, it has taken a year for those children to feel safe, even in a safe place—wow!—if their mother is not there. My fear is for those mothers who have been unable to leave their children—those who do not attend church, do not have a creche or nursery, or do not have access to other adults who could help. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said how important it was for mums to have another mum to talk to, and even that was partially lost in the pandemic. I also wonder about pre-school and nursery children.

We must consider the effect of lockdown in a very detailed way. It is a genuinely big question to ask the Minister, but I see it in my constituency, and I am sure that everyone in this debate will be on the same page. I recently read a report by the National Children's Bureau that highlighted the post-covid position. Although support for babies and infants, and their families has always been critical, the unprecedented covid-19 pandemic has refocused efforts on prevention and early intervention to address new or increasing risks, which is what this debate is really about.

Although it will be some time before the long-term impact of the pandemic is known, evidence already suggests a number of areas for concern, including the rising cost of living. The pandemic has moved on, but other things are impacting on young children, from babies right through to five-year-olds, including the cost of living and increasing fuel poverty. These are real things that every mother and every dad has to look at every day. I am no different from anybody else in this Chamber; I think that we are all the same. We are hearing regularly from our people and our constituents about these issues, and we worry about that. Again, that is not all the Minister's responsibility; it is just to show the impact that these things are having.

Many people and families are increasingly reliant on food banks, which comes on top of already unacceptable child poverty rates, and against the evidence about the links between poverty and adverse childhood experiences. I never fail to get quite upset when I read those stories in the press about wee children who have been abused or, in the cases that make the press unfortunately, killed. I just cannot understand how those things can happen. I cannot understand the mindset of anybody who does that, and I cannot understand how social services did not step in earlier. This is just me, speaking from the outside. I find those stories quite painful to read, Madam Chair; I think we are all the same in that regard. Sometimes, you just have to flick over the page—not that you are disregarding it, but because it is so awful that you just cannot read it all. Those are some of the things of the day, along with concerns about parental mental ill-health, which is being driven by isolation, job uncertainty or the loss of a job, the loss of loved ones, illness and anxiety, among other factors.

I will just make a couple of quick points—I am coming to the end of my remarks; time is flying on here. I am greatly encouraged by foster families. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire is absolutely right about that. I know foster families who do some fantastic work, and they have a love for their children. Although they are not their biological children, they are their children. Those children get the love they did not have in their own homes, for whatever the reasons were. I know some foster families who have adopted maybe

20 or 30 children—that is incredible. They give affection and love, which is so necessary for a wee baby or small child between three and five, which are such important years.

Increased pressures in the home and the rising incidence of domestic violence—which is unfortunately another issue that happens with a regularity—are putting young children at risk of witnessing or experiencing abuse, and it impacts parental wellbeing. They see their mummy or daddy—let’s be honest, more often their mum—getting beaten, and that affects the child. The right hon. Lady is right: the experience of that three to five-year-old seeing that will have an impact for years to come. That is why this debate is critical and why over the years, when she has brought us to Westminster Hall and the Chamber, I was always there. I understand—not as good as the right hon. Lady does—what she is trying to achieve.

Services are facing pressure as they seek to continue the delivery of essential support to infants, parents and their families within the constantly changing environment that they find themselves in. The environment is changing all the time, and the pressures are great. There have been delays in access to services and support during lockdown and the pandemic, particularly for isolated and vulnerable families with newborns. Sometimes mothers have difficulty dealing with their children—it happens. It is a fact of life, but having someone to speak to and to help at that early time is so important.

The hon. Member for Twickenham is absolutely right about the need to invest in our children and young people. I see it as an investment and an opportunity to get it right, so that the children of the future can grow up to be Ministers, Chairs of Committees, doctors, teachers or MPs. We should give them the opportunity to do that. Let us get things right at the early stages. Every child deserves a good start in life, as the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said. I agree wholeheartedly with that, and I hope the debate can in some way move us towards that.

The need is clear, and we need to be just as clear in our pathway to support and help and in how this will be funded and promoted in every area of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am pleased to be an MP here and part of a nation that is united across the four regions. I say that to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—she and I are good friends. It is important that we have a strategy and a way forward for all four regions to achieve what the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said: giving every child a good start in life. If we could do that, we would be doing well.

3.43 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) not just on securing the debate but on her ongoing passionate advocacy for our youngest citizens. It is a mission I am always happy to support her in.

One of the things that awoke my interest in this area was during the covid lockdown; both the right hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have spoken movingly about the impact that lockdown had on many families. I spoke to mums in my constituency

who were having their first child in lockdown, with all those pressures on them, such as not having contact with their partner or their family during labour, or with informal or formal networks afterwards. I reflected on how different their experience was from mine over a decade ago, when I had my babies. My first impression was of the impact of that on maternal mental health—I was pleased to secure a debate on that topic in March 2021—but the issue of infant mental health is so closely linked to that. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire for her really detailed opening speech. We have the data and the evidence, and it very much underpins the anecdotal evidence from our own personal experiences and those of our constituents.

A number of great points have been made about how much the baby’s mental health is based on the quality of the parent-infant relationship, and how the parent’s responses shape how babies experience emotions, regulate their own emotions and express themselves. We have referred a great deal to the research, but 15% of children—more than four in an average classroom—will have developed a problematic relationship with their main caregiver as a result of unpredictable or hostile care. As we have already debated, that troubled start increases the risk of children having poorer social and emotional wellbeing across their lives, and the ongoing and lasting impact that that can have.

My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), talked about some of the gaps in services to support infant mental health. We really must focus on that. There are currently 42 specialised parent-infant relationship teams in the UK, which focus on strengthening and rebuilding those early relationships. That means that most babies live in an area without access to such a team. They are multidisciplinary teams led by mental health professionals with expertise in working with babies and families.

A key area of focus is working with families that have experienced intergenerational trauma. With the right care, the trauma experienced by parents does not have to inform their infant’s development. However, it is so important that specialised services are there to detect such instances and are equipped with the skills and funding to intervene and support families where needed.

I will briefly touch on the experience of dads, which has been raised on a couple of occasions. I recently visited my local maternal mental health crisis unit, and I was surprised to find that there is no systematic care given to dads who experience mental health problems when their partners are pregnant. It might get picked up if their partner is coming for care, but it very much flies under the radar. In particular, we know that domestic violence can often commence during pregnancy. I see that as a direct result, perhaps, of men’s struggles with mental health as they become fathers. I therefore think it is a matter of real urgency that we pick up the matter of dads’ mental health, particularly from the beginning of pregnancy.

It is also important that mental health professionals can spot the signs of poor mental health in our youngest children, who cannot express their emotions in the same way that older children are able to. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the reviews of some of the horrific cases of child death that have been carried out recently—I am thinking of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. I do not want to talk too much about

[Sarah Olney]

them, for the same reasons as he did not. I just cannot—it is just too much. But I really hope that someone is looking at that and thinking about what could have been done to detect the signs of mental distress in those young people who could not express it for themselves. We must be training people for some of these crisis situations, so that they can pick up on the mental health of young people who have difficult, damaged or problematic relationships with their caregivers and do not know how to express themselves, but are at risk of real harm if that mental distress is not picked up on.

Whenever I get the opportunity, I like to highlight the importance of health visiting. That is something that I picked up when I spoke to the first-time mums during lockdown. For full disclosure, my own mother is a health visitor, so I have been raised to regard health visiting as a wonderful thing, but that has been my experience as well. The importance of health visitors is that they visit—or should visit—every new mother, and her family, in her home. For those mothers who are finding it hard to reach out, it is an invaluable service to have somebody coming to them and asking if they are okay. We really must continue to support it. On infant mental health in particular, health visitors are uniquely placed to identify concerns, spot issues in early relationship and attachment forming, and identify where infant mental health may be an issue.

Families should receive a minimum of five mandated reviews by a health visitor between pregnancy and age two and a half, but even before the pandemic, many children were not receiving those core contacts. Over the course of the pandemic, the number of missed contacts has increased further, despite the fact that many reviews were conducted online or over the phone. One thing I am really concerned about is that we must not allow telephone or Zoom visits to become the new normal, because we will miss out so much from not visiting mothers in their home. Evidence of domestic violence and, in particular, the subject we are discussing today—those attachment disorders—will not be so evident if health visitor visits move to some sort of digital contact.

In 2015, responsibility for health visiting was transferred to local authorities. Since then, it is estimated that 30% of the health visiting workforce has been lost, with further losses expected. As with many local services, there is something of a postcode lottery in the availability and quality of support. My team and I have spoken to health visitors in north Kingston—the team that supported me when my children were babies—and they reiterated that currently, their biggest challenge is workforce issues. Almost 25% of their current health visiting team is due to retire in the next few years, and they are struggling to find candidates for the vacant roles. They recently advertised a vacancy that received just one application, and that person then decided that they would not take the post.

Health visitors work in relatively small teams with large case loads; in north Kingston, there are about 600 cases for every health visitor. That is unsustainable, not least because it forces health visitors to focus their resources on the most at-risk families. As we know, these problems can occur in all kinds of families from all backgrounds and income groups, so it is really important that we push for health visiting to remain a universal service with home visits.

I will end by stressing the importance of face-to-face contact, and that the health visiting service needs support and investment in its workforce. More than anything, we want to join up the agencies, so that the Department of Health and Social Care is working closely with the local authorities to make sure that the right information is being passed between agencies. If health visitors pick up anything concerning, they must be able to speak immediately to the other agencies surrounding the family, so that we do not have to read too many more distressing case reports like those I mentioned. The £300 million Start for Life programme that has recently been announced is wonderful—it will be great—but there is no funding in it for health visiting services. The funding sits within the DHSC, which is separate from health visiting; again, joining that up would make a huge difference.

With fragmentation, there is a risk that things will fall through the gaps. The one thing that we have all said clearly today is that the consequences of allowing that to happen are too big, both for our individual children—all those future MPs who we are looking forward to welcoming to this place—and for our society as a whole. We want to do everything we can to give little babies and children in every corner of the United Kingdom—in every part of the country—the best possible start. That includes supporting their mental health from the earliest days.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Dr Lisa Cameron.

3.53 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Thank you, Mrs Murray; it is a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of such an esteemed lady and parliamentarian, who is friendly to all.

I thank the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), and congratulate her on securing such a vital debate. Having worked all my life as a psychologist prior to coming to the House, I think it is fantastic that there are champions for this issue in this place, because setting the right foundation right across the United Kingdom and giving people opportunities to thrive from their earliest days is a fundamental premise for creating a healthy society. The right hon. Lady should never underestimate the value of the work she is doing in this House, not just today but for generations to come. I wish her all the best with her early years review, and will gratefully give any support that I can offer.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who spoke about the social care system for children and the particular plight of children in care, which goes back to the disorganised attachment styles that were mentioned. In fact, this debate has taken me right to my psychology days—I trained a long time ago—and Bowlby's theory of attachment, which is the foundation for much of what we are speaking about today. It is so important that if a parent is not there, there is a trusted and secure caregiver. It does not have to be the mother. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it is often the mother, but it can be the father or another trusted adult. The important thing is that there is a secure attachment.

The hon. Member for Twickenham was spot on when she spoke about why having disruption in early childhood—particularly for children who go into care

settings—can have an adverse impact. We must make sure that trusted, secure and stable relationships are built and provided throughout every child's life. That is vital, and we must support it.

The hon. Member also spoke eloquently about CAMHS support for infants and why it is so crucial. Helen Clark, a former MP who leads on the child mental health charter, is doing vital work on that through the charter with Play Therapy UK. There are many therapies that should be open and available to families with infants, including family therapy, behaviour therapy, which I used to do when I was practising many moons ago with very young children, and play therapy.

I will never forget the feeling of looking out of the window during covid when the council was opening up the playpark across the road from my house and seeing the children, including my own, running to it. There is something very therapeutic and nurturing about peer support and being able to play in a positive environment. I experienced that exact sentiment when I visited refugee centres in Lebanon. One of the most fundamental changes for those young children was the building of a playpark in the refugee centre. They were able to smile and laugh and play. Therapeutic involvement is vital, as is having natural environments that enhance wellbeing. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham for her contribution.

The hon. Member for Strangford is an absolute stalwart of this issue and so many others in the House. He spoke about the impact of covid-19 on children's development. There will have to be a lot of research done into that, because we may not see the full impact for years to come. Longitudinal studies will be needed to address that. We must all come together to ensure that funding, support and programmes are put in place so that children have every opportunity to catch up with the socialisation and education they have missed during this critical period.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) made an important contribution about gaps in service and maternal mental health. She also gave a shout-out for dads' mental health, which is rarely mentioned but is so crucial. When I first came to the House, my husband took on many more of the activities I had usually done. The first week I came back from Parliament, I opened the fridge door and there were a whole host of Tupperware dishes in the fridge. I said, "What's this? Where did it come from?" The neighbours had very kindly handed him food for himself and our children, because they assumed that they would be reliant on me and not him. I do not think he needed the food, because he stepped up to the mark, but it still shows that we cannot value fathers enough. They are all-round heroes when it comes to early childhood development.

The hon. Member also mentioned health visiting and face-to-face contact, which is extremely important. As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I know that face-to-face contact is vital for people. Particularly when they are speaking about mental health and wellbeing, they find it very difficult to do that over Zoom. They often do not bring it up at all in that format or over the phone. It is important that they have a personal relationship that is built up over time. The same can be said for GPs: it is vital that people can get back to seeing their GPs face to face, and we will be carrying out an inquiry into those issues.

I want to quickly mention adverse childhood experiences. I worked in and out of young offenders institutions and prisons for adults for a number of years, which involved visiting people because of their mental health issues and doing mental health assessments. Very few of the people I assessed after they had ended up in the criminal justice system did not speak of some trauma in childhood. The more we can do at the earliest stage, the better, in order to give people a path that will lead them to a fulfilling life. Early difficulties do not always lead to criminal justice problems, but there is a significant correlation, if not causation. We know the risk factors, and we must do all that we can. The British Psychological Society has highlighted that preschool children of parents with poor mental health are three times more likely than the general population to have mental health difficulties, so there is an intergenerational aspect, and we have to help with wellbeing more generally and across the lifespan for families.

Having come from being a psychologist to working as an MP, I see that we are not picking up young people who have autistic spectrum disorder or learning difficulties early enough. Those assessments can be done before they start school. The people who come to see me at my constituency surgery often tell me, "I have been saying for years and years that I need an assessment," yet the waiting lists preclude that happening at the right time. Two years is a long time in the context of childhood development and the developmental milestones that children may not reach at the correct time because they do not have additional support to help them catch up, so we need to get early diagnosis through children and families hubs, or through community health services. As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I can say that this is an issue right across the UK, because I hear about it from people right across the UK. Parents are asking for help, and they need to have it.

Parenting programmes are vital. Our school system has become so dynamic that some of the things that we did when I was at school have been lost. Yesterday I spoke to a nutritionist, who told me that he is having to do a lot of work with parents on nutrition for infants. He said that some parents never undertook any kind of cooking at school—it was called home economics when I was there—and are blitzing McDonald's to feed young infants. These are things that are fundamental for parenting support, and we need to make sure that we put them in place. We need access to paediatric care, including psychology and types of therapy such as play therapy, and we need parity between mental health and physical health. Looking at the wellbeing recovery from the covid pandemic will be key, and parenting programmes for parents who feel that they need a bit of extra support will be vital.

It would be lax of me not to quickly mention some of the work that the Scottish Government are doing. We have the baby box, which has been delivered to more than 200,000 families since 2017. It ensures that we in Scotland welcome every child, and that children have a basic provision for the first few months of their lives. We are saying very positively, "You're welcome. We want to do our best for you throughout your life." The Scottish Government also recognise the significant impact of the covid-19 pandemic and are doing work to address the issues that I have raised. We have the Best Start five-year plan for neonatal care, and perinatal and

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

infant mental health programme boards have been set up. A number of increased payments and grants have been made too.

I concur with what I have heard in the debate, and I want to work wholeheartedly with everybody who is working in this vital area. It has been nice to be taken back such a long time—many decades—to my education as a psychology graduate and to Bowlby's important theory of attachment. We should ensure that the work of Infant Mental Health Week is taken forward every week of the year, and especially that we hold infant mental health as a key issue in our work in Parliament.

4.5 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mrs Murray. I thank the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for securing this extremely important debate for Infant Mental Health Awareness Week, and all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions this afternoon.

I know I say this sometimes in Westminster Hall debates, but there really are some debates that unite us all. Infant mental health is one such issue. I am delighted to say that I have learned a lot and am filled with the powerful advocacy that has come out of every single wonderful contribution today. It is good to know that there are such powerful advocates in this room. I thank the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire for all the work that she has done in this space.

We are all here today because we recognise that adverse childhood experiences are the key driver of mental illness in later life. We have many experts in the room today. The last two years have shone a light on the problem. The pandemic has hit the poorest and the most vulnerable children the hardest, highlighting the inequalities in our society that are very hard to escape—children with chaotic home lives; children in overcrowded, noisy housing; and children from black and ethnic minority communities who suffer disproportionately from worse outcomes and worse mental health provision than white communities.

In 2018 it was estimated that 50,000 children aged zero to five lived in homes where domestic violence, adult drug or alcohol dependency and adult mental illness were all present. Children and adults living in households in the lowest 20% income bracket are two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems than those in the highest.

There was already a crisis in child and adolescent mental health provision in this country, even before the pandemic, and the virus has undoubtedly made it worse. The latest report by the Children's Commissioner shows that demand for child and adolescent mental health services increased, with one in six children suffering from a probable mental health condition, up from one in nine in just 2017—that is one in six. Yet only a third of children were able to actually access treatment, and 42% of child and adolescent mental health services in England do not accept referrals for children aged two and under.

Why should someone's ability to access preventative services or treatment be determined by where they live? Poor mental health in childhood is carried into adulthood. As we have heard many times, what happens today will

impact on demand for mental health services tomorrow. As the old saying goes, prevention is better than cure. That is why we have a range of public health measures in place for children—check-ups for eyesight, hearing and growth; vaccinations to protect against measles, mumps, and rubella. Yet we ignore the wisdom of the ages when it comes to children's mental health.

Improving infant mental health is all about prevention. With early intervention in those critical 1,001 days, families and infants can be supported. As a doctor, I know that adverse childhood experiences are a key contributing factor to poor mental health in adulthood. In A&E, I see increasingly younger children coming in who have self-harmed or who are living with eating disorders. It is simply heartbreaking. For parents, it is absolutely agonizing.

It should be a badge of shame for the Government that three quarters of children were not seen within four weeks of being referred to children's mental health services. Imagine being a mum or dad whose child is self-harming or presenting with symptoms of depression, anxiety or phobias, and being without special support for more than a month.

There has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist treatment for a severe mental health crisis between April 2021 and October 2021 compared with the same period in 2019. According to the latest report from the Children's Commissioner, waiting times depend on where someone lives. When they eventually are seen, services may be hundreds of miles away.

I invite the Minister to please tell the House what new measures the Government are taking in relation to infants and their parents—I am looking for new measures. What new money is being allocated to child and adolescent mental health services, and where is it going? How many new mental health staff will be recruited? Are there plans for specialised parent-infant relationship teams for the infants most at risk? How will they tackle mental health inequalities along the lines of place, race, class and income? With respect, in every mental health debate we hear about the £2.3 billion allocated to mental health, but it seems to get spent five to 10 times over. I would like specific answers to my specific questions.

The Labour Government are committed to improving infant and child mental health. We will guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it, ensuring that patients start receiving appropriate treatment—not simply an initial assessment of needs—within a month of referral. We will recruit 8,500 new staff so that 1 million additional people can access treatment every year by the end of Labour's first term in office, and we will provide specialist mental health support in every school and put an open-access mental health hub for children and young people in every single community, ensuring that every child has somewhere safe and secure to talk about their mental health.

As it stands, our children are being failed on prevention, on access to treatment and on funding, and we are failing to support their families. The system is stretched to breaking point. The staff are exhausted, the children are suffering, and parents do not know where to turn. I plead with the Minister today to take action before it is too late for another generation of children.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan):

It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) and congratulate her on securing the debate. I soaked up her speech—when she used that phrase, I felt that that was what I was doing. It was insightful and educational, and all of us got the benefit of her 25 years of experience and understanding of what we need to do and how we should do it. As we know, in this place quite often we can appreciate the problems, but it is much harder to come up with the solutions. I know that her work has been vital in doing that and in helping the Government shape policy in this area.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and their support for this initiative. We are at the very beginning of this journey and we want to keep that collegiate approach. We have a real opportunity to shape this and, as in many of the areas that I am responsible for, it is not particularly party political. It is really about how we impact real people's lives, and in this case babies.

It is clear to us all that the development of babies is incredible and needs lots of vital support in the first years. They are born with more brain cells than there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy. If a baby is loved and receives care, their brain flourishes, laying the foundations for good future physical and mental health. That is why the first 1,001 days have been described as critical for development. There is a real understanding of that now, and that is undisputed. It is also why I am delighted to speak about this important topic and also work on developing the new services. I welcome being able to do so during Infant Mental Health Awareness Week.

Infant mental health refers to social, emotional and cognitive development. For good infant mental health, babies need parents or carers who will consistently meet their needs, as outlined by my right hon. Friend, because that leads to secure attachment relationships. Over 60 years of research tells us that that is related to positive long-term developmental outcomes, from improved emotional development and school readiness to reduced rates of offending, as mentioned by the shadow spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron).

Having a baby can be a time of great joy, but also a time of challenge and change. Many new parents get the support that they need from midwifery and health visiting teams, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), whose mother I thank for her service. I am sure she has helped a lot of parents and families in her time. Many new parents get support from family and friends as well. We talked about how a lot of that could not happen during covid when it was a very difficult time for many new parents. We know that having a baby can be a time of great challenge. With or without a pandemic, it is a time of great change. There are many reasons why a new parent may struggle, from social isolation, as has been mentioned, financial stress, a traumatic birth, relationship difficulties or their own experiences of early trauma. Without the right support this can impact parents and babies alike.

Perinatal mental health difficulties are common. Approximately one in five mothers and one in 10 fathers experience mental health difficulties during the 1,001 critical days. They are critical days, but also difficult days, which is why the numbers are so high, and parental mental health difficulties are associated with increased rates of mental health difficulties in children. As has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members, these difficulties can be passed on.

Parent-infant relationship difficulties are common. They can involve a parent struggling to bond with their baby, or may relate to a perinatal mental health difficulty. Although exact prevalence is difficult to establish, some estimates indicate that approximately 40% of babies have insecure attachment and 10% have a disorganised attachment style. Both are associated with an array of long-term developmental outcomes.

I recently visited Knowsley's building attachment and bonds service, which is one of the new services being trialled and introduced. It is on the same estate where I went to school—I literally passed my old school—so the area was very familiar, and I was familiar with the problems the service was trying to deal with. I saw at first hand that relationships are everything and that early intervention is crucial. I met a mum there, with her baby. She had had several children and had problems, and she was no longer with the children. With this baby, the service had put in a lot of effort to keep mum, dad and baby together, and to make sure that they built that family. It was making a massive difference, and her other children have since come back to join her. The service was changing everything about the outcome not just for the baby, but for the other children in the family as well. These issues are why ensuring that every baby gets the best start in life is of central importance to this Government.

As all hon. Members said, this is an investment in the youngest and most vulnerable members of our society, and it is part of our ambition to level up health outcomes and opportunities across the country. Our vision is for every parent and carer to have access to high-quality universal services in their local area. That is set out in "The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days", published by the early years healthy development review in March 2021. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire for her inspirational work enabling us to support the implementation of this vision.

The Government are investing £302 million to improve start for life services and to create a network of family hubs in 75 local authorities in England. The funding will help bring services for families together into one place, improving their access to support, advice and services. This funding package includes £100 million for perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship support, £50 million for breastfeeding support and £50 million for parenting support. This significant £100 million investment will improve access to mental health support for babies from conception up to the age of two, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). It will help us build the workforce in order to fill the gap we see at the moment.

The funding will tackle entrenched inequalities in communities, as mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), and we announced the 75 local authority areas that are eligible

[*Gillian Keegan*]

for a share of this funding in April. The funding will be targeted at local authorities with disproportionate poor health and educational outcomes, and I am pretty sure that Knowsley, where I am from, has been included in that group. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire once stood for election in Knowsley. Since that announcement, we have been working with the eligible local authorities and a range of expert stakeholders to further develop the programme. We will share a draft programme guide, detailing how local authorities can make the most of the funding, in the coming weeks.

The investment will complement the ambitions set out in the NHS long-term plan, as referred to by the hon. Member for Twickenham. It will deliver the fastest expansion in mental health services in NHS history, with 345,000 more children and young people having access to specialist, NHS-funded mental health care. That ambition is backed by the additional £2.3 billion a year for mental health, but we have not actually spent a penny of it yet, because it is by 2023-24. That is when this amount kicks in, and it will be for years thereafter.

Obviously, the workforce is vital. It is clear that we have to invest in developing the modern, diverse and highly skilled workforce that we will need to support babies and families by trialling and evaluating innovative workforce models in five local authorities. That is what we will be doing to ensure that we have the right mix and blend. Obviously, health visitors are also a key part of that; they were mentioned by the hon. Member for Richmond Park.

With regard to 2029, we obviously know that the training of more clinical psychologists, child and adolescent psychotherapists, psychiatrists and the perinatal workforce will require additional capacity across the current education and service providers, all of which are currently operating at full capacity or are limited. We have immediate action—at the moment—to model the workforce to support the development of new roles, new ways of working, and upskilling, particularly with regard to the perinatal, primary and community workforce, including health visitors. We are working with Health Education England, NHS England and NHS Improvement to ensure that we have this workforce plan to sit alongside the new 10-year mental health plan. When we publish that, we will be putting that together, so we absolutely recognise that this is critical. The training time, as the hon. Lady will be able to vouch for, is a long time, so we have to innovate; we have to do things differently. Otherwise, it will take too long and too many people will not benefit from what we all know is required.

We have heard from families that stigma is a real barrier to their seeking support. I really identify with that; I definitely saw it growing up in Knowsley. My friend used to run the Sure Start centre there, and it was clear that she found it very difficult to access the people that she knew she needed to access, because stigma got in the way. To reduce the stigma associated with perinatal mental health difficulties and parent-infant relationships, we must have a multifaceted approach. That includes ensuring that the family hub is a welcoming place for all families; sharing key messages about perinatal mental wellbeing and good parent-infant relationships; and

enabling the workforce, paid and voluntary, to feel comfortable and confident to have conversations with families about mental health, bonding and attachment. Those are difficult conversations to have.

Needless to say, there is little point in tackling stigma if not enough support is available. As has been mentioned, there is currently huge variation in the availability of early intervention and preventative support across the country. Some areas have robust and very good offers, including universal antenatal education classes, peer support services for breastfeeding and mental health, and drop-in sessions at the local family hub. In other places, support may be available only if difficulties become particularly severe. That feeds into the stigma, because only when something is going wrong do people get access to the services. That is why the universal nature of the services is vital.

There is also a discrepancy in the perinatal mental health support that is available for mothers and for fathers and co-parents. That was mentioned by the hon. Members for Twickenham and for Richmond Park. We know that more than one in three new fathers are concerned about their mental health in the perinatal period. We identified that gap in provision of support for fathers or co-parents experiencing perinatal mental health difficulties, particularly if the mother is not experiencing any difficulties—then they will not be picked up in the same way. That inequality of access has an impact on the baby's mental health and wellbeing. A positive relationship with both carers would lead to better long-term developmental outcomes. That is recognised; it is identified as a gap, so support will be provided.

Lastly, none of this will be achieved and achievable without a knowledgeable, skilled and confident workforce. This investment is an opportunity to improve workforce capability and capacity. We understand the workforce challenges and will encourage local areas to create capacity by incorporating greater skill mix in clinically led teams, relieving the pressure on existing teams. The funding available through the Start for Life programme will enhance capacity across a range of professions and volunteers, and improve capability through training. That will build the knowledge and confidence of the workforce needed to provide mental health support. The family hub model will enable families to receive support with perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship difficulties. That investment will build on existing provision while responding to local needs.

Before I draw my speech to a close, I want to acknowledge the important contribution of two other Government initiatives. First, there has been an additional £200 million investment in the supporting families programme. That will enable local authorities and their partners to provide help earlier, and promote better outcomes for an additional 300,000 families, including families with babies. Secondly, we have launched a consultation to develop a new 10-year plan for mental health. The consultation is open until 7 July. We are concerned to try and get more people responding to that, particularly from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Members could help to spread the message, to ensure that we get more representations from people with those characteristics. The mental health plan includes specific questions relating to babies and their parents or carers, in recognition of the distinct

needs in the first 1,001 critical days. We look forward to seeing the results of that consultation. As I have said, please spread the word.

I will end by reassuring my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire that early intervention and prevention sit at the top of this Government's mental health priorities. We are committed to ensuring that babies and their families get the support they need to make sure they get the very best start in life.

4.26 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom: What a fantastic debate. We need to keep doing this—it is wonderful. Every time we get together, we have the most positive and constructive discussion about what is, in my view, the most significant contribution we can make to building a happier, healthier and more successful society.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who recently held a Home-Start celebration. I remind her that one of the people there trying to get money from all of us told a wonderful story about how,

sadly, he had lost his mum when he was quite young. His mum was on her death bed, and he was thanking her for being such a wonderful mother, and she said to him, “I’m not a wonderful mother; I was just well parented and I passed it on.” I thought that summed it up. That is what we need to do—we need to make sure that every family gets well parented so that they can parent well.

As a postscript, I will admit to something weird. I chair the review, so all the stuff that the Minister is talking about is well known to me. However, it is so lovely to hear her saying it. It feels like it is actually happening—it is not just a figment of my imagination. I thank colleagues for a wonderful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Infant Mental Health Week 2022.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 June 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

National Security and Investment Annual Report 2022

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am today laying before Parliament the first annual report under the National Security and Investment Act 2021. I will place copies in the Libraries of both Houses and the report will also be published on gov.uk.

The National Security and Investment Act 2021 protects the UK from risks to national security arising from acquisitions of control of entities and assets. In doing so it also maintains the UK's status as an attractive place to invest. The system is predictable, enabling businesses involved in acquisitions to have certainty when engaging with it and it provides clear and efficient clearance processes for relevant acquisitions to be assessed, for remedies to be applied if necessary.

The new National Security and Investment (NSI) system commenced on 4 January 2022. The Act requires me to report on the system each year after 31 March.

I am pleased to lay the first NSI Act annual report before the House today. This fulfils my requirements under section 61 of the Act for this year.

The report shows that the system has started strongly. As of 31 March, the Investment Security Unit received 222 notifications and accepted 201 of them. To that date I had issued 17 call-in notices. Of those notifications that were cleared without any further action, all were cleared within the statutory 30 working-day limit. I had not imposed any final orders (the means by which I can impose conditions on, block, or unwind an acquisition) by 31 March in relation to the 17 call-in notices issued, though the full national security assessment process was still ongoing for many of them.

Because the data covers only the first three months of the Act's operation, we cannot draw long-term conclusions or observe patterns with accuracy. However, the system is operating well and, extrapolating out, volumes at each stage are within the estimates provided by the impact assessment.

We brought forward the reforms in the NSI Act to protect national security while keeping the UK open to investment. The early data is encouraging and shows that these objectives can be complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Those who wish us harm should be in no doubt that we will always act to protect the UK's national security interests. Equally, the Government's ambition is for the UK to be the best place in the world to invest and to start and grow a business, so I hope that business leaders and investors will take confidence from this report.

[HCWS106]

TREASURY

United Kingdom Debt Management Office: Business Plan

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The United Kingdom Debt Management Office (DMO) has today published its business plan for the financial year 2022-23. Copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and are available on the DMO's website, www.dmo.gov.uk.

[HCWS108]

DEFENCE

UK Air Defence Support to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): After the attacks on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) oil production facilities on 14 September 2019, the UK has worked with Saudi Arabia and international partners to help defend critical infrastructure and support the territorial integrity of the kingdom. The UK deployed two Giraffe radars in February 2020 to help mitigate the continued aerial threats that the kingdom has faced. The deployment was purely defensive in nature. It was necessary to repatriate these radars in December 2021, but the threat to Saudi Arabia has not abated and the requirement to support KSA remains.

The Ministry of Defence has conducted a phased follow-on deployment of air defence equipment to Saudi Arabia. The deployment comprises a small number of high-velocity missile (self-propelled) systems and associated personnel. As with the Giraffe radars, this is a purely defensive capability, and is being deployed solely to support KSA efforts to defend itself from persistent aerial threats to its territorial integrity.

[HCWS110]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-EEA EFTA Separation Agreement: Joint Committee Meeting

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): The UK-EEA EFTA separation agreement, which was agreed with Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein, and signed on 28 January 2020, covers citizens' rights and separation provisions. The separation agreement established a Joint Committee whose primary role is to supervise and facilitate the implementation and application of the separation agreement, with the power to make decisions. The Joint Committee has a rotating chair which is currently held by Liechtenstein.

The third meeting of the Joint Committee took place on 8 June 2022 in London, and focused on citizens' rights. Each of the parties to the agreement gave an update on the implementation and application of the citizens' rights provisions, and reiterated their commitment to ensuring continued correct implementation and application. The Independent Monitoring Authority and the EFTA Surveillance Authority also attended to

give updates on their monitoring and complaints handling functions as required by the separation agreement, and to discuss their annual reports for 2021.

The Joint Committee adopted a decision to amend part I of annex I of the separation agreement to reflect decisions taken by the EU's Administrative Commission for the Coordination of Social Security Systems. These decisions relate to the interpretation of the relevant social security co-ordination provisions, including on data processing and data exchange. They do not impact the rights provided for in the separation agreement. Copies of this decision have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Joint Committee will meet at least annually, with Norway holding the next rotating chair. The next meeting is expected to take place in 2023. I commit to continuing to update Parliament following future meetings of the Joint Committee where decisions are taken.

[HCWS107]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 December 2021 to 28 February 2022

The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 28 February 2022)	2
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 28 February 2022)	2
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices expired (during reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during this the reporting period)	1

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The first quarter TRG meetings were held on 12 and 13 April 2022. On 8 December 2021 one individual was charged with five breaches of the electronic communication device measure of the TPIM notice.

[HCWS105]

JUSTICE

Rape Cases: Progress Update and Measures to Improve Outcomes

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): Today the Government are announcing additional funding for victims of sexual violence and domestic

abuse, publishing a progress report on the implementation of the rape review action plan and the next iteration of the criminal justice system (CJS) delivery data dashboard. These form an important part of our commitment to transform the criminal justice system response to rape, boost transparency and ensure victims get the support they deserve.

The Government are announcing:

An additional £6.6 million p.a. boost on a multi-year basis throughout this spending review period, for services supporting victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse. £6 million is being provided directly to police and crime commissioners to increase community-based support in local areas and £0.6 million for training to support the recruitment of the 300 additional independent sexual violence advisors and independent domestic violence advisors over the next three years.

The publication of a progress report one year on from the publication of the end-to-end rape review action plan. This delivers on commitments in the rape review to be transparent and accountable to the public on how we are progressing work to improve the cross-system response to rape.

The third iteration of the criminal justice system delivery data dashboard, previously named the CJS scorecard. This publication includes additional Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) metrics and population adjustments.

Together, these products will contribute to this Government's commitment to restore faith in the criminal justice system, pursue justice for victims, and build back safer.

[HCWS109]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Private Rented Sector White Paper

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): The Government have today published their White Paper "A fairer private rented sector".

The private rented sector currently offers the most expensive, least secure, and lowest-quality housing to a growing number of vulnerable people, including 1.3 million households with children and 382,000 households over 65. This is driving unacceptable outcomes and is holding back some of the most deprived parts of the country.

Many renters face a lack of security as they can be evicted without a reason at just two months' notice (so called "no fault" section 21 evictions, under the Housing Act 1988). This means many tenants do not challenge their landlords or agents on standards. Renters also feel that they cannot put down roots in their local areas, which does nothing for community cohesion.

The system does not work for good landlords either, the majority of whom do right by their tenants and offer them a positive, secure living situation. They lack the ability to effectively tackle antisocial behaviour or deliberate and persistent non-payment of rent. Most landlords are trying to do the right thing but simply cannot access the information they need. Further, inadequate enforcement is allowing criminal landlords to thrive, which harms tenants and reputable landlords.

The A Fairer Private Rented Sector White Paper builds on the vision in the Levelling Up White Paper and sets out our plans to fundamentally reform the private rented sector and level up housing quality in this country. It sets the strategic direction for the PRS for the first time in a generation and demonstrates our ambition and determination to give private renters a better deal.

The White Paper sets out a 12-point action plan of how we will deliver a fairer, more secure, higher quality private rented sector:

Safe and decent homes

The PRS has some of the worst housing of all tenures. We will improve this by:

Delivering on our levelling up housing mission and require privately rented homes to meet the decent homes standard for the first time. This will give renters safer and better value homes and the blight of poor-quality homes in local communities.

Accelerating quality improvements in the areas that need it most. We will run pilot schemes with a selection of local authorities to explore different ways of enforcing standards and work with landlords to speed up adoption of the decent homes standard.

Increased security and stability

For too long tenants have felt powerless and unable to challenge poor practice. We want to change this. We will rebalance the law to deliver a radically fairer deal for renters, while making sure that landlords can regain possession of their property when needed. We will achieve this by:

Delivering on our manifesto commitment to abolish section 21 “no fault” evictions and introducing a simpler, more secure tenancy structure. A tenancy will only end if the tenant ends it or if the landlord has a valid ground for possession, empowering tenants to challenge poor practice and reducing costs associated with unexpected moves.

Reforming grounds for possession to make sure that landlords have effective means to gain possession of their properties when necessary. We will expedite landlords’ ability to evict those who disrupt neighbourhoods through antisocial behaviour and introduce new grounds for persistent arrears and sale of the property.

Improved dispute resolution

Tenants and landlords need structures in place that allow them to resolve disputes efficiently and fairly. We will deliver on this by:

Only allowing increases to rent once per year, ending the use of rent review clauses, and furthering tenants’ ability to challenge excessive rent increases through the first-tier tribunal to support people to manage their costs and to remain in their homes.

Strengthening tenants’ ability to hold their landlord to account and introduce a new single ombudsman that all private landlords must join. This will provide fair, impartial, and binding resolution to many issues and be quicker, cheaper and less adversarial than the court system.

Working with the Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) to target the areas where there are unacceptable delays in court proceedings. We will also strengthen mediation and alternative dispute resolution to enable landlords and tenants to work together to reduce the risk of issues escalating.

Better compliance and robust enforcement

Landlords, tenants, and local authorities need access to the right information and, for local authorities, the right powers, to crack down on poor practice. We will deliver this by:

Introducing a new property portal to make sure that tenants, landlords and local authorities have the information they need. The portal will provide a single “front door” for landlords to understand their responsibilities, tenants will be able to access information about their landlord’s compliance and local councils will have access to better data to crack down on criminal landlords. We also intend to incorporate some of the functionality of the database of rogue landlords, mandating the entry of all eligible landlord offences and making them publicly visible (subject to consultation with the Information Commissioner’s Office).

Strengthening local councils’ enforcement powers and ability to crack down on criminal landlords by seeking to increase investigative powers and strengthening the fine regime for serious offences. We are also exploring a requirement for local councils to report on their housing enforcement activity and want to recognise those local councils that are doing a good job.

A positive renting experience

We want to improve the experience of everyone who rents in the private rented sector and will:

Legislate to make it illegal for landlords or agents to have blanket bans on renting to families with children or those in receipt of benefits and explore if action is needed for other vulnerable groups, such as prison leavers. We will also improve support to landlords who let to people on benefits, which will reduce barriers for those on the lowest incomes.

Give tenants the right to request a pet in their property, which the landlord must consider and cannot unreasonably refuse. We will also amend the Tenant Fees Act 2019 so landlords can request that their tenants buy pet insurance.

Work with industry experts to monitor the development of innovative market-led solutions to passport deposits. This will help tenants who struggle to raise a second deposit to move around the PRS more easily and support tenants to save for ownership.

We have already taken significant action to improve private renting, including significantly reducing the proportion of non-decent private rented homes, banning tenancy fees for tenancy agreements signed after 1 June 2019, and introducing pandemic emergency measures to ban bailiff evictions—these reforms will finish the job that we started in 201—and deliver a fairer private rented sector.

We have also today published the Government response to the 2019 consultation “A new deal for renting” that sets out how the new tenancy regime will work once section 21 evictions are abolished, the Government response to the “Considering the case for a Housing court: call for evidence”, and the Government response to the 2019 “Tenancy deposit reform: a call for evidence”. We will be depositing copies of these documents in the Library of the House.

We will deliver on these reforms in the forthcoming parliamentary Session, which will drive real change and make the private rented sector fit for the 21st century. These reforms will apply to England only.

[HCWS111]

TRANSPORT

Aviation Industry Disruption

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): Over the half-term jubilee weekend, we saw disruption at UK airports with some passengers facing long queues and cancellations largely due to staff

shortages at airports, airlines and ground handlers. These experiences, for too many consumers recently, have been unacceptable.

The Secretary of State and I have made it clear to the sector that they need to operate services that are offered for sale properly and according to schedule, or provide swift, appropriate compensation.

The aviation industry is privately owned, operated, and run. It is therefore responsible for making sure that it has enough staff to meet demand and to operate the flights offered for sale. It is important that the sector is a competitive, attractive market for workers. The Government have called upon the sector's leadership to offer better packages and build a resilient workforce to meet demand.

Since earlier this year, the Government have worked across a number of different areas to help the industry alleviate the issues they have been facing. We are clear that consumers should not lose out. The Government are taking steps to boost consumer rights, including recently consulting on using our Brexit freedoms to enhance consumer protections. We have committed to publishing an aviation passenger charter to ensure consumers can access information about their rights all in one place.

We have sought ways to ease the burden of background checks carried out by industry. A statutory instrument was laid on 29 April to provide greater flexibility, enabling Ministers to take the decision to allow certain training to be undertaken while background checks were completed.

Ministers have also agreed that HMRC employment history letters can be used as a suitable form of reference check—with safeguards in place. These temporary alleviations have helped to speed up recruitment times.

In partnership with the Civil Aviation Authority, the Government have written to the industry setting out five specific expectations we have for the aviation sector this summer:

Summer schedules must be reviewed to make sure they are deliverable.

Everyone from ground handlers to air traffic control must collaborate on resilience planning.

Passengers must be promptly informed of their consumer rights when things go wrong, and—if necessary—compensated in good time.

Disabled and less mobile passengers must be given assistance they require.

Safety and security must never be compromised.

I am chairing a strategic risk group with CEOs of the aviation sector, which will meet on a weekly basis going into the summer. This group will identify possible interventions to further improve the resilience of the sector, and will be used to hold the sector to account for delivering its schedules. Department for Transport Ministers and senior officials will continue to monitor the situation closely to make sure consumers do not lose out from any further disruption.

[HCWS112]

Petition

Thursday 16 June 2022

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House on 15 June 2022 but not read on the Floor

Council tax discounts for dementia

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there are over 600,000 people with dementia who receive care at home; further that people with dementia are only disregarded for council tax if they have a medical certificate and are in receipt of

certain benefits; further that this means that many people with dementia have to wait months or years to qualify for council tax discounts after they have been diagnosed; and further that, if council tax disregards were backdated to the date a person was certified as being severely mentally impaired, people with dementia could receive additional council tax discounts for longer periods and potentially save thousands of pounds.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to require that council tax disregards are backdated to the date a person was certified as being severely mentally impaired, where they then go on to qualify for a relevant benefit.

And the petitioners remain, etc./

[P002739]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 16 June 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Cabinet Office topical questions on 9 June 2022.

Felicity Buchan: 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?

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.

[Official Report, 9 June 2022, Vol. 715, c. 937.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General:

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan).

The correct response should have been:

Michael Ellis: Since the pandemic began, civil servants have been delivering the Government's priorities both from the workplace and occasionally from home. **My right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency has** written to all Secretaries of State outlining their abilities to ensure that Departments return to pre-pandemic occupancy levels.

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**not later than
Thursday 23 June 2022**

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