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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 June 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Agri-research

1. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support agri-research. [900671]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has one of the five largest science and innovation budgets in Government. It is investing £270 million in innovation through the farming innovation programme to 2029, working with our leading-edge agricultural research institutions across the UK's four nations to harness the power of innovation.

Chris Green: The advocate-general of the European Union recommended gene editing, but the European Court of Justice opposed it and put it in the same category as genetically modified organisms. Professor Nigel Halford said that

“the decision could set back agbiotech in Europe by another 20 years. We are already a generation behind. Young scientists interested in agbiotech are likely to move to places where common sense and scientific evidence prevail”.

In the name of better productivity, healthier food and scientific progress, when does my hon. Friend expect to see gene-edited crops on the UK market?

Jo Churchill: The EU has just opened a consultation on the issue, because my hon. Friend is totally right that precision-bred crops are very different. We have already taken steps, starting with the introduction of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, which will go into Committee very shortly. Through its agricultural research institutes, the UK is at the leading edge. There will be overwhelming benefits for climate change, food resilience, pest resistance and so on. I look forward to the Bill receiving support across the House, going through Committee and going on to the other place.

Wet Wipes: Plastic

2. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to ban the sale of wet wipes containing plastic. [900672]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Like the hon. Member, I am determined to tackle the issue. We have already run a call for evidence to explore policy options for tackling wet wipes, including a possible ban on those that contain plastic. We have also sought views on mandatory flushability standards, mandatory labelling and an extended producer responsibility scheme.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome the Minister's response. Billions of wet wipes containing plastic are still being used across the country, causing environmental damage and blocking our sewers. The consultation finished in February and there is still no ban in sight. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the next steps towards achieving a ban?

Rebecca Pow: There was a huge response to the call for evidence, and we are working our way through the details. We have to make sure that if a ban is brought in, it does not have knock-on effects that will cause similar problems. Even though other wet wipes might be deemed suitable to flush, they still get stuck in sewers, so we have to be mindful of that. I say to everybody, “If you don't need to use a wet wipe, don't—and don't chuck them down the loo.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Could the Minister expand on that answer? When are the results of the call for evidence on the proposals to ban single-use plastics likely to be published?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend's question demonstrates the interest in the issue. I am just as interested myself, but we have to get the science right. We must not jump out of the frying pan into the fire, so we are exploring all options and the science behind them before we make an announcement, but I assure him that it will be made shortly.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My constituent Stephen, who is blind and partially deaf, has an assistance dog called Jodie. Stephen has told me that he is required to pay £160 for an animal health certificate and vaccines each time he takes Jodie to an EU country—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a different question. We will come back to the hon. Lady.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Anyone who has visited a sewage works such as Budds Farm in Havant or Bishop's Waltham, as I have, can see the impact of wet wipes on the sewerage system. What more can we do now to raise awareness of the issues among the public so that only the three Ps are flushed down the loo?

Rebecca Pow: I am a mother who did not use wet wipes. It is all about comms and education. If one has to flush, one should look for the flushability logo. My hon. Friend is so right, because 93% of sewerage blockages are caused by wet wipes, which then get fat stuck around them, causing fatbergs. The more we talk about not using them, the better.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister will know that when there are overflow discharges into rivers from water treatment works, wet wipes are

not filtered out. She will also know that the River Tame has a very high concentration of microplastics. It is of massive concern to me, as secretary of the Friends of the Tame Valley, that the trees along the riverbank are littered with wet wipes. What is the Minister doing, not only to get the message out about not flushing wet wipes down the toilet, but to clean up our riverbanks so that they do not look like a horrific scene from “The Nightmare Before Christmas”?

Rebecca Pow: I can only agree that it is revolting. We are getting sewage overflows more frequently than we need because of blockages with wet wipes. It is slightly extraordinary really, but that is why we are doing all the work and that is why we have done the call for evidence. We will come up with some suggestions for what we propose to do very shortly.

Farm Profitability

3. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps he is taking to help increase farm profitability. [900673]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We will spend over £600 million on farm-based innovation over the next three years. Our recent food strategy outlined how we intend to use grant support to help businesses invest to improve their profitability and increase their agricultural output. While we will not tell farmers what to invest in, we will support the investment decisions that they judge to be right for their own businesses.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: My farmers are seeing rising production costs, from increases in fertiliser costs, feed prices going up, the price of red diesel agriculture fuel doubling and increasing labour costs because of low availability of labour in the south-west. Those pressures will increase food prices further or see farms go to the wall. What more can be done?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is true that farmers are facing increased input costs, particularly for fertiliser, fuel, animal feed and energy. Some farm-gate prices are also at record highs, and that is helping to mitigate the impact of those increased costs. The Government have already announced a package of measures to support farmers with the availability of fertiliser. To help with cash flow, we have brought forward basic payment scheme payments to July, and we have also announced an additional 10,000 visas through the seasonal worker visa route to help with labour shortages.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State’s latest assessment of the impact on farm profits of plunging exports, new red tape and the labour shortage caused by the Conservative Government’s Brexit deal?

George Eustice: Farm incomes have seen a strong recovery since the 2016 referendum. Land prices are running at record highs and the price of milk has also increased. Farm profits have been on the rise in recent years. In the current year, it is true that the increased input costs caused by the spike in gas prices will put pressure on margins, but it is in the context of a successful post-Brexit boom for agriculture generally.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): While the other place’s International Agreements Committee report broadly welcomed the Australia-UK trade deal for sectors such as financial services, it was concerned about the deal’s impact on UK agriculture, highlighting that it will allow the importation of beef from deforested land, crops grown with pesticides not permitted in the UK or the EU, and often no protection from copies for products such as Scottish whisky and Cornish pasties. The Committee fears that that will continue with other trade deals that the Government pursue and criticises their refusal to involve the devolved Governments. How can farms and our food and drink sector remain profitable in the face of such free trade agreements? Does the Secretary of State accept that his failure to achieve protections from untrammelled competition for farmers and food producers will ultimately have an impact on their businesses and livelihoods?

George Eustice: In the context of the free trade agreement with Australia, we secured staging protections for the sensitive sectors of beef and lamb for a decade, and then a very strong special agricultural safeguard thereafter, set against volumes. We judged that that would be sufficient to manage any risks to the market. It is important to recognise that Australia cannot compete with the UK on the vast majority of agricultural products, including dairy. In lamb, New Zealand cannot compete with the UK and does not use the quota it already has. Beef is an issue that we are watching, but we believe that we have the right protections in place.

Peatlands

4. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help to protect and enhance peatlands. [900674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We have a genuine focus on protecting and enhancing our peatlands, because that helps to tackle net zero and add to wider ecosystem services. We have an England peat action plan and a nature for climate fund, £4.8 million of which is to restore 3,500 hectares of blanket bog in the Pennines. That forms part of a bigger initiative working with the great northern bog.

Mr Holden: I thank the Minister for that answer. The North Pennines area of outstanding natural beauty contains some of the largest areas of blanket peat bog in the UK. Peat can trap up to four times as much carbon dioxide as woodland. The peatland code provides a real opportunity for the voluntary carbon market to show it has quantifiable and additional benefits for the environment. What are the Government doing to highlight that and enable more environmental opportunities for areas of blanket bog peatlands, and ensure that environmental schemes are concentrated on where they can do the most good and not taking up—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister has the gist.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the value that restoring peat can bring to us. That is why we have nearly 100 restoration projects across the UK registered with the peatland code, which he referenced,

enabling the restoration of nearly 14,000 hectares of peatland. Through the natural environment investment readiness fund and the peatland grant scheme, we are also developing a lot of pipeline investing projects that will bring forward all the things he is highlighting.

Food Strategy

5. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implementation of the Government food strategy published in June 2022. [900675]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Before answering this question, I would like to take this opportunity to correct the record. In an urgent question to which I replied on 19 May, I stated:

“We are largely self-sufficient in wheat production, growing 88% of all the wheat that we need.”—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2022; Vol. 714, c. 839.]

In fact, we produce 88% of the cereals that we need and the figure for wheat is a little lower, at 81%.

In answer to the hon. Lady’s question, let me say that the food strategy has themes that are cross-cutting and have effects on policy in many other Departments. I can therefore confirm that the process of securing collective agreement meant that this issue was discussed exhaustively with Cabinet colleagues and other Departments.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that response. Henry Dimbleby’s national food strategy was an “excellent plan to help people escape the ‘junk food cycle’”.

That is what the former Conservative leader William Hague said when he was writing in *The Times* a few weeks ago. He went on to describe the Government’s U-turn on implanting any of the recommendations in that strategy as

“intellectually shallow, politically weak and morally reprehensible”. Was he right?

George Eustice: No, he was wrong, because we have implemented new point-of-sale restrictions, which take effect later this year, in October. That is already driving reformulation; so we have put in place policies that deliver on the issues highlighted in Henry Dimbleby’s report. As for advertising and bans on promotions, we do not believe that that is the right thing to do in the context of rising food prices.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for issuing reports on food strategy, but I am still not entirely convinced that we have a long-term sustainable policy on the production of indigenous fertiliser in this country. Will he put into the House of Commons Library additional information for us to share with our farmers on this very important issue? Given the rising costs of fertiliser and the concerns about potential closures of fertiliser plants, may we have these assurances?

George Eustice: Although CF Fertilisers has confirmed its intention to close the Ince plant, it is maintaining production at the Billingham plant, which is the largest of the plants, and I understand that it has full order books until later this year.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On CF Fertilisers, may I thank the Secretary of State for the time he took yesterday to discuss the future of the site? I am pleased to see that there is interest in purchasing the plant. Does he agree that despite the ongoing challenges that the industry faces, with a parent company that increased its dividends by 33% in the first quarter, there is no reason why the plant cannot be sold as a going concern?

George Eustice: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman; although CF Fertilisers has chosen to consolidate its UK operations into Billingham, the Ince plant remains viable and the best commercial exit from that plant for CF Fertilisers would be to progress an offer based on selling it as a going concern. There are many skilled people in his constituency who have been working at that plant, and the best outcome for all concerned would be for it to be sold as a going concern.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Secretary of State has just mentioned that we lack total self-sufficiency in wheat production. Presumably, given the skyrocketing prices in the wheat market because of what is happening in Ukraine, the Government food strategy is more about producing more of our own wheat. I do not ask him to comment on a particular planning application, but what does he think of an application to build a solar farm covering 7,000 acres of good agricultural land in my constituency? I am not asking him to comment on that proposal around Gainsborough, but will he consult his colleagues to ensure that we maximise food production on our farmland?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Some years ago, we changed the planning guidance from the chief planning officer in the then Department for Communities and Local Government to make it clear that there should be a powerful presumption against the construction of field-scale solar on the best and more versatile agricultural land—that is defined as grade 3b land and above. I am aware that there are concerns that in some parts of the country that advice is no longer holding and applications are being approved, and we are discussing that across Government.

Pets: Travelling Abroad

6. **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to make it easier for people to travel abroad with their pets. [900677]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): We are clear that we meet all the requirements to gain both part 1 listed status and recognition of the UK’s tapeworm-free status. We see no valid animal health reason for those not to be granted. We are carrying out further engagement to make progress on this issue.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for her answer and wonder whether she could elaborate. My constituent, Stephen, who is blind and partially deaf, has an assistance dog called Jodie. Steven has told me that he is required to pay £160 for an animal health certificate and vaccines each time he takes Jodie to an EU country. I wrote to DEFRA on Steven’s behalf

more than a year ago and received a response that basically said that the change has still not happened. Does the Minister recognise the impact of this slow progress on Stephen and other people who rely on assistance dogs? Could she elaborate further on what Stephen might do?

Jo Churchill: I do recognise the challenge. There is no change for animals coming from the EU to here and there is no reason why that arrangement should not be reciprocal. We are proactively engaging with the assistance dog community and relevant stakeholders and we are continuing the engagement with the EU to make sure that we can overcome this challenge.

Food Security

7. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle food insecurity. [900680]

8. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure food security. [900681]

9. **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure food security. [900682]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): As we have recently heard, we have a high degree of food security in the UK. We produce 74% of the food that we can grow here and we have robust supply chains for the rest. Our food strategy sets security as a goal. We are clearly concerned by the rising pressures on household incomes and are monitoring them very closely.

Jessica Morden: With studies showing that 9.9 million people across the UK cut back on food or missed meals altogether in April, why are the Government cutting money to FareShare, which, in my constituency, has supplied the equivalent of 63,200 meals to charities over the past year?

Victoria Prentis: We have worked very closely with FareShare, an organisation that I have the utmost respect for, during the last couple of years in particular. Tackling poverty in all forms is a real priority for the Government and the Chancellor has now committed £37 billion-worth of support as part of a package to help families with food costs.

Mr Speaker: Bob Blackman is not here, so I call Claire Coutinho who is here.

Claire Coutinho: An important part of food security is reducing food waste. I recently visited an amazing organisation in my patch, the Horley Food Club, which is doing tremendous work recycling food waste into the hands of the community, using great food that would otherwise have been thrown away. However, the big supermarkets say that some regulations are holding them back, such as use-by labelling. Will the Minister update the House on what we might be able to do about that?

Victoria Prentis: I thank my hon. Friend for her interest in this really important question. I am pleased to confirm that the Food Standards Agency has agreed to ensure that there are no more unnecessary barriers to food redistribution through food banks or other types

of community sharing organisations. I would be ever so happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The president of the National Farmers Union Scotland, Martin Kennedy, has said that the UK is on the verge of food security concerns not seen since world war two, due to a “perfect storm” driven by covid, Brexit and the Ukraine war, with the 300% increase in the cost of fertiliser impacting food production costs, on top of the rises in feed and fuel costs and the labour shortages affecting the sector. The SNP called for financial support for food producers months ago when the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. Will the Minister clarify whether the UK Government will heed that call?

Victoria Prentis: As the hon. Lady knows, agriculture is devolved. In England, we have been able to take steps to support our farmers through rising input costs, such as those for fertiliser. On fertiliser, we have been able to bring forward the support payment to July from December to give farmers the confidence to place orders for fertiliser, which is important. We have also made other changes to the guidance on farming rules for water and urea, for example, which really ought to help the movement from chemical fertilisers to biofertilisers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, inflation hit a new 40-year high at 9.1% amid the cost of living crisis. Things seem to be getting worse with each month that passes. Currently, 7.3 million people are living in food poverty, including 2.6 million children. What assessment have the Government made of the number of people who will be in food poverty by Christmas this year? If that assessment does exist, can it be published and put in the House of Commons Library?

Victoria Prentis: We continue to monitor very closely both the cost of food and the effect that this has on household budgets of those who are struggling. The Chancellor, as I have said, has recently added £15 billion to his total support package for struggling families—£37 billion in total. We know that food, while a very important part of household expenditure, is not the largest part in terms of cost for families. It is around 11% in the average family and 14% in more struggling families. We continue to work very closely with a wide range of organisations to make sure that we know what is happening on the ground and that we can intervene where necessary.

Jim McMahon: The Government’s own food security report relies on the existence of food banks to keep the UK fed. However, food banks cannot keep up today with the rocketing demand. Far from levelling up, what we see in reality is that our northern regions are the hardest hit with the highest levels of food insecurity. Is it not the truth that the Government’s record of low wages, low growth, record tax rises and out-of-control inflation is keeping people skint and hungry, and that the Government just do not have a plan to address it?

Victoria Prentis: I dispute that. We very much have a plan to continue to help people with the pressures on the cost of living. This is a very difficult and sensitive

issue. Often, the higher costs are in the housing or the fuel sphere, but it is important that we continue to work with the Trussell Trust and others, with which we have an excellent working relationship after the pandemic. We have all learned to deal in a much more granular way with food supply chains and how to get food to people who need it. It is important that we dial down the political tone on this and continue to help people who need it.

Village Halls

10. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support village halls. [900683]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Village halls are at the heart of so many rural communities, and I am absolutely delighted that we have launched the platinum jubilee village hall improvement fund. Just as a mark of how important I think village halls are, let me tell Members that, when our own village celebrated 50 years of its village hall, I wrote a song about it, which I am still being teased about.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister for not sharing that song with us.

As a former chair of my local village hall, I know how important village halls can be in connecting people of all ages. That was particularly evident during the pandemic. Village halls are generally run by small dedicated teams of volunteers who, unfortunately, are continually scraping around for the cash to keep them open. What more can we do to give easier and more sustainable funding to ensure that as many of these vital community hubs as possible can stay open?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend makes such a good point. I congratulate him on his former role, and all those who have been on village hall committees. That included my husband who regaled me with many tales of what was said at the village hall committee. Our platinum jubilee village hall fund will provide for many halls the support they need to modernise, upgrade, and put in new internet and so forth. We also have a grant to support Action with Communities in Rural England to provide support for village halls across the whole country with advice, including on other sources of funding.

Puppy Smuggling

11. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the illegal puppy smuggling trade. [900684]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): We are delivering on our manifesto pledge to crack down on the smuggling of dogs and puppies. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill includes powers to introduce further restrictions. We have recently consulted on these and we will be publishing our report very shortly.

Dr Hudson: The steps proposed in the kept animals Bill, in our Environment, Food and Rural Affairs report on the movement of animals across borders, and in the commercial and non-commercial movements of pets in

Britain consultation are desperately needed. I, as a vet, along with charities such as the Dogs Trust, have serious concerns about the biosecurity of the UK's dogs if smugglers continue to be able to abuse the system. Will my hon. Friend go further and commit to now introducing visual checks on dogs that enter the country and also institute pre-entry health checks and preventative measures such as tick treatments?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend has long taken a particular interest in this matter and he was a very involved member of the Bill Committee. As I said, we will shortly publish the results of the consultation that deals with the matter. I very much look forward, as I am sure he does, to seeing the Bill back on the Floor of the House as soon as possible.

Discharge of Untreated Sewage

12. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that untreated sewage is not discharged into rivers, inland waterways and the sea. [900685]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): This Government are the first to set out our expectation that water companies must take significant steps to reduce storm sewage overflows. Through the Environment Act 2021 we have set a legal duty on water companies to reduce discharges and enhance monitoring, and we have just consulted on the largest programme in history to tackle storm overflows. Sadly, the hon. Gentleman's party voted against these measures in the Environment Bill.

Mohammad Yasin: The Environmental Audit Committee recently recommended that Ministers tackle water pollution by setting a stretching timetable for progressive reduction in sewage overflows. However, under the storm overflow discharge reduction plan, half the storm overflows would still be spilling untreated sewage in 2040. This is totally unacceptable to my constituents, who have every right to expect clean and healthy waterways. Will the Government show some ambition and commit to a target of 100% of sewage outflows in priority areas not causing ecological harm by 2030?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman has referred to the storm overflow discharge reduction plan, which we will publish in September. A huge amount of scientific research is informing this, and we have set a revolutionary system in place that will tackle these storm sewage overflows. We also have to be mindful of the cost of this on water bills, but we are certainly tackling the worst areas first—bathing waters and protected sites. We have a very sound system in place to deal with this once and for all, and the water companies have to clean up their act.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Alex Sobel.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Windermere is England's biggest lake, and the beautiful weather this week has attracted huge numbers of swimmers to its shores, but people are being advised by conservationists not to swim or let their dogs in the water due to the amount of raw sewage being pumped into it by United Utilities. However, the official figures report that the Environment Agency claims that the amount of untreated sewage has reduced and there were no spills last year.

Will the Minister admit that the reporting system is broken and take urgent steps to ensure that there is reliable monitoring so that people can enjoy beautiful Lake Windermere?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, but that is why we have a very sound system in place through the Environment Act and through our directions to Ofwat, the regulator, to tackle this area. It is why event duration monitoring will be in all storm overflows by 2023. It is why we have such an important and comprehensive system of monitoring and reporting back on when these storm overflows are being used. It is why we are tackling the water quality above and below storm sewage overflows so that we can demonstrate what is happening and action can be taken—and action will be taken on the water companies; we make absolutely no bones about that at all.

Topical Questions

T1. [900689] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I take this opportunity to welcome the confirmation this week that the UN convention on biological diversity, COP15, will now be going ahead at the end of this year in Canada under China's presidency. This week, in preparation for that, the UK will lead ambitious calls to protect nature at Nairobi in the run-up to building ambitious biodiversity targets.

This week I met the US Deputy Secretary of Agriculture to discuss many issues around sustainable agriculture and trade. I am pleased to announce today that the UK will join the Sustainable Productivity Growth Coalition convened by the United States. I look forward to working with our international partners in this dialogue on innovation, science and sustainable agriculture.

Damien Moore: The wine trade, and particularly wines produced in the UK, plays an increasing important role in Southport's food and drink industry. Will my right hon. Friend meet some of these businesses to listen to how the proposed duty reforms will affect their trade?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will know that duty and tax is a matter for the Treasury, but I am more than happy to meet his constituents. The English wine industry has been a fabulous success story in recent decades.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Given the impact covid has had on mental health and wellbeing, for many, access to the outdoors was a vital escape, but the Secretary of State will know that access is not equal. Research by Wildlife and Countryside Link highlights that the poorest communities are twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood without access to nature. What are the Government doing to ensure that every neighbourhood in every corner of England finally has access to a green and pleasant land?

George Eustice: We have set out some detailed proposals on this, both in our response to the Glover review, but also under the Environment Act 2021. Local authorities

will be required to have local nature recovery strategies in future, and that will include commitments around public access in particular locations. We have also opened a new farming and protected landscape scheme, which is all about supporting public access to the countryside.

T2. [900690] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): Residents in Gedling have recently received letters regarding a nearby outbreak of avian flu, and I am grateful for the work of DEFRA officials in combating that, but might my right hon. Friend be able to offer any update on when restrictions are likely to be lifted? I am particularly thinking of my constituents who race pigeons. There is a short pigeon racing season from April to September, and they are currently prevented from doing so. They would like to get on with their hobby.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has highlighted, we have witnessed the worst avian flu outbreaks on record in recent months, having sustained 122 cases this year. We will lift restrictions in disease control zones, including those on racing pigeons, as soon as we are able to do so, because of the biosecurity need. This week, we have announced that scientists across the UK will join forces in a major new research consortium to fight against avian flu. I note that my hon. Friend has written to me, so he will get a fuller answer.

T3. [900691] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Almost 343,000 meals were redistributed in Glasgow South West thanks to FareShare and other charitable organisations, yet FareShare says that its Government funding has been cut. Does the Secretary of State intend to meet FareShare and concerned Members of the House to discuss its funding, so that we can support its #FoodOnPlates campaign?

George Eustice: I met FareShare recently to discuss a particular proposal it had around trying to ensure that waste on farms was redistributed where possible. We did increase the funding for FareShare temporarily during the coronavirus pandemic, and we continue to support it, but obviously I will look into the specific case he raises.

T4. [900692] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): The UK's dependence on food imports makes it vulnerable to food insecurity and soaring prices. I know that the Minister will be joining me next week to welcome Infarm, which is bringing one of Europe's largest vertical farming facilities to Bedford. Can she reassure me that these innovative urban farming methods will supplement, not replace traditional farming methods to ensure that Britain and indeed the world is more food secure?

Jo Churchill: I am very much looking forward to visiting next Monday, and I reassure the hon. Member that while there is no silver bullet, it is important that we use everything we have available. The innovation that is coming in vertical farms, in greenhouses and so on gives us the opportunity to produce more food in the UK to feed ourselves.

T5. [900694] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I recently joined my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) on

a visit to the Colne Valley regional park, which covers a number of Members' constituencies. It is an important haven for agriculture, aquaculture and leisure. Will the Government support our campaign to improve the protections for this vital green space on the edge of London?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Our landscape review highlighted that areas of outstanding natural beauty are often just as important as national parks to their local communities, as my hon. Friend is demonstrating. We will be working with the National Association for AONBs to better reflect AONBs' significance through their name and their purposes, and we have allocated additional funding to support that this year. In terms of new AONBs, we are always happy to consider applications from interested parties.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): With prices spiking for fertiliser and vital fuels such as tractor diesel, farmers in Lincolnshire face extreme pressure on cash flow. Does my right hon. Friend agree that giving farmers the support and confidence they need to plan for the future is vital to our food security?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and that is why we have decided this year to give the industry the confidence needed by bringing forward half of the BPS payment to July from December. That will help ease those cash-flow pressures. In the context of Lincolnshire, which has a particularly strong horticultural background, we have increased the number of visas so that farmers can have access to the labour they need.

T6. [900695] **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** On Tuesday, at Foreign Office questions, the House paid tribute to the activists Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, who were killed while working on the book "How to Save the Amazon". Does the Secretary of State agree that our food chain is contaminated by products linked to deforestation, in particular livestock feed from imported soya that is grown in the region, and that we need to do much more to stamp that out and protect the work of activists seeking to expose this?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady raises a sad and tragic case, and our thoughts are with the affected families. On her specific question, she will know that we have introduced legislation to push for due diligence in supply chains; that will require producers in the UK to ensure there is due diligence right through their supply chain, in particular for forest-risk products.

Mr Speaker: We welcome the new Chair of the Select Committee, Sir Robert Goodwill.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Following last year's mass shellfish mortality off the Yorkshire coast, the problem has still not gone away: catches of lobster are 50% down despite vessels venturing further out to sea. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has attributed this to algal bloom, but other theories are circulating. Will the Minister publish all the toxicology data available for sediment, sea water and dead crustaceans to independent scrutiny?

Is it true that the recent extensive dredging of the River Tees is based on just one silt sample taken in February last year?

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): My right hon. Friend and the neighbouring MP are very concerned, as am I, about what happened last year, and I have been to see some of the crabs affected. As he said, we are not entirely sure of the cause of the mortality but algal bloom seems the most likely explanation. I have made it clear that we should publish every single piece of information available, and academics must work together on this.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday I was able to celebrate with the Environment Agency the investment of £45 million into flood resilience in York and the £38 million on the completion of the flood barrier. However, that came with a 17-year warning that unless investment is put upstream we could be here again by 2039. What steps is the Minister taking to address the upland resilience we need for the future?

Rebecca Pow: I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes that funding on the Foss barrier; it is a tremendous project and well done to everyone involved. She also mentioned upstream work: we are investing £200 million in projects to investigate innovative and creative ways to deal with upstreams so we can stop the water before it gets to where it is causing the problem.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Persecution of Christians Overseas

1. **Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** What steps the Church is taking to support the implementation of recommendations in the final report of the Bishop of Truro's review on persecution of Christians overseas.

[900659]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The murder of 50 Catholics in church this month in Ondo state in Nigeria and the ongoing murders for alleged blasphemy are a stark reminder of why the Church of England stands foursquare behind the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's review.

Jim Shannon: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's response but the independent review of progress on Truro is due now, as required by recommendation 22. Will he join me in pressing for that? Does he agree that, whatever it says, there will be more work to do on the Truro recommendations and that that must continue as the problem of persecution across the world is getting worse? This year's Open Doors world watch list indicates that 20 million more Christians than a year ago will be highly persecuted and that across the world a Christian is killed every two hours for their faith.

Andrew Selous: That is absolutely right, and the situation does indeed continue to get worse, not better, with over 4,000 Christians murdered for their faith last year. To end the work of the Truro review now would be unthinkable. Recommendation 6 calls for the establishment of the

special envoy role permanently and in perpetuity, as for example in the United States of America, and the Church of England supports the full and ongoing implementation of recommendation 6.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Political Campaigning: Transparency

2. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the (a) Elections Act 2022 and (b) provisions in the Online Safety Bill on the transparency of political campaigning communications. [900660]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The commission's view is that the digital imprints requirement in the Elections Act will increase transparency by helping voters understand who is paying to target them online. It could provide further transparency if the requirement were extended to cover all digital material from unregistered campaigners, regardless of whether they paid to promote it. The commission has said that other changes in the Act relating to non-party campaigners will bring limited additional transparency, while increasing the complexity of the law.

The Online Safety Bill would include new freedom of speech protections for some campaigning content, but does not include any provisions that would directly affect the transparency of political campaign activities.

Deidre Brock: Recently, openDemocracy highlighted research that suggests it is difficult to establish exactly what more than £3.6 million was spent on by the Conservative party before the 2019 general election because of unclear or even unavailable invoices. Without that clarity, it is obviously difficult to establish exactly what political campaigning communications resulted from contracts that included £700,000 and £1.6 million to political consultancy firms, or even from the 200 out of 300 local Conservative branches that apparently submitted returns with no invoices. Yet the commission said it was "not proportionate" to take enforcement action. Under what circumstances would the commission be prepared to take action?

Christian Matheson: The commission reviewed the spending return delivered by the Conservative party following the 2019 parliamentary general election, and is aware that not all the required invoices were provided. Having reviewed the compliance of the return as a whole, it was decided that it was not proportionate to take enforcement action in relation to those missing invoices.

The hon. Member mentioned local associations, and local association campaign spending and accompanying invoices or receipts at a UK parliamentary general election are submitted as part of the spending return from their central party. The commission is required to publish the returns as soon as reasonably possible, whether or not they are complete. When a return is incomplete, the commission will consider what action to take in line with the principles of proportionality, as set out in its enforcement policy.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Schools

3. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What recent assessment the Church has made of the contribution of its schools to education (a) in Penrith and The Border constituency and (b) across England. [900661]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England educates over 1 million children in its community schools across England, including nearly half of the primary schools in the Penrith and The Border constituency. These schools are generally very popular with parents of all faiths and none, and have a vision to be deeply Christian, to serve the common good and to foster a thirst for knowledge across a broad curriculum.

Dr Hudson: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Unfortunately, the educational attainment of children across the country, including in rural areas, can all too often be impacted by poverty and isolation, including food and energy poverty. Would my hon. Friend join me in thanking the Church of England, including its schools in Cumbria and across the country, for supporting those vulnerable families, particularly in the challenging times of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis? Will the Church commit to continue to provide that vital support?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's thanks, and I can reassure him that the Church of England will continue to support vulnerable families wherever possible—for example, by buying school uniforms, providing breakfast clubs for free and paying for school trips. In the village of Shankhill in his constituency, the Church school supports the whole community by acting as a village hall for gatherings, lunches and intergenerational activities.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What assessment has the Church of England made of the impact, particularly on rural Church of England schools, of the dramatic reduction in the number of priests in some dioceses? Does the hon. Member share my concern that money generated by parishes is being increasingly sucked into diocesan administration and projects, meaning that an impossibly small number of priests serve huge numbers of parishes? That threatens the very future of English parish life, including the role of rural Church schools.

Andrew Selous: I totally understand the point the right hon. Gentleman is making. He will know that the Church of England absolutely holds to its vision to have a Church of England presence in every community. Of course, he is right that if there are not so many incumbents, it can be difficult for them to go in and do assemblies in Church schools and so on, but the Church is really focused on the frontline and putting the parish first.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Church education is quite rightly a priority for our Church, particularly for its leadership, but can my hon. Friend assure me that

significant appointments to the Church, particularly to the House of Bishops, demonstrate that the Church of England is actively seeking to represent the breadth of opinion among its members, particularly those of a more conservative theological disposition?

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry, but that is not a relevant question. [*Interruption.*] I know that the hon. Gentleman is shaking his head at me, but I cannot allow open supplementary questions on a closed question.

Freedom of Religious Belief: International Ministerial Conference

4. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What role the Church will play in supporting the UK-hosted international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief in July 2022. [900664]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England is working closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to support the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief taking place in London the week after next, and very much wants the conference to make a difference. The Archbishop of Canterbury will address the conference.

Bob Blackman: Christian minorities across the world are clearly under threat of forced conversion or potentially death. What more can the Church do to ensure that minorities are protected across the world, starting with this conference?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is right. Christians are the most persecuted faith, and the Church of England will always stand up for all people who are being persecuted. He is also right that the Church needs to show global leadership by building relationships with the leaders of other faiths and with Governments so that there can be truthful conversations about what change needs to happen. The Anglican communion has great expertise in inter-faith relations, and we will focus on that in the Lambeth conference this summer. He is also right that that needs to be a priority, given that persecution is getting worse.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

Protection of Stonework

5. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What steps the sponsor body plans to take to ensure that historically significant stonework is protected throughout restoration works to the Palace of Westminster. [900665]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Following decisions by the House Commissions in February, the sponsor body paused its work on producing a business case for the restoration and renewal programme. The two Commissions have now proposed a new approach for how the programme should be governed and delivered. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the Commissions recommend that a priority area for the work should be

“Conservation of the building fabric including stonework.”

It is intended that the new proposals will be put to Members of both Houses for debate and decision before the summer recess.

Margaret Ferrier: I recently took a restoration and renewal Palace tour and saw historically significant artwork painted directly on to the stone in parts of the building that are at risk of flooding. How it can be ensured that that artwork is not lost for future generations to enjoy and that it is properly protected during restoration works?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an extremely good question. As I sit on the sponsor board, I can say that that is an absolute priority for everybody working for the delivery authority. A huge amount of work has already been done in listing and understanding every part of the fabric and every piece of artwork; the hon. Lady can rest assured that, once the works commence, every effort will be made to remove those artworks so that they are not in any way damaged.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Places of Worship: Net Zero Target

6. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What contribution the Church has made towards achieving the Government’s net zero target in relation to its places of worship. [900666]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England is trying to achieve net zero by 2030. Examples include solar panels on the roofs of Gloucester and Salisbury cathedrals, heat pumps and underfloor heating in Newcastle cathedral and Bath abbey using natural hot spring water. I even have a vicar coming to see me shortly about a tidal power proposition for his church.

Nick Fletcher: I recently attended a wonderful service at St Mary’s church in Tickhill; it is a beautiful 12th century church and the pride of Tickhill. However, it is struggling to raise finance to replace its dated heating system. If that was to be replaced with a ground-source heat pump, that would cost in excess of £750,000. What can my hon. Friend suggest to help the church? Many of my other churches will face the same issue, including those in Hatfield, Rossington, Bawtry and Thorne, among others.

Andrew Selous: I absolutely get the scale of the challenge as I have similar churches in my constituency, and I know that the churches that my hon. Friend mentioned in Hatfield, Rossington, Bawtry and Thorne will be looking at the issue carefully. In the first instance, I suggest that they look at the diocese of Sheffield’s green energy audit scheme and the “funding net zero” section of the Church of England website. Emissions savings can be made by, for example, switching from oil to under-pew heating from renewable electricity.

Ukrainian Refugees

7. **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to support Ukrainian refugees. [900667]

Andrew Selous: Four bishops and hundreds of clergy currently have Ukrainian evacuees living with them. The Church is also using vacant vicarages for Ukrainian families. The Church continues to encourage its members to open their homes and to support those who have.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his answer. Certainly, I have seen lots of activities in churches in my own constituency. We have a lot of mums with children arriving in the United Kingdom and in South Northamptonshire. Lots of them either want to work or are working, but with the summer holidays fast approaching there will be the need for childcare. Can my hon. Friend give us an idea of what the Church can do to provide summer playgroups, so that Ukrainian children can keep learning English and making new friends?

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is typically too modest to mention that she is herself host to a Ukrainian family. I thank her, on behalf of the Church of England, for what she is doing.

The point my right hon. Friend makes about summer holiday clubs for children is extremely important. I can tell her that most parishes are now operating such clubs, although we are not quite back to where we were before the pandemic, due to a shortage of volunteers. I will ask the Diocese of Peterborough to let her know the details of all our clubs operating in her area.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to June Partington and others at the parish of Christ Church and St George's in Denton? June and the parish have organised, on behalf of churches across Tameside in Greater Manchester, the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Is that not precisely what the Church of England, having parishes in every community, is about?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the strength of the Church is in its parish life. I am very happy to pay considerable tribute, and give thanks, to June and all the parishes in Tameside who are clearly doing such good and important work.

Russian Orthodox Church: Ukraine

8. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What discussions representatives of the Church have had with their counterparts in the Russian Orthodox Church on the conflict in Ukraine. [900668]

Andrew Selous: The Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken frankly with Patriarch Kirill during the invasion. The Church of England has chaplaincies in both Russia and Ukraine, and will continue to foster dialogue in the pursuit of peace.

Felicity Buchan: Last week, the Foreign Office sanctioned the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. What steps can the Church of England take to try to persuade the Russian Orthodox Church that it is wrong to back Putin and this barbarous war?

Andrew Selous: The Church Commissioners and our pensions board were some of the first institutions to take all practical steps to withdraw from their direct investments in Russia. The Church of England remains committed to a ministry of reconciliation based on love and truth, and will continue to reach out—for example, through the chaplain of St Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow, who is the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The conflict in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of many freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief. I am very pleased that Ukraine will be represented at the conference on freedom of religion or belief here in July. What, in my hon. Friend's opinion, would be a successful outcome to the conference for delegates such as those from Ukraine and elsewhere, where freedom of religion or belief is being violated or denied?

Andrew Selous: It is a really important question. The bottom line must be a reduction in global persecution, which is going up, not down. Presidents and Prime Ministers need to prioritise this issue. We need better co-ordination with civil society. We need freedom of religion or belief in education and we want young freedom of religion or belief ambassadors.

Institutional Racism

9. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Church is taking to tackle institutional racism. [900670]

Andrew Selous: Parts of the Church of England behaved appallingly in turning away Caribbean worshippers after the war. The Church has paid a heavy price in losing the spirit-filled vitality of those worshippers to spread the good news of Jesus. Work by Lord Boateng and the inspirational Peter Stream, which is drawing ordinands from a wide variety of races and backgrounds, is starting to redress that shameful episode.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The decision to refuse to ordain Calvin Robinson was a missed opportunity, but my hon. Friend is both a fair-minded and God-fearing person. I hope I can rely on him to ask the bishops to pray, reflect and reconsider.

Andrew Selous: I must say to my right hon. Friend that it would not be appropriate for me to comment specifically on an individual candidate for ordination. The period of initial formation for candidates is part of the discernment process, and not every candidate who starts training finishes it or is judged ready for ordination at the end of it. I am informed that, as with all applications for the ministry, this candidate was considered irrespective of Church tradition, political views or race.

British Council Contractors: Afghanistan

10.30 am

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to make a statement on British Council contractors in Afghanistan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): Last August, when the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating so rapidly, the UK Government worked at great speed to evacuate more than 15,000 people from the country within a fortnight. This was the biggest mission of its kind in generations, and the second largest evacuation carried out by any country. We are right to be proud of what our British forces and others achieved at that time. Those evacuated included British nationals and their families and about 500 particularly vulnerable Afghans, including some British Council contractors, journalists, human rights defenders, campaigners for women's rights, judges, and many others. All former British Council employees who wished to resettle have arrived in the UK, with their family members.

The British Council played an important role in Afghanistan in working to support the UK mission there and to promote our values. It is right that the Government do the right thing for British Council employees and contractors, and that includes resettling eligible contractors if they are at risk. Therefore, in January this year the then Minister for Afghan Resettlement, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), announced the launch of a new Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, which will resettle up to 20,000 eligible people over the coming years. There is no application process for the scheme, but people can express an interest in resettlement.

Eligible individuals will be referred for resettlement via three referral "pathways". Under pathway 3, we are committed to considering eligible at-risk British Council and GardaWorld contractors as well as Chevening alumni. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will refer up to 1,500 people from Afghanistan and the region to the Home Office for resettlement, including eligible family members. On 20 June the FCDO opened an online system, whereby eligible individuals can express their interest in resettlement.

Mr Baron: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her response.

Members on both sides of the House have expressed our pride in and gratitude for Operation Pitting. However, I must say to the Minister that about 180 British Council contractors remain in Afghanistan, 85 of whom have been classified by us as being at "very high risk", while a further 90 or so are deemed to be at "high risk". They live in constant fear for their lives, moving from safe house to safe house as they are hunted by the Taliban. After questions in the House and a positive meeting with Lord Harrington, we finally secured a written ministerial statement last week announcing the opening of the ACRS on Monday, and that was welcome.

As the Minister mentioned, there is now a window for British Council contractors, GardaWorld employees and Chevening scholars to submit expressions of interest

in coming to the UK, but this application window is open for two months, which may mean that submissions will not be processed by the Government, or decisions confirmed on individual submissions, until the middle of August. That would further delay the contractors' journey to safety. However, responses to my written parliamentary questions earlier this week suggest that there might be some flexibility to allow applications to be processed before the window closes.

I suggest to the Minister that there is too much ambiguity, given the urgency of the case. It is clearly unacceptable that, 10 months after the fall of Kabul, we remain in this situation in which contractors—not just British Council contractors, but personnel who have promoted British interests, values and culture in Afghanistan—are still trying to sort out an application process that has taken too long as a result of bureaucracy. I therefore seek clarification on two important issues, and I would appreciate that clarification, because I do not want to keep coming back to the Chamber to pressurise the Government. I want answers, to help these people.

First, will submissions from those who are deemed to be at "very high risk" and "high risk" be processed before the closing of the application window in two months' time—and here we are talking about the third week in August? Secondly, will their relocation to the UK or, in the interim, a third country, also be expedited so that they are able to leave Afghanistan as soon as they have been approved under the ACRS?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend has played an important role in championing the British Council, which does amazing work across the world—I have seen a lot of that work at first hand. It is absolutely right that we try to support the contractors, which is why we have made this online scheme available. We need to give people reasonable time to submit their expression of interest. I will look at the issue of very high-risk individuals, but we have not stopped taking people from Afghanistan since the end of Operation Pitting last August. In fact, another 4,600 people have since come to the UK, many through the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, including Ministry of Defence contractors and a wide range of other people such as members of the LGBT community, journalists, prosecutors, women's rights activists and some country-based staff. Those 4,600 people have come here, and others have been referred through the UN pathways.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Fabian Hamilton.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing this important urgent question.

On behalf of the Labour Opposition, I extend my thoughts to all those currently suffering in Afghanistan following the dreadful earthquake earlier this week.

In February it was revealed that hundreds of British Council staff were left stranded in Afghanistan following this Government's botched evacuation from Kabul. The Minister told the House at the time that the Government were supporting those in need and that 50 British Council contractors had been evacuated. Four months on, we are faced with the same problem: hundreds of former British Council contractors are stranded, with

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

reports that they are being attacked and beaten by the Taliban due to their previous work on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Many of those still in Afghanistan are security guards who protected British staff at the embassy as they undertook an extremely difficult task during the evacuation last August. We owe so much to these courageous British Council contractors, and the fact that they are still in Afghanistan and facing daily violence due to their co-operation with the UK is, frankly, nothing short of a disgrace.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could tell us how many British Council staff are still stuck in Afghanistan today. What urgent measures are being put in place to evacuate the rest of the staff who are still stranded in Afghanistan? What engagement has she had with regional partners to facilitate safe passage for the former staff who attempt to leave? Once again, what message does it send to other British Council contractors who work in challenging environments around the world if the UK leaves Afghan contractors stranded in this way?

It is high time the Government got their act together and stood up for those who worked with the United Kingdom to promote security, tolerance and democracy in Afghanistan.

Vicky Ford: I also send my thoughts to those affected by the terrible earthquake two days ago. The UK is one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and we are already working with teams on the ground, including the UN, non-governmental organisations and the Red Cross, to get assistance to those who need it.

The hon. Gentleman asks how many British Council staff are still affected. I make it clear, as I did in my opening remarks, that all former British Council employees—in other words, British Council staff—who wished to resettle have arrived in the UK with their family members. British Council employees were prioritised both in Operation Pitting and in the immediate response to help those who were invited to take part in Operation Pitting but did not make it out, and they are among the 4,600 people who have since come out of Afghanistan.

The issue here is contractors. We have prioritised British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni in the 1,500 places we have this year. They will be able to put in their expression of interest between now and 15 August. I must say—maybe this will also help my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)—that if there are exceptional and compelling circumstances, for example a threat to life, they can set that out in their expression of interest and they will be considered for expedited action.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The bigger picture is that we chose to abandon Afghanistan and hand it back to the very insurgents we went in to defeat. We make grand promises to help the people of Afghanistan, the 40 million people left behind who are struggling to survive. Is it not now time to unfreeze the \$9 billion-worth of Afghan assets? They belong to the Afghan people. We are not going to change the Taliban's behaviour. The people who are now suffering because of that are the Afghans themselves, not the Taliban.

Vicky Ford: Let me be very clear: it was the Taliban who chose what to do in Afghanistan, rather than the UK. Our British forces did amazing work in that two-week window to bring British people out. The sanctions are important, but we also played a key role in establishing a humanitarian exemption under the United Nations Afghan sanctions regime. Thus we have a Security Council resolution adopted in December that gives an exemption from the asset freeze in order to provide humanitarian assistance. It is humanitarian assistance that people need. That is why in January we also laid our own sanctions regulations, which mean that we can also ensure that money for humanitarian needs and supporting basic needs can still flow.

Mr Speaker: I call SNP spokesperson Stephen Flynn.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I place on record my thoughts and those of all my SNP colleagues for all those impacted by the devastating earthquake in Afghanistan. If my calculations are correct, it is now 299 days since the end of Operation Pitting. While the efforts of our military personnel cannot be commended highly enough, what cannot be commended is the pitiful response of this Government, both in the weeks leading up to the fall of Afghanistan and in the many months since. Lest we forget, when Kabul was on the brink of collapse senior Government Ministers and senior civil servants were on holiday. Lest we forget, when people were literally falling from the outside of aircraft trying to flee the Taliban, the doors to this Parliament remained firmly shut. Lest we forget, it is nearly 300 days since Afghanistan fell and so many British Council contractors and others were left at the mercy of the Taliban. I ask the Minister this: why on earth is this taking so long, and when does she expect every single British contractor boot to be on UK soil?

Vicky Ford: Far from doing nothing over the past few months since Operation Pitting finished, the UK has been one of the leaders in the world in a) getting the exemption from the sanctions regime to help money to flow and b) ensuring that humanitarian aid is raised. In March we co-hosted the pledging conference and we are one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid ourselves. We have been working extremely closely to unlock the World Bank money, for example, and get that out. Since Operation Pitting finished, another 4,600 Afghan refugees or individuals from Afghanistan have arrived in the UK, including many from very vulnerable groups. It is a continuous process; we have committed to taking another 20,000 people through the ARAP system over the next few years, and that window is being prioritised for those contractors and our Chevening scholars.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) mentioned, there are just under 200 British Council contractors who are still trapped in Afghanistan. All of them are in fear for their lives. We must know the names of those individuals, but we probably do not know their exact location. Will my hon. Friend ensure that applications for those people to come out of Afghanistan to the UK can be lodged by other people on their behalf? Otherwise, people will have to spend time online and getting to places that will be unsafe for them to travel to.

Vicky Ford: I will certainly take up the point that my hon. Friend raises, but that is precisely why there needs to be a window of time for people to register their interest. I also point out that those taken under the pathway will be not only the individuals, but their family members; that is why 1,500 people will be able to come and we have a window of time to assess their needs and bring them through the pathway. I will certainly take on board my hon. Friend's point about whether third parties can put in an application.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is absolutely right. The hardest part of the process for the people affected is getting out of Afghanistan safely without it being detected that they are fleeing. Why on earth is there a two-month window only, rather than an open, rolling programme? Why is there a limit every year? As the hon. Members for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and for Harrow East have said, we already know who these people are.

Vicky Ford: I remind the hon. Gentleman that 4,600 people have already come to the UK since Operation Pitting. We are working to get some of the most vulnerable people out. This is an important prioritisation that we are doing for those who have been contractors—security contractors or British Council contractors. They need the window to express interest, but if there are exceptional circumstances such as threat to life, they will be considered for expedited action.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): How many people have been resettled in the UK under the ACRS, since it opened in January, who had not been evacuated under Operation Pitting?

Vicky Ford: The 4,600 people who have been supported to leave Afghanistan and are either coming to the UK or, sometimes, moving to third countries—sorry, Mr Speaker; I should have been clearer on that point—includes people under both ACRS and ARAP.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of whether all those who might be eligible can safely and securely apply online for permission to come to this country? If they cannot do that, there has to be a fall-back position, has there not?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is right that in certain parts of Afghanistan it is particularly challenging. That is part of the reason why we are giving a window.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am listening to the Minister with a bit of incredulity. She said:

“It is right that the Government do the right thing...and that includes resettling eligible contractors if they are at risk.”

Minister, they are at risk! That is a totally mealy-mouthed and profoundly unhelpful statement. We have known about this for months and months. The UK Government have given those of us asking questions the runaround time after time. We know who these people are, we know that they are vulnerable and we know that their lives are at risk. Will the UK Government stop giving

us all the runaround and tell us how and when these vulnerable people will be given the opportunity to come to safety?

Vicky Ford: I am actually extremely proud of the work that the UK does to support vulnerable people coming to the UK from so many different areas. Many of my constituents are working to bring in Ukrainian families and support the Afghans who have come to my constituency. Many tens of thousands of Hong Kong nationals have come here. As I said, 4,600 people have come under either ARAP or ACRS since then. This is an important prioritisation that we are doing to support these contractors. They will be given time to apply because, as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) points out, sometimes it can be challenging to get online in these places. That is why we have to give them a window. We have brought 4,600 people, including some of the most vulnerable, during this period. These are difficult circumstances and the UK is doing much, much more than many others. I continue to be proud of what we are doing.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): These British Council contractors live in fear for their lives on a daily basis. Each day they wake up could be the day of their death sentence. We know who they are. The logistics of getting them out of Afghanistan are going to be incredibly difficult. I would like to know what preparations the Minister has in place, not only to expedite their applications when they come in, but to physically get them to safety and out of the grip of the Taliban.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman will probably understand that I should not comment on that at this stage, particularly for those who are at risk. We have said that we will expedite matters, for example if there is a serious risk to life. We need to give this window for people to apply, but I am not going to comment on the specifics that the hon. Gentleman raises at this time.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Given the recent devastating logjams at the Home Office and Her Majesty's Passport Office, can the Minister confirm how many extra staff have been appointed to process the expression of interest requests from those stranded in Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: I will need to get back to the hon. Lady with the details.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Afghan contractors worked to protect British Government officials and to keep them safe. We have left those contractors behind and done too little to repay the favour. What work has been under way for the past 10 months across the various Departments involved to try to ensure the safety of all contractors?

Vicky Ford: As I think I have said a number of times, we have brought in some of the most vulnerable people during this period, from various different groups. We have also been leading some of the international work to try to get aid into the country to help all of the citizens of Afghanistan with the extremely challenging economic situation. That is why we have led the pledging conference and put funding in for others to try to

[Vicky Ford]

stabilise the situation. We are prioritising the contractors, which is why we have opened this window for them to express their interest and let us know their exact circumstances, and so we can bring out those who are most at risk.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Government for all they have done in the Afghan resettlement scheme. I know that my constituency has been eager and keen to assist and help. On the issue of the British Council contractors, does the Minister agree that our withdrawal from Afghanistan leaves much to be desired? When it comes to the contractors we are all concerned about, our support must be blameless, and I suspect that unfortunately on this occasion it may not be. How will the Government improve the current support system in Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: The organisation whose approach to Afghanistan leaves much to be desired is the Taliban.

Business of the House

10.52 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 27 June will include:

MONDAY 27 JUNE—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill.

TUESDAY 28 JUNE—Opposition day (4th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 29 JUNE—Consideration in committee of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill (Day 1).

THURSDAY 30 JUNE—Debate on a motion on Iran's nuclear programme followed by, general debate on 50 years of Pride in the UK. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 1 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 July will include:

MONDAY 4 JULY—Conclusion of consideration in committee and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill.

TUESDAY 5 JULY—Estimates day (1st allotted day). Subjects to be confirmed.

WEDNESDAY 6 JULY—Estimates day (2nd allotted day). Subjects to be confirmed.

At 7.00pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I hope he had a wonderful time at the Tory party's summer ball on Monday night. I hear the top prize auctioned off was a £120,000 slap-up meal for four including the Prime Minister, his predecessor and her predecessor. The absolute audacity of Tory MPs telling food bank users that they do not know how to spend their money, when Tory donors seem to be willing to pay the going rate of £40,000 per failed and failing Prime Minister. It is shocking. Tory donors, clearly unaffected by the cost of living crisis, are wined and dined by the Cabinet when working people face inflation at more than 9%, lower pay and backlog Britain grinding the country to a halt. Where in the upcoming business is the Government's long-term plan to deal with all that?

Perhaps I can offer the three recent Conservative Prime Ministers a conversation starter: 12 years of underfunding and Tory mismanagement of our NHS; and record numbers of people waiting for care and waiting longer than ever before. In Wakefield, since 2019, the people of that great city have lost three local GP practices and 300,000 GP appointments per year, all while the Chancellor puts up their taxes. Does the Leader of the House think it is fair that his Government are asking the people of Wakefield to pay more, for less?

On Tuesday, Labour's successful motion called on the Health Secretary simply to meet his Government's own target of recruiting 6,000 extra GPs and to ensure that everyone who needs an NHS dentist can get one. Those are not unreasonable demands, but the Health Secretary cannot even meet them. He has admitted that he is not on track, so can the Leader of the House explain to his voters why his Government are breaking yet another one of their promises? What is the plan? People around the country, including those in Wakefield, will want to see it. Will he ask the Health Secretary to make a statement on how he is going to train, recruit and hang on to the GPs we need? I remind him that they are the Government and our motion passed. They should do their job and at least attempt to sort this mess out.

It is another week of the Government engulfed in Tory sleaze and scandal, instead of dealing with problems in our NHS. I do welcome the fact that they have realised that they obviously need an ethics adviser, but they must get on with recruiting a new one. On Tuesday, Labour's ethics motion called for urgency. The Tories voted against it, so I ask the Leader of the House: when can we expect to see the ethics vacancy filled? Can he guarantee that the investigations that were ongoing prior to Lord Geidt's resignation will be completed?

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore) asked the Prime Minister for a straight yes or no on whether he had ever considered the appointment of his now spouse to a government post or one in any other organisation. We hear that No. 10 spoke to *The Times* after it published an article on this and the story disappeared. There is clearly something going on and it is clearly unethical to use a position as a very powerful person, possibly the most powerful person in the country, to get your partner a six-figure-salary job. The Prime Minister failed to deny this yesterday, so I am asking the Leader of the House now: could he advise us on what conversations were had and how far was this allowed to go?

Last week, the Leader of the House failed to address my question on missing legislation. The proposals on renters' rights reforms last Thursday are welcome, but they were promised three years ago and all we have got is a White Paper. This is another example of the Government picking an issue, waving it around on a day they need a distraction and dropping it the next. This is no way to run a country. So when will the Leader of the House bring forward the actual legislation and give renters the rights they deserve, for which they been waiting for so long? Whether it is the distraction of sleaze and scandal, missing legislation or countless failed promises, the choice is stark: a Tory Government unable to govern or Labour, a party that believes in democracy, decency and respect, with a plan to deal with backlog Britain and tackle the Tory cost of living crisis. People up and down the country will be waking up this morning, including in Wakefield, knowing that it is time for a fresh start.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. What is clear is that the Government are getting on with the job. We are making our streets safer; we are recruiting 20,000 more police officers, and we have already got 13,500 of those recruited. We continue to grow the economy to address the cost of living challenge that people face. That is why we have invested £37 billion to help people through the challenges that we face—frankly,

the whole world is facing these challenges. We are funding the NHS to deal with those covid backlogs, which is why we introduced the health and social care levy; we are talking about £39 billion-worth investment in our NHS. The Labour party did not support that investment in our health service. We are providing leadership that is needed in these challenging times. We are the strongest supporter of Ukraine. We have delivered the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, which is why the economy continues to grow.

There was one question that I will address—there was one genuine question in all of that rant: what did I know about the allegation that the hon. Lady made about the Prime Minister's wife. I can tell her and the House that I was the Government Chief Whip from the moment the Prime Minister became the Prime Minister. I think I am the longest serving Chief Whip since 2010. I was in meetings and rooms with the Prime Minister probably more than any other Minister during that period. I never ever in my political career heard mention of the Prime Minister's wife getting a role—ever, to be clear.

What we heard in the shadow Leader of the House's comments was anything at all she wants to talk about, other than the crisis that the unions are delivering to this country as we sit here. Look behind her at those empty Benches. The reason those Benches are empty is that they all ran like rats to get a train yesterday—*[Interruption.]* Across the House, colleagues had to go and get trains yesterday because of the misery the unions are pouring on to this country. Let us look at some of the working practices they are trying to defend.

Whole teams have to change a socket when one person could do it; they want nine people to go and do it. They want a walking time of one minute to take 12 minutes. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Shocking!"]* This is absolutely true. A break time starts, and if one of their managers says hello to them during it, the break has to start again because management have interrupted it. Technology now exists with cameras to check the safety of rail lines—a very important job—but the unions insist that they have to be walking checks. Eight rail workers have been killed on the rail lines in the past two years doing those walking checks when technology exists to protect those lives and to look after people on our railways. Best of all, there was a threatened strike over the replacement of a tea urn with a kettle.

That is the sort of thing that these people are defending. I call on the hon. Lady and her friends' paymasters to get back round the table, talk to Network Rail, and ease the misery that they are imposing on working people up and down this country.

Mr Speaker: We now come to Bob Blackman, who is acting Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for announcing the business not only for next week but for the week after. At our meeting of the Backbench Business Committee on Monday evening, we will be determining the applications for estimates day debates. As an advert to the House, and beyond, could those who wish to submit applications do so by 1 o'clock on Monday at the latest? We will try to be as flexible as we can in terms of the number of speakers and so on that will be required for such a debate, but we obviously need to get on with the job.

[Bob Blackman]

My right hon. Friend announced the provisional business for the week of the estimates day debates but did not mention what is happening on Thursday 7 July. Could he update us on that, because we have a queue of applications?

Last night, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and I attended a symposium on the plight of Hindus across the world. Forced conversion, murder and, quite frankly, genocide have been committed against Hindus across the world. Can we have a debate in Government time on the threat across the world to Hindus, who are peaceful, law-abiding people who just want to live their lives in peace and harmony?

Mark Spencer: I encourage Members across the House to make representations to the Backbench Business Committee on the estimates, and I know that my hon. Friend's door will be open to those requests. The business will be announced next Thursday, so I am sure that he will be in his place to hear what it will be on Thursday 7 July. I commend him for the work that he does in supporting Hindu communities not only in his own constituency but around the world. He is a true champion for rights and religious freedom—almost as robust and enthusiastic as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Mr Speaker: Let us come to the SNP spokesman, Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am quite surprised to see so many Conservative Members in their places—don't they know there are by-elections they have to fight? I suppose it is a lot safer being in here, though, than having to traipse around Devon or the north of England having to explain away all the many prime ministerial indiscretions.

Can we have a debate about job opportunities, because it seems to me that if you are intimately involved with this Prime Minister your chances of securing a top job in Whitehall, with the royal family or at COP seem to be greatly enhanced? I listened to the Leader of the House on this particular issue. I do not know if this piece of prime ministerial nepotism is true or not, but it seems to be quite consistent with what we have experienced of this Prime Minister over the past few months. I know—maybe it is a job for the ethics adviser. Oh yes—there isn't one; his role is currently being reviewed. Translated from the Johnsonian, that means it is being abandoned. This is a Prime Minister with the ethics of a polecat. Not even all the ethics advisers in the world could start to scratch the surface of the many issues that need to be confronted.

I am quite surprised—I thought Government Members would all be on their feet today celebrating Brexit day. It is six years since that decision was taken—six years of chaos and misery for this nation. In Scotland, this day is marked with nothing other than dismay, disappointment and simmering resentment. We are a nation taken out of an EU we cherished against our national collective will, after being promised that our membership would be safe if we stayed in their Union. The absolute failure of their Brexit and the preparation to break international law on Monday on the protocol is the main driver for converts to the cause of Scottish independence. They

may have got themselves out of the European Union, but they have inadvertently helped Scotland get out of the mess of this Union. Maybe that is something worth celebrating.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I celebrate the fact that we left the European Union. I am not a democracy denier like the hon. Gentleman. We acknowledge that there was a democratic process and that is why we delivered on Brexit; that is why he should acknowledge that at the last referendum on Scotland's place in the Union, he unfortunately lost. We are stronger together. He should celebrate democracy and join us in making the Union stronger.

The Government are getting on with the job. We delivered this week on the High Speed Rail (Crewe–Manchester) Bill, we are delivering on the cost of living with payments coming quickly to people, and we are supporting pensioners with disability benefits.

The hon. Gentleman talked about job opportunities. There is a job in Scotland available to people who want to engage in bureaucracy. This week, the SNP came forward with its plan to spend £1.5 billion on administration alone to secure the services of care workers from local authorities, only to then procure care workers' services from the local authorities from which they have taken those care workers. It is absolutely bonkers. The SNP is too busy being distracted by its own Watergate moment, with its internal meetings being leaked. The SNP Chief Whip was so angry that he wrote to colleagues saying, "Please don't leak"—only for that letter to be leaked. I think the SNP leaks more than its ferries.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): In May 2016, Diana, the wife of my constituent, Peter Walker, was killed in an accident with a cyclist in Pewsey High Street. The following year the Government announced a consultation on a new offence of causing death by dangerous cycling. The year after that, in 2018, my predecessor Claire Perry was assured by the Government that the response to the consultation would be issued shortly. Four years on, we still have no response. Since 2019, I have written to the Government four times to ask for a date for when it will happen. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this really is not good enough? Will he please use his good offices with the Department for Transport to get it to come forward with a timetable on the review and to bring forward the legislation that we need?

Mark Spencer: I am very sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent. I assure him that the Department for Transport takes the issue very seriously. We have had a tragedy in my own constituency, when a pedestrian was hit by an e-scooter on a pavement; the lady lost her life. The Secretary of State is planning to publish our response to the consultation as soon as we can and, as my hon. Friend knows, has already announced that we are considering bringing forward legislation to introduce new offences around dangerous cycling. We will do that as part of a suite of measures to improve the safety of all road and pavement users.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): My constituent, Mr David Hand, has generously agreed to sponsor two Ukraine nationals who are fleeing that awful conflict. He made an application to the Homes for Ukraine scheme on 22 May, but has not yet received

any update. My office has spoken to the MP account management team at UK Visas and Immigration on several occasions, but, unfortunately, no update is forthcoming. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time to discuss the unacceptably long wait that some refugees are experiencing in incredibly dangerous situations?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Mr Hand who is doing a very generous thing in supporting and offering to host those people. Many people up and down the country are opening their homes to refugees. We should be enormously proud of that. I am sure the Home Secretary will have heard his comments, but to make sure I will pass them on directly to her and see whether she can assist him directly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate on the huge disruption being caused to our constituents by tube and rail strikes? We need the opportunity to condemn the Labour MPs who are supporting these irresponsible strikes, even to the extent that they are actually joining picket lines, which is scandalous.

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. That is something that is worthy of debate. We had a debate on this matter last week. I think 25 Labour Members have been on the picket lines along with Arthur Scargill this week. It is causing misery to commuters. It is making students miss exams and it is causing huge damage to the economy. The only way out of this is for the unions to go and speak directly to Network Rail and resolve these matters around the negotiating table.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House confirm when the Government's proposal on the use of agency workers during industrial action will be brought forward for debate in the House? I understand that a statutory instrument is due to be published today but, having looked at the sheet with the business and having listened very carefully to what he said, I have not heard any confirmed timetable or process. Will this be brought on to the Floor of the House so that we can have a proper debate?

Mark Spencer: I do not have to hand the specific time when that will be brought forward, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman and let him know as soon as I am aware of that. The use of agency workers is an option available to employers up and down the country, but that must be done safely, ensuring that those agency workers can deliver a standard of service that is safe to members of the public.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I notice on the Order Paper that the restoration and renewal motion has been tabled. I welcome the proactiveness of the Leader of the House on the issue. Can he let the House know how individual Members can take part?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right that the motion is now on the Order Paper. It is important that the House understands that what the two commissions of the Commons and the Lords are seeking on this occasion is to take the sponsor body function back

in-house to make sure that we can get on with the job quickly. Members across the House can engage. There are some drop-in sessions taking place. In fact, I hope that I and the shadow Leader of the House will do a joint one next week; I think it is currently in the diary for 2.30 in Committee Room 12. I encourage Members to come along, engage and find out more information.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Leader of the House may be aware that a major pilot of a four-day working week, with no loss of pay for workers, has begun in the UK. A previous trial in Iceland was significant in finding improvements in terms of wellbeing and productivity, so a win-win for workers and for employers. The Scottish Government are committed to helping businesses to pilot a four-day week. Can we have a statement in Government time on whether the UK Government will also support exploring the benefits of flexible working, including a four-day working week?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Clearly, this is something that the Government will observe and consider. I know that there are a number of pilots taking place up and down the country. It is an interesting concept, but we would need to understand all the implications before it was rolled out as a national policy. However, it is certainly an interesting area of debate.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Speed cameras, love them or hate them, but for villages across my constituency, such as Felmersham, Thurleigh and Sutton to name just three, speeding through the village is a major issue. The desire for average speed cameras is at the top of the agenda for many parish councils, but funding is limited. Can we have a debate about alternative sources of financing? We do not want to make fines for speeding an incentive, but is there a way that we can help these rural areas to get the protection they deserve from speeding?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will be aware that it is Transport questions next week, where he will have an opportunity to ask the Transport Secretary that question directly. Average speed cameras can be frustrating, but they happen to keep people alive and safe. I know in my constituency that several people lost their lives on the A614. Post the introduction of average speed cameras—I hesitate to say this, as I do not want to jinx myself—no one has lost their life on that stretch of road. They do work, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight it. I encourage him to seek a Backbench Business debate on the matter.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Port of Tyne is an important economic player in North Tyneside, as well as across the whole of Tyneside and the region. On behalf of the port, I invited a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister to visit just over two months ago, but as yet, I have not heard anything. As the port is so keen to showcase all the good work it is doing, could the Leader of the House urge the Minister to respond positively to the invitation?

Mark Spencer: I will of course pass on the hon. Lady's comments directly to the Minister. Not just the Port of Tyne, but ports around the country are an

[Mark Spencer]

important part of our infrastructure and getting trade in and out of the UK. They need to work efficiently, and I will make sure that the Minister is aware of her comments.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): My constituent Brian Leigh has been in a hospital in Corfu for 18 days, where he has been taken ill with a heart condition while on holiday. His wife, Michele, has come home and is desperately trying to get Brian back to the UK. His insurance company, Staysure, has handed responsibility for repatriating him to a company called Red Star, which has taken more than a week so far to get Brian home. Can we have a debate on the regulation of these arrangements, as my constituents have done the responsible thing and arranged travel insurance, but find it is little help to them when they need it?

Mark Spencer: I wish Brian a speedy recovery. Hopefully we can get him home soon with my hon. Friend's efforts. I will make sure that the relevant Minister is aware of the case and encourage them to engage directly with my hon. Friend.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Leader of the House will probably be aware that 6 July is the deadline for submissions for new bids to the next round of the levelling-up fund. What he will not be aware of is that Tameside Council is putting together an excellent bid for Denton town centre in my constituency, which I wholeheartedly support. It includes streetscape works, extensive improvements for pedestrians and cyclists and, at the heart of it, a new community hub at the Denton Festival Hall. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities so that we can have a better idea of the timescales for this next round of bids, and so that I can champion Denton, Denton, Denton?

Mark Spencer: I cannot deny that the hon. Gentleman does that on a regular basis. I hesitate to wish Denton well in its bid, because I am sure that many Members across the House will have bids for the levelling-up fund. I am sure that once the Secretary of State has received all those bids, he will be able to assess them and come forward with the great amount of investment that the country is looking for and the Government are committed to delivering.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I was very proud on Monday to attend the flag raising in Aylesbury for Armed Forces Week. It was an occasion to show support for everyone in our local armed forces community, from our cadets to our Army Reserve and from personnel at RAF Holton to service families. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all who serve in our armed forces at home and abroad and ensure that Parliament can mark its appreciation and gratitude, whether through a debate or other fitting means?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend; I think he is part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I am sure the whole House will want to recognise the great contribution that our armed forces make. I had the privilege of visiting the poppy factory in Richmond

on Monday this week to hear directly about the fantastic work it does to support veterans and to see the wreaths being made in the factory. Members of the public can visit the factory and have a tour of it, and I highly recommend that they do so. There is a dedicated office team supporting veterans up and down the country, and it is something that the House would want to recognise.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): One food bank in Aberdeen distributed 600 parcels in a week, and another distributed 80 in just a 90-minute period. That is a scandal, but it is a necessity because of the economic and welfare policies of the UK Government. The Chancellor happens to be in my constituency at this moment in time, so I have asked him whether he would like to attend one such food bank to see for himself the devastating impact of his actions. I am not too hopeful that he will say yes. Bearing that in mind, will the Leader of the House agree to dragging the Chancellor to the Chamber for a debate on the impact of Tory policies?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Chancellor of the Exchequer regularly appears at the Dispatch Box. I think that the last time he was here, he topped up the support fund to £37 billion. That is a huge amount of cash going to support people with those challenges.

I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to those charities which, alongside what the Government are doing, assist people when they fall into difficulty. We have increased the household support fund to £1.5 billion, we have the £200 million holiday activities food programme and we are funding £24 million-worth of school breakfasts. The Government are doing a huge amount to support people, but I also pay tribute to the charities that he recognised.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): This week's strikes have been incredibly disruptive for so many of my constituents, so I welcome the Business Secretary's announcement today on temporary workers. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on implementing minimum service levels similar to those in Italy and Spain so that we can limit the harm that these strikes do our people?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight once again the devastation that the strikes are causing. I encourage the unions to get back round the table and negotiate with Network Rail and the employers directly. I thank him for raising the matter, which is worthy of further debate.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Part of backlog Britain is the court backlog, which is unacceptable to my constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields, and it is getting worse. Justice delayed is justice denied. My constituents face delays in getting a hearing and many lost payments from courts, which delay hearings further. They also face delays in getting judgments respected. Rogue companies are taking advantage of the system breaking down. Can we have a debate in Government time or a ministerial statement about what action will be taken on the court backlog to get everyone the justice that they deserve?

Mark Spencer: Of course, one of the contributing factors in getting people to court is a decent transport system. If the transport system is not running, how can people get to court? We recognise that, post covid, there is a challenge in our health service and in our courts system. That is why we have introduced a quarter of a billion pounds to support the court recovery. The spending review provided an extra £477 million to the criminal justice system. We will also increase funding for the victim and witness support service to over £192 million by 2024-25. That, of course, is on top of the billions of pounds that the health and social care levy is pouring into our NHS to deal with post-covid challenges.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Last month, I attended the Eastgate sheep show, which, due to covid, happened for the first time since I was elected. Later in the year, I will attend the Weardale show at St John's Chapel, the Stanhope show and the Wolsingham show. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the fantastic news that these shows are starting up again? Will he consider joining me at one of them—given his farming background, he would be a great addition—and provide time for a debate on these shows, which are a vital part of life in our rural communities across Britain?

Mark Spencer: Actually, that is worthy of a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate. This year, I have had the privilege of going to the Newark and Nottinghamshire show, and I hope to attend the Royal Welsh show this year. Hon. Members not in their places may be at the Lincolnshire show, which is taking place today.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Last week, my teenage constituent Jacob Naismith from Blantyre won in the final of the GB three nations boxing tournament—a great win for Scotland. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Jacob on his impressive achievement and schedule a debate in Government time on the value of youth sporting clubs in developing talent such as Jacob's?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in congratulating Jacob on his achievements, and also the coaches and support teams of such clubs up and down this country. Whether it is rugby, boxing or football,

there are thousands of volunteers who stand on the touchlines or around the rings watching these individuals develop their skills. These sports are great for people's physical health and also great for their mental health.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last time Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs mileage rates went up over a decade ago, the average price of a litre of unleaded petrol was about £1.20. It is now more like £1.90, so can we have a statement from the Chancellor, ideally at Treasury questions next Tuesday, about what can be done to bring mileage rates in line with the true cost of fuel?

Mark Spencer: Of course, there are challenges given the global fight against inflation that we are engaged in, which is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer reduced fuel duty—a huge tax cut—with £5 billion of tax reductions. I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be at the Dispatch Box once again very soon, when the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to challenge him directly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just yesterday, representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and of the all-party parliamentary groups on refugees and on international freedom of religion or belief held an event marking the very grim milestone of 100 million people across the world who have been forced to flee conflict due to persecution. The meeting also highlighted the number of judges—and we met one of them yesterday—and vulnerable minority groups who are still stuck in Afghanistan, despite the UK's Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Would the Leader of the House make time for a debate on how we can best protect vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, which is very much in our minds today because of the earthquake?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have just had an urgent question on Afghanistan. I know he was present for it, and was once again saved up right till the end. I do not know why we save the hon. Gentleman till the end. He is like the No. 24 on the Advent calendar—the little treat at the end. I pay tribute to him for all the work that he does on religious persecution, and I know that he knows that there are many options available to him to continue to raise the profile of the causes he holds so dear.

Point of Order

11.27 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not often raise a point of order, but I always try to be constructive and helpful, and I notified the Speaker's Office of my point of order and spoke to the staff as well. I ask in a most respectful manner, and I make this point in a very helpful fashion: could you give me some guidance?

As someone who is absolutely engaged with and adheres to the processes and traditions of this House—I love the traditions in this House—can anything be done to increase the time for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs oral questions? The Department covers a massive issue and the time is always over-subscribed. It does not get the full time that other departmental questions get, and I believe it warrants additional time due to the sheer volume of right hon. and hon. Members trying to engage, but unable to do so. I very respectfully ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker: is there a way of doing that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It is actually the Government who set the timetable. He could have raised this in business questions this week, but he might like to ask the Leader of the House the same question next week, and I am sure he will be as helpful as he can be in his response.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would be welcome to seek a conversation with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who may be in a position to assist him in looking at these matters in more detail.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Excellent. There are lots of options there.

Backbench Business

Heart and Circulatory Diseases (Covid-19)

11.29 am

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

That this House has considered the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on people with heart and circulatory diseases.

May I say how pleased I am to have this debate in the main Chamber? It was originally earmarked for Westminster Hall, where most of my debates are—indeed, probably all of them—but on this occasion I have kindly been elevated to the main Chamber, and I am greatly humbled to have this opportunity. I spoke to Mr Speaker's Office this morning to thank the staff for that. I understand the reasons for it, but the reasons do not matter: we are here, and that is the important thing. I am very pleased to be able to participate in this debate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking on the opportunity to have a debate in this Chamber; as he well knows, had he not been so flexible the House would be rising now. He has enabled the House to continue, and on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee I thank him. Of course, his season ticket is honourably renewed.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kindness. The Backbench Business Committee is kind to everyone who applies for a debate, so I am always very pleased to do so, and on a regular basis. It will not be too long before I am back looking for more debates.

On this debate, I put on the record my thanks to the Committee. I am pleased to see that Members from across the House are involved, although I am mindful that today right hon. and hon. Members have many other engagements that mean they are unable to be here, even though the debate is in the main Chamber.

It is just over two years since the start of the lockdowns, and a little more since the pandemic first arrived. Life changed for everyone—I do not think there is anyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who did not have a life-changing moment—and for some of us it may never be the same as it was. It will never be the same for those who have lost loved ones; that is very real for every one of us. Some of the changes that took place due to the pandemic and covid-19 were cosmetic, but others have been life changing, and it is those changes that we need to address.

I want to say a massive thank you to all the doctors, nurses, auxiliary staff and cleaning staff—there are so many to name—who have been outstanding. There is nobody in this House who does not know some of them, has not spoken to them and does not also want to put that on the record as well. I thank them at the beginning of this debate.

During lockdown, barriers and obstacles to providing care for heart patients and all patients rocketed. I know that happened across all health departments, but in particular I thank the British Heart Foundation and the Stroke Association for all the information, detail and evidence they sent to me and others for the debate. We are very pleased to have that.

Some of those efforts by doctors were heroic; I do not use that word often, but on this occasion it is a word that aptly describes their efforts. Despite those heroic efforts of doctors, nurses and other key workers in our health systems, however, we have seen cardiovascular services disrupted so greatly that people are still feeling the effects today.

I am beyond thankful for every NHS staff member who went ahead with emergency surgeries. The reality of life for elected representatives is that we do not get many people coming and saying, "Thank you very much for that." We get the complaints, but that is what we do. We are a conduit for their complaints and concerns. Some of the people were waiting for emergency surgery were not sure whether they would pay a price for that, so again for that I sincerely say a big thank you.

We are all aware of the waiting lists, reduced access to primary care and the pressures on urgent and emergency care. They all have real consequences for people's health. That is why hon. Members pushed for this debate and why we are so pleased to have the opportunity to hold it today in the main Chamber. I feel incredibly privileged, honoured and humbled to be able to present this case—not for me, because I am not important, but on behalf of our constituents who have experienced hardship because of those things.

Those problems have also had real consequences for families' lives, their relationships and the happiness of their families. Very often, the issues for those who were ill reflected back on the families, who were under incredible pressure to deal with circumstances that would be difficult to deal with normally but that, with covid-19 and the pandemic, escalated even more. There are 11,000 people living with heart or circulatory diseases in my constituency. I know the Minister does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland, but I will provide examples from Northern Ireland that are relevant across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There are 2,000 stroke survivors and 13,000 people who have been diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Long waits, difficulty accessing routine medical services and long ambulance response times make life more difficult for the 7.6 million people living with heart and circulatory diseases in the UK. I mention those issues not as a criticism, but to highlight them and raise awareness. Ambulance response times in many parts of the United Kingdom, including in my own constituency, have been difficult, as have been the waiting times outside accident and emergency departments, with ambulances in place. That is happening not just in Northern Ireland but elsewhere, as I am sure other hon. Members will confirm.

Someone in the UK dies from a heart or circulatory disease every three minutes. This debate has been going for six minutes, so that means two people will have died from heart disease since it began. By the time the debate is over—it is a stark headline, unfortunately—as many as 20 people will have passed away. That statistic reminds us of the fickleness of life. It also reminds us of what this debate is about and why we are here. Someone is admitted to hospital due to a stroke every five minutes. Indeed, someone will have been admitted to hospital since this debate began. Two thirds of patients leave hospital with a disability. Stroke as a standalone condition costs the UK economy £26 billion annually, yet it is largely preventable and recoverable.

I look forward very much to hearing the response to the debate from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup). I know she is very committed to her job and has a deep interest in it, so I look forward to what she has to say in response to the questions we will ask her today. I also look forward to hearing from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who is a good friend and with whom I seem to be in debates all the time. If we were not in the Chamber today, we would be in Westminster Hall.

Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke highlights that there were 15,758 recorded deaths in 2019. That is some figure and it is worrying. The top three causes were cancer, circulatory diseases and respiratory diseases; together, those accounted for 64.3% of all deaths in Northern Ireland. That figure reminds us of just how fickle life is and that we are just a breath away from passing from this world to the next. They have been the three leading causes of deaths since 2012. Deaths due to chest, heart and stroke conditions, when combined, are the No. 1 cause of death, at 36%. As I said earlier, that reminds us why this debate is so vital and why we look to the Minister for a response that can help us, encourage us and give us some hope for the future.

These are some of the most prevalent, serious and life-altering conditions that anyone could have the misfortune to suffer from. They touch everyone's lives, be they in Northern Ireland, where my Strangford constituency is, Scotland or Wales—or England, with whose health matters this House is primarily concerned. I also very much look forward to hearing from—I apologise; I should have said it earlier—the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on behalf of the SNP. She has a deep interest in health, too, and I look forward very much to her contribution.

Every one of us has a neighbour, a friend or a loved one who has problems with their heart. Those problems do not halt at any border. They do not even, dare I say it—rather mischievously, perhaps—stop at the Irish sea border, which is able to prevent most things from crossing over. What prevents them from getting the care they need? The most obvious issue is undoubtedly waiting lists, which are at record levels. One of the questions I would like to ask the Minister—I always ask such questions constructively; that is my way of doing things—is: what is being done to reduce waiting lists and to provide some hope? According to NHS England, only this month the queue for NHS care stood at 6.5 million, the highest number on record ever. The number of patients waiting more than a year to be seen has increased to 323,000, which is a massive number. These are record levels as the health sector recovers from the impact of the pandemic.

Although the pandemic has hugely affected waiting lists, the issue predates the pandemic. At the start of 2020, around 30,000 people were waiting more than 18 weeks for cardiac care. This problem was not caused by covid, but it was exacerbated and worsened by covid. If it was bad before, it is much worse now.

The pandemic has had a seismic effect. In April 2022, two months ago, 170 times more people in England were waiting more than a year for heart procedures than in February 2020. I look for an indication of how we can reduce that number, and I know there is a strategy. I am putting this constructively, because I believe

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there are ways to do it, and the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish and for Motherwell and Wishaw, other Members and I are keen to hear what they are. Waiting lists for cardiac care have also hit record levels, rising to 319,000 people. In Northern Ireland there are 31 times as many people waiting more than six months for cardiac surgery compared with the end of 2019.

And it is not only life-saving surgery, as some of this surgery is about people's quality of life. Waiting times for echocardiograms, a kind of heart ultrasound used to diagnose a range of conditions, have risen, too. More than 170,000 patients were waiting for an echocardiogram at the end of April 2022, with 44.6% of them—almost half—waiting more than six weeks. That is a 32% increase on the year before. The covid-19 pandemic has increased those numbers, and I am not blaming anyone for that, but we need to address these issues, both as a Government and collectively, in a way that gives succour and support to our constituents.

In Northern Ireland, the number of people waiting more than six months for a cardiac investigation or treatment reached a new record in March 2022. That is the responsibility of Robin Swann, the Health Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I know he has taken steps to try to address it, but this is a general debate about how we address heart and circulatory diseases across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland following covid-19.

Nearly three quarters of people in Northern Ireland waiting for an echocardiogram have waited longer than the recommended clinical maximum. A number of worried, heartbroken family members have come to my office to say that covid is killing their loved ones, even though they did not have covid themselves. The delays were and continue to be a threat to life. Covid-19 does not seem to result in the number of hospital cases that it once did, which is good news.

Although an echocardiogram is not open-heart surgery, delays still cause increased anxiety for patients and delay the treatment they need. Taken as a whole, cancelled operations risk a rise in avoidable deaths and disability, and they cause anxiety and put physical pressure on people with heart problems.

What can we do about this? The British Heart Foundation is watching this debate, and I thank it for giving me most of my information. I also have a staff member who is qualified in this, and she has given me some information, too. I am proud to work with the British Heart Foundation, which has welcomed the additional funding for the NHS and the announcement that 95% of patients who need diagnostic tests will receive them within six weeks by 2025. It is good news that we have a target but, with respect, that target is a few years away. We need to consider how we address the situation over the intervening three years. The foundation has also pushed for an accompanying Government strategy for cardiovascular disease to take us beyond recovery and address the problems that existed before the pandemic.

With all that in mind, we need to think about how we can do better and support those who need help today. The NHS long-term plan identifies cardiovascular disease as “the single biggest area where the NHS can save lives over the next 10 years.”

If there is one issue I would love us to tackle, it is how we can save lives. I am ever mindful of the statistic I cited earlier that every three minutes someone dies as a result of heart problems. If we can save lives, that is what we want to be doing. We know that the NHS is doing all it can to deliver cardiovascular services, but without a properly funded cardiovascular disease strategy, it cannot meet its targets and deliver adequate care. When will a strategy be put in place to address the issues in the short term?

What else would such a strategy address? Cardiovascular diseases have many and varied impacts on patients, who need different forms of care as a result. Access to primary care is integral to the identification and management of heart conditions. When people cannot access primary care, opportunities to prevent heart attacks and strokes are lost, and more problems are caused for those who are already under pressure. How do we address that issue?

A 2021 survey of 3,000 heart patients found that 12% had a routine medication or condition review cancelled or rescheduled in the first year of the pandemic. I understand that the pandemic was not the Government's fault; the Government are to be complimented and thanked for how they responded to it, because we are all beneficiaries of the vaccination programme and it is probably why some of us are alive today. However, the cancellation or rescheduling of routine medication or condition reviews explains the longer waiting lists. Four patients in 10 have had appointments cancelled or rescheduled more than once. I know people back home who have actually fasted for an operation and then been told that it would not go ahead, which has caused anxiety and worry.

Health Foundation analysis shows that 31 million fewer primary care appointments were booked between April 2020 and March 2021 than in the previous 12 months. The pandemic has also had an impact on how patients with heart and circulatory disease interact with primary care. Some people say that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, but statistics prove a point: there were 5 million fewer face-to-face GP appointments in 2020 and in 2021 than in 2019. We understand the reasons why, but we have had a lot of debates in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall about GP appointments, and there is not one of us who would not wish for the number of appointments that we once had. My constituents tell me that, and I am anxious and keen for appointments to return.

Many people welcome the flexibility and safety that remote appointments bring, but they can mean that healthcare professionals lose the opportunity to collect information that they usually gain through physical examination. Constituents have told me that their ailments and problems would be better assessed physically. The quicker we move back to physical assessments, the better. Someone cannot really be diagnosed at the other end of a Zoom call; they can say what their issues are, and by and large the doctor may get a fair idea, but in many cases it takes a physical examination. The situation is no one's fault, but it may lead to a delayed or even missed diagnosis of a condition such as high blood pressure. I take a Losartan tablet for my blood pressure every day; I was told by my doctor not to worry about it, but after he told me I would have to take it every day, he said, “By the way, you can't stop it.” At that stage,

I realised that it is necessary to keep me on the straight and narrow and keep me breathing, so perhaps in a small way I understand the need to control blood pressure.

We do not know for sure how many missed diagnoses there have been but we do know that the NHS issued 470,000 fewer prescriptions for preventive cardiovascular drugs between March and October 2020 than in the same period of the previous year. The Institute for Public Policy Research forecasts that if those missing people with high-risk cardiovascular conditions do not commence treatment there will be an additional 12,000 heart attacks and strokes in the next five years. I ask the Minister what is being done to find those who have not been prescribed these preventive drugs over the last period of time, mindful that the unfortunate end result of that is more heart attacks.

This is a ticking time bomb, and we need to defuse it if we are to meet NHS long-term plan aspirations to prevent 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases by 2028-29 and, more importantly, if we are to be able to look those families in the face. Behind every person who dies of a heart attack there is a grieving family; we know that probably personally and certainly from constituent cases. As the Good Book says, we have threescore years and 10; we might get less than that or we might get more, but one thing we do know is that our time will pass. We must address the issue of preventing heart attacks, strokes and dementia.

At least half of the 15 million adults in the UK who have high blood pressure are undiagnosed. We all need a bit of stress; it is part of life, and I thrive on a bit of stress, but we can only take so much and it is important to find the right balance. Many of those with high blood pressure are not receiving effective treatment. It is vital to find people early and support them to manage cardiovascular risk factors such as atrial fibrillation. The Automated External Defibrillators (Public Access) Bill was introduced in the House not long ago, with support from all parties; I hope the Government will support its progress so its measures can be introduced in health and education settings. Finding the people with conditions early is vital; we must try to help people manage conditions such as raised cholesterol and hypertension so they can longer and healthier lives.

However, we cannot do that if we do not know who they are, which shows that data is important; it comes up in almost every health debate I participate in. To be fair, the Government and the Minister understand this, as data helps to focus on the right strategy and develop it in a constructive way based on evidence. I ask the Minister to put on the record where we currently are in relation to the collection of data, as it will point the way forward.

Some patients do not need to be found, however, as they or a loved one call 999 because of a medical emergency. For cardiovascular conditions, that normally means they have had a heart attack or stroke. A fast response that gets the right person to the right hospital department at the right time in an ambulance can be the difference between life and death. The newspapers often present examples of ambulances not arriving in time for whatever reason and people passing away. Unfortunately, in England the average response time in May for a category 2 emergency such as a heart attack or stroke was almost 40 minutes; we must do better. The target is 18 minutes; it is not being met.

I did not manage to source the corresponding data for Northern Ireland, but I know personally of one 70-year-old lady who had called believing her husband was having a stroke. She was told to give him an aspirin to chew and that the ambulance was delayed. She was then told in another phone call, which was fairly frantic, that if possible she should bring him herself to hospital, so she dragged him to the car—he is a fairly big man—and arrived at the hospital crying and begging passers-by to help. This man was diagnosed with some form of hernia which presented like a heart attack, and I thank God for that because he could have died waiting on the ambulance and then waiting on his elderly wife to trail him to a car and on to a hospital; that is simply not good enough.

Owing to the scale of current ambulance and A&E delays, we will see more disability and deaths from heart and circulatory disease that could otherwise have been avoided, but if we can avoid them—if we can do things better—the debate will have achieved its goal. This is happening despite NHS workers and paramedics going above and beyond the call of duty to help those in need. I used the word “heroic” earlier, and I use it again now. It is not a word that is taken out of context when I apply it to those workers. Ambulance delays are the symptom of a system that is under immense pressure at every level. Problems in one part of the NHS affect other parts. Problems with accessing primary care lead to more emergencies, which means that, again, there is a greater demand for ambulances.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I commend him for securing the debate. He mentioned the waiting times for category 2 emergencies. A constituent of mine lost her mother because the ambulance took more than an hour to arrive. This is a heartbreaking situation, and no family should have to go through it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need urgent action to improve ambulance attendance times?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do, and I am sorry to hear of the passing of the mother of the hon. Lady's constituent. If the ambulance had arrived earlier, perhaps she would be alive today. That example is probably replicated throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; I know that it is in my constituency, and indeed elsewhere. Perhaps when the Minister responds to the debate, we will hear some indication of how this could change.

A holistic response is needed. The NHS cannot begin to address this crisis, the very crisis to which the hon. Lady has just referred, without significant help from the Government—again, I look to the Minister—in the form of a cardiovascular strategy covering the whole patient pathway, as has been called for by the British Heart Foundation, which is also calling for a similar strategy in Northern Ireland. While the BHF wants the strategy in England, of which the Minister will be aware, to be replicated in Northern Ireland, I suspect that the same applies to Scotland and Wales.

The UK strategy, at its core, needs to address the issue of the workforce. Just as workforce shortages are key to issues involving waiting lists, access to primary care and ambulance delays; solving those shortages must be key to the response. I know from statements

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that Ministers have made, both in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, that they are committed to increasing the number of nurses, doctors and other staff in the NHS, and the figures are certainly very encouraging. We have not yet reached the targets of 50,000 nurses and 20,000 GPs, but the Minister may be able to give us some timescales and some idea of when the Government hope to achieve those targets.

People who are at risk of cardiovascular diseases, and those already living with them, are supported by a diverse range of health professionals—paramedics, cardiographers, and specialist cardiac nurses—but the 2021 “Getting It Right First Time” cardiology report estimates that the NHS is short of nearly 100 consultant cardiologists; there are currently about 1,700. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell us when those 100 vacancies will be filled. I ask these questions with the aim of being constructive and ensuring that our constituents throughout this great nation have a better idea of what is going to happen. It is said that we also need 760 new cardiac physiologists to meet the demand over the next decade. Is there a strategy and a recruitment plan? If there is, we will be greatly encouraged. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. He has talked about shortages, and how we should plan for the future. A number of my constituents have written to me about the financial difficulties experienced by medical students, particularly during the final two years of their training. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government really need to come up with a plan to protect and support student doctors, so that we can have the workforce that we need for the future, and ensure that people from all backgrounds can have a career in medicine?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that helpful intervention. I am glad that she mentioned that: it should have been in my notes and she has reminded me. We do need to have a plan to help those students who wish to pursue a future vocation as consultant cardiologists. If we can recruit them now, it will take three, four or even five years before they are ready. I am not sure whether it is the Minister’s responsibility, but perhaps she could give us some idea of whether there is a plan to give students some financial assistance. I have asked the question before, and the answer would be very interesting. If people make a commitment to staying in the NHS for that period of time, perhaps the Government can make a financial commitment to them.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and I am listening to it carefully. Doctors take between 10 and 15 years to become consultants once they have graduated, and they stay in the NHS for two years for the foundation levels. Many GPs are doing face-to-face appointments, and some departments are doing amazing work, such as St George’s Hospital in Tooting which is looking after a huge number of my family who have Brugada syndrome, a sudden death syndrome that affects the heart. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising awareness of the issue: there are some very good things going on in the NHS at the moment.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right. There are some remarkable consultants, and we should be greatly encouraged by that, but I want to highlight some of the shortfalls and look to the Minister and the Government for how we can take that forward. I mentioned a timescale of three, four or five years, but I accept that 10 or 15 years is more realistic.

We greatly underestimate the number of heart failure specialist nurses required to deliver the NHS long-term plan. The recommendations do not consider the full extent of covid-19 backlogs and national recovery targets, meaning the shortages are likely to be even more pronounced now than they would have been before.

More generally, the number of full-time, fully qualified GPs in England decreased by about 6% in the five years between 2016 and 2021. Full-time equivalent district nurses have reduced by 45% between 2010 and 2021. Seven out of 10 practice nurses work less than full time, and around a third are aged over 55.

I accept that the Government have committed to recruitment, but the issue is how the shortfall can be made up. Without a workforce capable of meeting demand, heart patients are at risk across the entire patient pathway, from the moment they dial 999 to when they find themselves in limbo waiting for specialist treatment. The NHS is publishing its long-term workforce plan in the autumn, and that must address shortages at specialty level. We need to know where the gaps in the cardiac workforce are so that we can address them. Perhaps the Minister can give us some idea of where we are in relation to that.

I am also interested, as a Northern Ireland MP who is principally based in this House, in the discussions that take place with the regional Administrations. The shadow Minister from the SNP will speak shortly and I am sure she will give us—as she always does—good information and the evidential base for what is happening in Scotland. I am always keen that all the Administrations come together with their knowledge and information, whether from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or England, so that we can swap ideas on how to do things better. I am keen to hear what is happening in that regard.

We also need to know where the gaps are regionally. While one postcode area may be exceptional, others may not be. While there might be a shortfall in England, we need to know what is happening in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The number and type of cardiac health workers is not spread evenly across the UK. The greatest number and range of workers is concentrated in large urban areas in England, meaning that many rural areas find themselves at a disadvantage. I hope the Minister can give us some idea of what can be done to improve the situation. The areas with the most workers are not necessarily the areas with the highest rate of cardiovascular diseases, or the poorest outcomes. We need to reappraise how that is done.

The British Heart Foundation is conducting a research project designed to further pinpoint gaps in the cardiac workforce and predict where they may come in future. I wish the BHF all the best as it carries out this vital informative work. That research project might be helpful to the Department; I hope the Minister will be able to tell us what discussions she has had with the BHF on that.

If we address the issue of workforce, we can start addressing waiting lists, primary care and ambulances, and start saving more lives. Let us not forget that the

NHS long-term plan identified cardiovascular disease as the single biggest area in which the NHS can save lives over the next decade. We all want to save lives and if there is a way of doing so, the Government need to grasp that. This House and our constituents need to see a clear plan.

So there we have it—I have encapsulated the debate over a bit longer time than I thought I might, but it is an important issue. We need a UK Government strategy specific to cardiovascular disease that addresses the cardiac workforce crisis, the disparity across the United Kingdom and provides sufficient resources for the delivery of cardiac services.

Cardiac care cannot wait, because those suffering from cardiovascular diseases deserve better. In this place, every one of us can be a part of life-changing post-covid changes for the better. I hope that today's debate is another step in that programme to change things. I look forward to the contributions from other Members. I thank those who have already intervened. I look forward to the responses from the shadow Ministers and especially to that from the Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We come to the SNP spokesperson, Marion Fellows.

12.8 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and for his passion in delivering his speech today. We all know and value the work he does to raise issues for his constituents here and in Westminster Hall. I also thank Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland and the British Heart Foundation for the valuable work that they do.

I start by pointing out that NHS Scotland is and always has been independent; NHS England or the NHS in Northern Ireland do not cover Scotland. We have always done things slightly differently, but work well in conjunction with the other health services.

Heart disease remains a major cause of death and disability in Scotland, accounting for more than 9,000 deaths each year. Ischaemic heart disease, which can lead to heart attack, is still Scotland's single biggest killer, responsible for 11.2% of all deaths in 2019 and 25,000 hospital admissions every year. In March 2021, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on patients with heart failure, emphasising that the most important factor in such diseases and premature deaths is poverty. Within their limited powers, the Scottish Government are doing everything they can to help those in poverty in Scotland by such measures as mitigating the bedroom tax, introducing a baby box to give a good start to every baby born in Scotland, and introducing other benefits to those qualifying, including a best start grant, pregnancy and baby payment, and the Scottish child payment. These are all designed to improve life chances for people, and especially children, living in Scotland. If we keep the weans well, they will continue with good outcomes further on in their lives.

The covid-19 pandemic has been a worrying time for many folk, especially if they already had a pre-existing condition such as heart or circulatory disease. There is no doubt that covid-19 has impacted some groups more than others. It is an unwelcome reality that communities

experience health, quality of life and life expectancy differently. Having a heart or circulatory condition probably does not make someone more likely to catch coronavirus, but if they have a heart condition, it can mean that they could get more ill if they catch it, so anyone with a heart condition is considered at an increased risk of more severe complications, and someone who is over 60 years old has a particularly high risk. The covid vaccine—we have to emphasise this—is safe for people with heart and circulatory conditions. Getting the vaccine is one of the main things that people can do to reduce the risk of becoming seriously ill from covid-19, as well as getting a booster shot when offered. During the first lockdown period of the pandemic, there was a deferral and reduction of services, including diagnostics, access to specialist support in the community, and cardiac rehabilitation. This needs addressing across the United Kingdom.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government are taking action on tackling heart disease in Scotland and have published an updated heart disease action plan. The covid-19 pandemic has brought the need to address heart disease in Scotland into even sharper focus, having had a significant impact on people with heart disease and on the services that support them. The heart disease action plan sets out the Scottish Government's vision of minimising preventable heart disease and of ensuring timely and equitable access to diagnosis, treatment and care. The vision of the plan is to minimise preventable heart disease and ensure that everyone with suspected heart disease in Scotland gets what they need. We need to identify ways to support people with the emotional and psychological impacts of heart disease, giving as many people as possible access to specialist support, including vital rehabilitation services, and, where necessary, supporting access to palliative care. Addressing inequality will be monitored and considered carefully throughout the implementation of the plan. In Scotland, one of the things we are really good at is listening to a wide range of voices in efforts to create pathways and reshape models of care. The use of technology and care closer to home has also been vital to maintain care throughout the pandemic and has important lessons for delivering person-centred care in future.

Cardiovascular disease is one of the main causes of death and disability in the UK, but it can often be largely prevented by leading a healthy lifestyle, and the Scottish Government are supporting people to make healthier choices. It is not always good to talk about what has happened but good rather to think about how we can prevent it happening in future. Many people in Scotland live with cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol that place them at increased risk of heart disease or stroke. Health-harming products—alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks—contribute to widening of health inequalities. Improving diet and levels of healthy weight is a public health priority. The Scottish Government are taking wide-ranging action to support healthier choices, as they have set out in "A healthier future: Scotland's diet and healthy weight delivery plan". The Scottish Government are shifting the emphasis from dealing with the consequences of obesity to tackling the underlying causes, which includes: ending poverty; supporting fair wages and families; and improving physical and social environments. The Scottish Government are committed to introducing during this Parliament a Bill that includes powers to restrict the promotion of food and drink that

[Marion Fellows]

are high in fat, sugar and salt. They have long advocated that TV and online advertising of foods high in fat, sugar or salt should be restricted to give children the best start in life. The SNP welcomes the fact that the UK Government have now moved in line with the Scottish Government's position, although it is disappointed at the delayed implementation.

The Scottish Government's tobacco control action plan sets out the priorities for reducing smoking rates to 5% or less by 2034. Their alcohol framework sets out priorities for preventing alcohol-related harm, and it contains 20 actions, building on existing action to change Scotland's relationship with alcohol, including Scotland's world-leading minimum unit pricing policy.

The Scottish Government are investing in health and are committed to significantly reducing health inequalities. There is no doubt that covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on people living in areas of socio-economic deprivation. The Scottish Government's programme for Government includes commitments to improve life expectancy and to tackle health inequalities.

The Scottish Government are committed to ensuring appropriate staff resources and training to deliver timely and equitable services across Scotland for people with heart disease. Under the SNP, Scotland has record health funding: a total health portfolio funding of £18 billion, with resource funding up over 90% in cash terms under the SNP since 2006-07. Frontline health spending is £111 higher per head in Scotland than in England. That is important because the Scottish Government recognise that we start from a lower base of good health, and they are committed to improving health. As I have said, disease prevention is a big factor.

We now have higher staffing per head than NHS England. We have a record number of GPs working in Scotland, with more per head in Scotland than the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government's NHS recovery plan, which is backed by more than £1 billion, sets out plans for health and care over the next five years. They are creating a network of national treatment centres, increasing capacity for more than 40,000 additional planned elective procedures and diagnostic care across 12 different specialities. They are also targeting improvements designed to maintain the 31-day standard and achieve the 62-day standard on a sustainable basis. They are also scaling up the use of NHS Near Me, which is a really good initiative and supported by £3.4 million a year. They are providing general practices and their patients with support from a wide range of healthcare professionals in the community. My own GP practice uses such healthcare professionals and it is really effective.

The Scottish Government also recognise the negative impact that long covid can have on the health and wellbeing of those affected, so they are spending more money to improve the care and support available for people with long covid across Scotland. The Scottish Government's chief scientific officer is funding nine Scottish-led research projects on the longer-term effects of covid-19, which will also impact on those with heart conditions and circulatory diseases. Does the Minister agree that what the Scottish Government are doing will help people with heart and circulatory diseases, and will she consider emulating their actions?

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

12.18 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I call him my hon. Friend because he is my friend—not only for securing the debate but for his skilful, seamless segue from Westminster Hall to the main Chamber. I join him in paying tribute to all those who work in our health and care system—from doctors and nurses through to porters, cleaners and cooks. They all keep our health and care system going, and we thank each and every one of them for the work they do.

As we heard from the hon. Members for Strangford and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who leads for the SNP on these matters, the issue of health inequalities cannot be ignored. The hon. Gentleman talked about postcodes and the workforce not being spread equally, and those health inequalities are not spread evenly across the UK. The hon. Lady mentioned some endemic health inequalities in parts of Scotland, and the same is true of every part of the UK. The maps of deprivation, of certain black and minority ethnic communities, of income levels, of education levels, of obesity and of smoking prevalence can almost be overlaid, and directly correlate, with those for the conditions that we are talking about. Those health inequalities and how we tackle them must be at the heart of everything we do, whether we are talking about the UK Government and their health policy for England, or the devolved Governments across the nations of the UK and the work they do to tackle these same health inequalities in the communities we represent. Health prevention must be at the core of what we do, and I am grateful for the insight the hon. Lady gave on the work of the NHS in Scotland and the insight that the hon. Gentleman brings on the work of the NHS in Northern Ireland. I am a big fan of the Marmot way of looking at health inequalities and how we tackle the social determinants of health. If we get that prevention policy right, we tackle the very conditions that we are talking about.

The pandemic piled massive pressure on the NHS, and indeed the motion is on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on people with heart and circulatory diseases. But these problems did not start with the covid pandemic. They have been exacerbated massively by it, but I am afraid that we are now seeing the consequences of 12 years of Conservative Government in England: soaring waiting times, an acute staffing crisis and the worst levels of patient satisfaction since the 1950s. We went into 2020 with the NHS in crisis, and the pandemic ruthlessly exploited and exacerbated the failures. As the Culture Secretary recently admitted, a decade of Conservative rule left our NHS “wanting and inadequate” before covid hit. That is nowhere more apparent than in cardiac care. At the start of 2020, 30,000 people were waiting more than 18 weeks for cardiac care. That was already an unacceptably high figure, but it has ballooned by an unbelievable amount in the last two years. Now, 319,000 people are on an NHS waiting list for cardiac care—that is 319,000 individuals anxiously awaiting essential care, worried for their future, worried about their health and worried about their lives.

Cardiac care is time-sensitive. For example, patients with severe aortic stenosis—I will put my teeth in to say that—who are treated within two years have a 50% chance

of survival, but that falls to 20% after five years. Every day that the Government fail to act, more patients face worse outcomes. About 15 million adults in the UK have high blood pressure and about 270,000 people over 65 have undiagnosed atrial fibrillation. What does that mean? It means we are sitting on a ticking timebomb, and unless we pre-emptively support people to manage cardiovascular risk factors, the system will come under even more pressure. I urge Ministers to work relentlessly to get a grip on this crisis. They need to come to terms with the fact that, on their watch, cardiac care has been allowed to falter. It is maddening that in these circumstances the Government have not set out a robust strategy for cardiac care and how they plan to address these really important issues. When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, will she commit to a timeline for that strategy, or will we hear more warm words with precious little action?

I want to reiterate concerns raised about urgent and emergency care. We now know that the average response time for a category 2 emergency, such as a heart attack or stroke, is more than double the target of 18 minutes. In some parts of the country, it is far, far worse than that, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). Does the Minister agree that no one suffering from a heart attack or a stroke should have to wait 40 minutes or more for an ambulance? If so—I am sure that she does, as we all do in the House; nobody wants to see those failings—what discussions have she and her colleagues had to sort it out? This is a crisis on multiple fronts, and I am afraid that we need action rather than words.

From the moment a patient dials 999, they are being systematically failed. As we know, our NHS staff are heroes. Without them, the system would have buckled under the weight of incompetence and indecision during the pandemic, but they are fighting an uphill battle and the Government are letting them do it alone. That needs to change.

There is also a failure to acknowledge the role that prevention plays with health and social care. The Government have cut public health budgets here in England—that happened before the pandemic, and it is just not acceptable—and it means that only half of adults over 40 are attending regular health checks, which were introduced by the Labour Government in 2009. Those health checks have provided crucial evidence for spotting diseases early on, not least cardiovascular disease. With the fall in health checks, many opportunities to spot avoidable problems are being missed, especially among people from disadvantaged communities as I and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw outlined earlier. Indeed, the disproportionate impact of covid-19 showed starkly just how unequal a country we have become in health terms.

We also have huge numbers of people reporting difficulty in accessing primary care, as the hon. Member for Strangford referred to in his contribution. Some 40% of surveyed heart patients or those at risk of cardiovascular disease had their appointments cancelled or rescheduled more than once. In 2019, the Prime Minister promised the British public that he would deliver 6,000 extra NHS GPs. Instead, numbers have gone down—another broken promise to add to the never-ending list of broken promises that define this Tory Government. Will the Minister explain to the House why the target is not being met and explain to patients why they are waiting longer than ever before?

We know from the Getting It Right First Time national cardiology report that the NHS needs 760 new cardiac physiologists and almost 100 consultant cardiologists to meet anticipated demand. Again, I reiterate the concerns raised about urgent and emergency care, because we need those staff in place. We need that workforce.

Mrs Drummond: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but how does he then account for the fact that in Labour-run Wales the waiting lists are even longer? I think 21% of the population are now on the waiting list, and that has extended dramatically, far more than in the NHS in England.

Andrew Gwynne: As we discussed at the start of the debate, the NHS is four systems that work together. We are here in the UK Parliament to hold the UK Government to account for the NHS in England. In terms of the NHS in Wales, the Welsh Government receive a block grant, as indeed do the Scottish Government, and they decide how to spend that money themselves.

There are some great things about the Welsh NHS, not least its leading the way on public health issues across Wales, and we can learn things from there, but I want to ensure that the promise about GP access that the hon. Lady's Government made to the people in my constituency in England is kept. That is why I posed that point to the Minister. Again, we need the Government to outline how they plan to fill those vacancies and whether the workforce plan, when it finally materialises, will include speciality-level data and strategy to fill those gaps.

We in the Opposition have been clear. Labour would put patients first and sort out the mess that the current Government have left our NHS in. The last Labour Government brought waiting lists down from 18 months to 18 weeks, and we would do that again—[*Interruption.*] The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), chunters from the Front Bench, but I remind him that, while patient satisfaction is worse today than it has ever been and our waiting lists are some of the highest in NHS history, when we left office, patient satisfaction was the best it had ever been and waiting lists were among the lowest in NHS history. That is our record and I am proud of it.

That progress has been undone by this Conservative Government. Again, we are on standby to step in and protect our NHS. But we would focus on prevention. That prevention would improve outcomes and guarantee access to GP services for those who need them. We would publish a robust and comprehensive workforce strategy, and transform pay and conditions in the process. As part of that, we would support the hundreds of thousands of cardiovascular patients who are anxiously awaiting treatment. We would support health and social care staff who are shattered and demoralised after carrying us through the pandemic, and we would build an NHS that was resilient, accessible and fit for the future.

At the heart of that is a public health agenda that will seek to resolve the health inequalities that are endemic in too many parts of the country, where those health conditions are holding back the life chances of the constituents we represent and causing misery, poverty and pain. That is why a holistic approach to public health, and within that a strategy to deal with heart and circulatory diseases, is crucial. I hope the Minister

[Andrew Gwynne]

understands the real importance of that. We stand ready to support her while she is in Government to get the strategy right, but getting that strategy right is crucial.

12.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate on heart and circulatory diseases. It is vital that we keep those serious diseases on the agenda. As he alluded to, many of us have personal reasons why that is so important. My mum had two heart attacks in her 60s, though she survived another 20 years thanks to the NHS, and my father had a debilitating stroke that took away his ability to speak and to walk independently. I also thank, as the hon. Gentleman did, the charities that support patients in their time of need and continue to support their families—a huge thank you to all those charities.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that cardiovascular disease is a key priority for NHS England. One of the ambitions in the NHS long-term plan is to raise awareness of the symptoms of CVD and ensure early and rapid access to diagnostic tests and treatment. NHS England has a programme of work to support this ambition, which is overseen by the national clinical director for heart disease and supported by an expert advisory group of clinical professionals across the country. That work remained a priority during the height of the covid-19 pandemic. Like other hon. Members, may I take the opportunity to thank all the dedicated NHS staff who worked hard to maintain services, despite the incredible challenges presented by covid, and are now working hard to restore them? Urgent hospital cardiology services were maintained throughout the pandemic.

In February, the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS published our delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care. The plan sets out a clear vision for how the NHS will recover and expand elective services over the next three years, including for cardiology. To further reduce patient waiting times, we have committed £2.3 billion to increase the volume of diagnostic activity and roll out at least 100 community diagnostic centres by 2024-25, which will provide services to support the earlier diagnosis of cardiovascular disease, including physiological measurement tests such as echocardiography, electrocardiograms, pathology tests and CT and MRI scans. Some £1.5 billion is committed towards elective recovery services, to roll out new surgical hubs and to increase bed capacity and equipment. That includes surgeries and treatment for cardiovascular disease.

NHS England has also established a cardiac pathway improvement programme, which is taking an end-to-end approach to the restoration of cardiac services that will deliver improved prevention, early and accurate diagnosis, reduced waits and best practice treatment and enhanced recovery. People with heart failure will be better supported by multidisciplinary teams as part of primary care networks. Greater access to echocardiography in primary care will improve the investigation of breathlessness and the early detection of heart failure and heart valve disease.

Stroke services across England also continued to provide rehabilitation and post-acute services to stroke survivors during the pandemic. In part, that was helped

by innovative methods of care delivery; clinical teams used virtual rehabilitation alongside face-to-face contact to ensure that every patient got the treatment and support that they needed, and 80% of patients reported positive or very positive experiences. However, we recognise that many people will want face-to-face rehabilitation. To that end, the NHS will deliver personalised, needs-based and goal-oriented stroke rehabilitation to every stroke survivor who needs it, in their place of residence. This will be a lifetime offer with annual reviews, recognising that a patient's needs will change over the course of their life. The national stroke service model, which was published in May 2021, summarises the gold standard of care across the stroke pathway and advises providers and commissioners on how each element of the pathway can be improved, including how services can ensure that 90% of stroke patients receive care on a specialist stroke unit.

I would like to reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that preventing CVD from developing in the first place is a key priority. One of the aims of England's NHS health check programme is to prevent heart disease. As the Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), referred to, the programme was largely suspended between April 2020 and February 2022 as a result of the pandemic and in line with national guidance from NHS England. An estimated 2 million people will have missed out on an NHS health check as a result, of whom an estimated 500,000 would have been found to have raised blood pressure and 400,000 would have been found to be at risk of a heart attack or a stroke in the next 10 years. Data for July to September 2021 indicates that local areas had begun to recover the service, with 136 of 152 local authorities reporting some level of activity. However, the number of checks offered and delivered over the period is about 40% of what was reported prior to the pandemic.

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is supporting local authorities to recover the health check service, including by showcasing local delivery models that demonstrate innovative approaches to reaching people at higher risk of CVD and by working with local authorities to pilot a digital NHS health check that enables people to self-complete an NHS health check at home, including cholesterol sampling.

In addition, NHS England is working with doctors and other health professionals to support patients with heart disease through the roll-out of the NHS@Home scheme. This self-management scheme enables patients with heart disease to look after themselves in their own home. Patients will be supported to understand their medications, record daily weights and blood pressure and recognise symptoms if they deteriorate. It is anticipated that that will lead to a reduction in hospital admissions, increased quality of life and improved patient and carer knowledge of managing their condition.

Members will be aware that high blood pressure can lead to heart failure, and I am pleased that NHS England plans to increase support for people at greater risk by increasing the number of people who have access to remote blood pressure monitoring and management. That will particularly apply to people with high blood pressure who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, from areas of higher deprivation and aged 65 years or over. This intervention will allow people to monitor their blood pressure from home, avoiding a trip to their

GP practice by communicating the results to their primary care clinician via a digital platform or phone call to the practice.

GPs also have an important part to play in reducing cardiovascular disease. The quality and outcomes framework is an annual voluntary incentive programme for GP practices in England, and it contains indicators promoting high-quality care for patients with coronary heart disease or with a diagnosis of heart failure.

For the two years of the pandemic, general practice was required to release capacity to support the pandemic response and to agree an approach to prioritising care for the most vulnerable patients. QOF was reinstated in full from 1 April 2022. That means practices will be paid based on their performance, including on the indicators relating to coronary and circulatory disease, which will ensure practices are again incentivised to deliver this care.

Our upcoming national vaccination service, announced by the Secretary of State in January, will bring together all the innovation, learning and good practice from the covid vaccination programme to deliver life-saving vaccinations. We are also keen for the service to offer people wider prevention services as they are jabbed, by taking the opportunity to have conversations about their health and lifestyle, to offer public health advice and impromptu health checks, and to signpost those who may need further investigation to wider NHS services. Making sure every contact with the NHS counts can help us to spot diseases such as CVD early and ensure people get the right advice and support to hopefully prevent more serious disease.

The hon. Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and for Strangford talked about ambulance times. The number of ambulance support staff has increased by 38% since 2010. The NHS has been provided with additional funding to address the current situation, which we know is not acceptable. NHS England and NHS Improvement are providing a range of support, including targeted support and additional funding for hospitals facing the greatest delays to help with the pressures both now and in the future. NHSE and NHSI have tendered a £30 million procurement contract for an auxiliary ambulance service.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish talked about health disparities. He will know—I do not think he has any doubt—that I am determined to tackle this issue. It is something I am very passionate about. Very shortly, we will be publishing our health disparities White Paper. We need to tackle obesity, smoking, alcohol and drugs, because they are factors that impact on people's health, including, disproportionately, cardiovascular disease.

Margaret Greenwood: I am pleased to hear the Minister's commitment. Will she then support an increase in universal credit by £20 a week? Poverty has a huge impact on people's physical wellbeing.

Maggie Throup: I think that question should be directed at the Treasury, not the Department of Health and Social Care.

If I may continue to address questions raised, I am pleased to say that our target of 50,000 more nurses is on track for 2024. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) made the very good

point that it takes quite some time to train our amazing healthcare professionals, particularly those who are highly specialised, such as in cardiology. She also highlighted the disparity in waiting times. In England, 11.6% of the population is on a waiting list, but in Labour-run Wales, as she rightly said, the figure is 21%. We have to be careful when we make comparisons and try to criticise one nation over another. Everybody is trying their utmost to get things back on track in whatever way they can, because we know that the population's health is a priority.

Jim Shannon: One of the questions I asked, in a constructive manner, was about the shortage of 100 consultant cardiologists. I am mindful—this was referred to by another hon. Member—that that training can take 10 to 15 years. If the Minister does not have the answer today, I am happy for her to write to let us know.

Maggie Throup: The hon. Gentleman asks a specific question, so if I may, I will get back to him.

In conclusion, I hope today I have demonstrated the Government's commitment to improve the lives of people living with heart and circulatory disease. Our commitment is there. If we can continue to make an impact on the lives of people with these conditions with better prevention, diagnostics and treatment, it will bring significant benefits to the NHS and better health outcomes for those affected. We can all agree that that really matters. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing this very important issue to the House for debate today.

12.47 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, in particular the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for giving us the Scottish perspective. I always wish to hear, as we all do, what the Scottish Parliament is doing on health. SNP Members often give us examples of how we can do things, which is why I talked earlier about exchanging viewpoints.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the shadow Minister, is indeed a good friend. Both he and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw talked about health prevention. That is clearly what I would like to see, too. We all, including the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), referred to the ambulance shortfall. The Minister gave us some encouragement, which I appreciate, with £2.3 billion in the next three years on diagnostic activity, earlier intervention for cardiac, and a lifetime offer of virtual or face-to-face rehabilitation. On ambulance times, there was additional funding also to the auxiliary ambulance service—I think the figure was £30 million. And we are looking towards the 2024 target for 50,000 nurses.

With that in mind, I thank the Minister most gratefully for her response. I will be happy to take some of the other singular issues in a written reply, whenever she has that opportunity. Again, I thank everyone who participated. I thank you, too, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not often said, but thank you so much for what you do.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on people with heart and circulatory diseases.

DWP Office Closures

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

12.49 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I want to raise the issue of Department for Work and Pensions office closures. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in particular my role as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe you have made representations on behalf of your constituents who are employed in the Department for Work and Pensions. This issue affects DWP staff across these islands. The PCS is the largest trade union in the civil service, representing 180,000 members, with workers throughout the civil service and Government agencies, including 50,000 members employed by the DWP. They are concerned, as hon. Members across the House are, about the DWP's announcement of 17 March 2022 that more than 40 of its processing sites are to close, which we believe has the potential of putting more than 3,000 jobs at risk of redundancy.

There are three categories of processing site closures. The first is where the site is closing and the work will not be consolidated anywhere in the vicinity. I understand there are 13 sites in that category. The second category is where the site is closing but work will be consolidated into an office that the DWP has deemed is within the vicinity, which I understand is 28 sites. The third category is sites that were originally announced as transitional, which will be retained in the short to medium term but will remain badged as transitional. That is eight sites.

Despite the initial assurances given by Department Ministers at an urgent question I secured, the real concern is that we were told that the closures would not impact frontline services, but a further announcement, on 30 March, was for the closure of five jobcentres. That is very concerning and seems to be the latest push by the DWP to implement its network design strategy, which will put jobs and services at serious risk, and there is concern that the latest announcements could signal further jobcentre closures.

The PCS parliamentary group is clear that, following the previous closures under the people and locations programme, these closures will have a devastating impact on the services that staff provide and the local communities where the offices are based. They are a serious threat to DWP staff jobs.

On 17 March, when the original announcement was made, there were 1,118 staff in processing sites that will close without the work being consolidated within the vicinity and 7,341 staff in sites where the work is being consolidated into other offices. The speed at which the Department is operating and has moved to issue "at risk of redundancy" letters to staff across 25 of the 43 sites vindicates the concerns that many of us have that jobs will be lost as a result of the closures.

While some of the sites in the second category are seeing work moving into buildings that are very close by—the Falkirk and Preston sites, for example—other offices that the DWP has classed as being in the vicinity, and so plans to move staff to, are actually some considerable

distance away. That includes the proposal to move the Doncaster office to Sheffield, which you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, is 22 miles away. In many of the offices, one-to-one meetings have taken place with members of staff and it is clear that many will not be able to move; it is therefore certain that many DWP staff will be faced with the very real prospect of redundancy.

There are two processing sites in Wales due for closure from a previous round of closures, where staff have also been confirmed as at risk of redundancy as part of the 16 June announcement. That is because there are more than 120 staff based across the two sites who are unable to make the long journey to the proposed new office. The offices are closing in two tranches. On 16 June, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that, of the 29 sites in the first tranche, at 25 sites a total of 903 staff were at risk of redundancy. We believe that at the remaining 14 sites, which are due to be closed on a slightly slower timeline, similar numbers of staff are likely to be at risk of redundancy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: No Adjournment debate would be complete without an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: Adjournment debates do not usually come this early in the day, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you and I know, but none the less we are very pleased, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on coming forward with it. He is assiduous when it comes to these issues, and I thank him for that. I think the whole House should thank him for it, by the way.

Coming from a rural constituency, with intermittent public transport as well as an intermittent internet and mobile service, I know that centralisation or closure of services is never a good suggestion for people in isolated areas. I know the hon. Gentleman is referring to towns, but does he agree and will he call on the Minister to consider, where this is possible, the suggestion of having satellite offices in rural areas such as where I live as well as in the centralised urban areas he has mentioned?

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because I have family members in his constituency, as he knows, so I am well aware of his constituency. He raises a very important point about satellite offices, but there is also homeworking. We were told that homeworking was a suggestion, but it seems now that the Government want to force people away from working at home into offices—only the Government are now closing these offices, so there do seem to be some mixed messages from the Government. I do thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He makes a very important point, and I hope the Minister will respond to it.

On 16 June, a voluntary redundancy scheme was offered to those staff at the 25 sites identified as being at risk of redundancy. Most of these closures are based on plans originally drawn up in 2016 and announced in 2017, and they are seriously out of date. The sites chosen for closure have, according to the Department, been selected after not just looking at the condition and suitability of buildings, but considering the potential impact of taking work out of locations that score more highly for economic deprivation.

However, many of these closures do not seem to make a lot of sense if their impact on the local economy has been taken into account. Many of these closures are in areas of economic deprivation that can hardly afford to lose good-quality public sector jobs. For example, 29 of the 41 processing sites are in constituencies that have higher than the national average claimant rates, and 18 of the 33 England office closures are in constituencies rated in the top 100 most deprived constituencies in the country. I do not call that levelling up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) has done a survey of businesses near the Springburn site, which is earmarked for closure. It makes interesting reading, and I will take a moment to mention what has been identified in that community impact assessment. There are many businesses that staff at the Springburn site use. The off-sales, where people may perhaps buy a bottle of wine before they go home for the evening, and the Chinese restaurant next door, have concerns about the closure of that office.

The local florist is very concerned because the staff use that service, the local pharmacy has concerns about the closure and the local butcher has made representations about the closure of the Springburn office. That is the very real impact, just in Springburn alone, that such office closures will have on the local economy. It seems—perhaps the Minister can confirm this—that the overriding reason for many of these closures is that the Department for Work and Pensions has itself let the buildings in which it is located fall into major disrepair.

Let me now turn to concerns about the lack of opportunities to redeploy staff. When offices have been closing, Ministers have sought to reassure Members that staff will be redeployed elsewhere in the DWP or in other Departments whenever possible. However, the potential for redeployment elsewhere in the civil service has become less likely following the Government's announcement on 13 May, through the press and without consultation with staff or trade unions, of their plan to cut 91,000 civil service jobs. The DWP's decision not to make permanent thousands of staff on fixed-term appointments will, I believe, have come as a blow to staff as well as service delivery.

Under the recent permanency exercise for 12,000 work coaches who joined the Department on fixed-term contracts, only 9,300 have been offered permanent posts. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell us whether those who are not among the 9,300 will be offered permanent employment in the DWP. Not all the posts have been offered to staff in their preferred workplaces, so they face making significant journeys if they want to continue their employment with the DWP.

The current position is that 1,400 full-time equivalent staff are on a waiting list but are being told that their contracts will end on 30 June 2022. Other FTEs have not been put on the waiting list and have been selected out of the process, despite having joined the DWP on the basis of fair and open competition. If this position does not change, it will lead to significant shortfalls in staff in jobcentres and DWP offices, which face staff reductions of up to 5,000. That will lead to increased workloads, place greater pressure on existing staff, and have a detrimental impact on the services that the public receive from the DWP. We believe that it makes no sense to threaten experienced staff with redundancies when the Department needs more staff, not fewer, to

deal with higher workloads. If these closures and job cuts are allowed to go ahead, we will face the absurd prospect of staff being made redundant in one area while new staff are recruited in another to do the same job. That would be both costly and inefficient.

There is also the issue of the buildings. I understand that the Department aims to rationalise its estate, taking into account matters such as hybrid working, making offices fit for the future, and considering the green agenda as it reviews existing offices. I am told that all offices will be looked at, including jobcentres, and that the Department wants to ensure that everyone is working in an office that is of good quality.

The employers seem to believe that much of the DWP's existing estate is no longer fit for purpose. They will seek to leave sites that are no longer suitable and relocate in new premises in the vicinity where they want to maintain a presence, overhauling some sites and closing others where they believe the DWP no longer needs to be located. They also seem to believe that having fewer, bigger buildings is a more efficient way of running the Department, although, as we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that will not necessarily always be the case.

However, many of the processing sites are based in buildings from which the DWP will still operate. For example, jobcentres remain in the same location in Doncaster, a site that could easily accommodate the 300-plus staff that the DWP considers to be the minimum number to make a building viable. It will not be possible to sub-let parts of the buildings that it will be vacating, so we question the sense in making experienced staff redundant only for the part of the empty office space that they have vacated to—potentially—become unused. One such example is the Gloucester jobcentre at Cedar House, where only one part of one floor is being vacated and more than 40 staff who are unable to move to Worcester have now been identified as being at risk of redundancy.

The Department and Ministers have claimed that the estate programme is in support of the Government's commitments on sustainability and net zero carbon. However, these plans are likely to lead to staff having to travel further to work as a result, which in turn would lead to more carbon emissions. No doubt the hon. Member for Strangford would agree with that, given his earlier intervention. It is also worth considering that the DWP is not totally vacating many of the buildings in question but has not said whether it plans to invest in making these buildings more energy-efficient in future. There is little evidence that the DWP is doing anything to improve the rest of its estate. Much of the remaining estate is similarly unsuitable and unsustainable. We also have concerns that not all the buildings the DWP proposes to move staff to will be able to accommodate the numbers.

That brings me to the issue of equality impact assessments. The restrictions on the equality impact assessments have been lifted by the Department and they are now available in the House of Commons Library. However, there are concerns that the equality impact assessments have identified that there will be groups disadvantaged by the closures but said very little about what is being done to mitigate those impacts. The assessments were produced before the one-to-one interviews were conducted with staff facing closure of their offices. It is likely that this process would further confirm the impact on people with protected characteristics.

[Chris Stephens]

Women form a significant majority of the DWP's workforce, on some sites constituting over 75%. There are no tangible mitigations offered in these documents that are likely to compensate for the clear detriment that women face from this office closure programme. People with disabilities, particularly if they impair their ability to travel to work, are likely to face disproportionate impact from office closures as they will have to travel, in some cases by making significant journeys, further to work.

The DWP aims to mitigate the impact on disabled staff by exploring reasonable adjustments and flexible working arrangements. However, this is unlikely to provide sufficient mitigation as the Department is currently not prepared to fully embrace working from home as a redundancy avoidance. I am sure that people in Strangford and other rural parts of these islands have benefited, and Departments have benefited, from staff working from home, particularly those in the DWP, where there was a huge increase in the number of universal credit claimants, for example. DWP staff should be congratulated on the work that they did during that period and should not now have to face their offices being closed and the prospect of redundancy.

In some sites—for example, Hackney—there is a high percentage of staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. The proposed solution inevitably means longer travel at greater expense if they are able to relocate, which is a clear detriment for those impacted. In Blackburn, 36% of staff have been identified as being ethnic minority. Despite this, the DWP's analysis is that there is no evidence to suggest that they will be negatively impacted. We believe that that analysis is flawed. There are high proportions of part-time workers, who are more likely to be carers, in many of these sites. Again, there is little by way of mitigation offered to those workers.

We are aware that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the permanent secretary invited a limited number of staff to attend a meeting on 26 May 2022 that they addressed with a presentation of the departmental plan for 2022-25. Once again, the DWP and Ministers have gone to staff without proper engagement with the trade unions. I would suggest that there should be full and proper consultation with the trade unions on the detail of a plan that has huge implications for trade union members, DWP staff and the public they serve. The plan identifies a cut in funding for staffing resources while at the same time introducing more work. It suggests a 12% cut in funding for staff over the three-year period. It also suggests a 16% increase in payments for universal credit, legacy benefits and pensions. This can only mean more work for less staff.

We want to see the Department take a realistic approach to a likely surge in demand for services as the impact of the war in Ukraine and the fall-out from the pandemic devastate the economy. I hope that the Minister will be able to answer many of the points that have been raised on this office closure programme and the concerns that we have for DWP staff, who deliver a great service. I hope that she will be able to confirm that there are no redundancies for those staff.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am checking whether anyone else present wishes to speak; there being time, I cannot stop that. Excellent; no Member has risen to their feet, so I call Minister Mims Davies.

1.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing the debate and for his immense interest in this issue, and I also note his register of interests declaration, but I want to take this opportunity to reassure him that there are currently no planned changes that would affect his constituency.

I have very proudly held the role of employment Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions for almost three years now and I greatly recognise the tireless efforts of our workforce up and down the country. From St Austell to Loughborough to Forres, I visit offices and meet staff regularly, and hear at first hand their experiences and some frustrations with the poor quality buildings, some of which have no proper kitchen facilities for example, but in which they are nevertheless delivering truly excellent DWP services.

Our staff are always positive and focused, and this was especially noticeable during the pandemic when their agility and commitment shone through as thousands of DWP staff were redeployed to process new claims, which doubled in a matter of weeks. This was a truly heroic effort, resulting in payment timeliness for our claimants remaining incredibly high and, vitally, vulnerable people receiving the support they needed in their time of need. I am proud and immensely grateful that our DWP Jobcentre Plus offices remained open throughout the pandemic for the most vulnerable.

Importantly, this transformation needs to be viewed alongside the significant recent investment in DWP frontline services. Since the start of the pandemic we have—or, rather, I have—opened 194 new temporary additional jobcentres as part of our rapid estate expansion programme to support our Plan for Jobs. We have also recruited 13,500 new work coaches in order to provide our claimants with the tailored face-to-face support they need. This new boost to our DWP workforce has played a leading role in delivering on our vital plan for jobs, getting people back into work and transitioning into growing sectors as we focus on building back better. I am incredibly proud of the over 163,000 young people under 25 most at risk of long-term unemployment due to covid impact who took advantage of the life-changing ability to take up a first job through the kickstart scheme and our brilliant Way to Work scheme which is on track to get half a million more people into work this year.

I want to strongly reassure Members here today that staff are being fully supported throughout this modernisation. While we are right-sizing our estate and making the DWP a better place to work—which is at the heart of this—we understand, and I very much do, that a change of workplace can be unsettling for people. However, we are committed to our plan of making our estate smaller, greener and—importantly, as we have seen with covid—more resilient.

These new sites will enable further progression and career opportunities due to larger teams being able to come together, meaning staff can more easily move between business lines and react to operational requirements, with more support in these larger cohorts. The support we are offering to our teams—to our people—absolutely includes regular one-to-ones with line managers about the impacts and confidential advice and support through the employee assistance programme, as well as CV and job application support if needed.

The DWP is absolutely committed to continuing to deliver for our customers, families and the economy. We need to continue to work positively with our teams to modernise and transform the way we deliver our service. As the hon. Gentleman says, that builds on the approach that was announced back in 2017. I am always struck by, and thankful for, just how positive and willing our DWP teams are to embrace the new changes and the challenges that we face in such a large operational Department. We believe that that means that we will drive better experiences for claimants and employees alike by building increased resilience in modernised and, crucially, higher quality sites, which will also reduce fraud and error.

These actions will generate savings for the taxpayer, which is the right and responsible approach that the Government must adopt, considering the fiscal position that we face. Given the recent increase in the cost of living, driven by global demand shock, the impact post covid and Russia's unacceptable invasion of Ukraine, we are always looking for opportunities across Government to make taxpayers' money go further. In reality, for the DWP, that means taking the decision to exit oversized, poor-quality estates when opportunities or—as in this case—lease breaks arise, making our public services more efficient and space-saving where we can.

Chris Stephens: I join the Minister in praising the supreme efforts of Department for Work and Pensions staff over the past couple of years, but why should those who will find it difficult to travel 20-odd miles to another site because of transport issues or disabilities face the prospect of losing their job? That seems to go against everything the Government claim to want for disabled customers, for example.

Mims Davies: I am trying to give some context and to reiterate to the hon. Gentleman that the DWP is the biggest public service Department. The current issue is that we occupy 20% of the civil service estate. It is right that we seek to reduce our footprint while committing to retain what makes us great—I absolutely agree with him about that—in our national presence, which means that we can deliver locally for our customers. I think that hon. Members will find it helpful if I provide some numbers to illustrate the point and, I hope, answer some of the hon. Gentleman's questions.

The DWP currently operates from more than 920 buildings. In March 2022, it employed just over 92,000 people, but based on recent estimates, our buildings have the capacity for more than 158,000 people. More than 60% of our buildings are 30 years old or more; 3.3% of them currently meet the top two energy performance certificate ratings. The Department is committed to occupying only A and B-rated buildings by 2030. To answer one of the hon. Gentleman's questions, we will be investing in the quality of the remaining estate, making sure that our buildings are the right places for our people to work. I believe that that will please him and those he represents.

The modification to a better estate will generate significant gross savings: it is estimated that £3.5 billion will be saved over a 30-year period, with ongoing annual savings of £80 million to £90 million realised from 2028-29, supporting the delivery of efficiency savings across Government. Importantly, we are bringing in a better quality of workspace for our employees, as the

hon. Gentleman and many of our workers have requested. It is important to stress that the estates-driven rationalisation programme is ambitious in terms of how we reshape the DWP and how the Department works. I recognise the impacts on people, but it supports the ongoing modernisation and transformation that we also need to provide for our people to create career progression.

These changes will also support those Government priorities of fewer and better-quality buildings, investment in the condition of buildings, the future sustainability of the estate and, above all, our commitments to net zero. It is also about ensuring, vitally, that the Department maintains a footprint in Scotland and Wales and shows a firm and vital commitment to our precious Union. *[Interruption.]* You have to let me have that one. We are supporting our places for growth programme by committing to roles outside of London. It also supports levelling up. We are committed to retaining a presence in some of the most deprived areas throughout the nation and regions and creating career opportunity for our people.

Chris Stephens: It is good to see the Department for Work and Pensions preparing itself for an independent Scotland, but that is not the point I want to make. The point I want to make to the Minister is on areas of economic deprivation. Some of these offices will be closing in areas of economic deprivation—I am thinking of Springburn in Glasgow, for example, and I have raised the concerns that the businesses have—which seems to go against the levelling-up agenda. How would the Minister square her argument with the fact that offices in areas of high economic deprivation are closing?

Mims Davies: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I will go on to say how we are managing this and the opportunities that hybrid working affords us and our staff and how it supports caring and other responsibilities that people may have. I also draw back to the point of the nearly 200 new jobcentres—we are also heading towards 200 new youth hubs—that the DWP has invested in and brought forward as part of our plan for jobs. We are looking at a small part of a very large moving picture of a very large operational Department. For those affected, of course, this situation is concerning. The Department intends to make progress and during this pending review period, we have to set the foundation of the modernisation and transformation I have described.

Let me take the hon. Gentleman through the situation in Springburn in Glasgow, where 138 people are moving to Atlantic Quay. As part of the first tranche of conversations, all of the one-to-ones have been completed. I reassure him that only one of those 138 people is currently at risk. If people continue to live in the area, they will continue to spend in the area, especially through hybrid working.

On the question of fixed-term appointments, 8,800 permanent positions have been confirmed, with more offers. We have had to safeguard the opportunities for permanent staff, with 500 more offers—I do not know the exact number; it is around that number but it is a moving picture. I am trying to give the House an idea. We are continuing to engage with the attrition we have with an older workforce and with people looking to progress and stay, but we are also trying to make sure that those who have come in and given their all to the Department get the opportunity to stay with us.

[Mims Davies]

To respond to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I will take him through the issues in Northern Ireland. The areas are operated, as he will know, through the Department for Communities, and the sites affected are GB-only. Homeworking was a covid business-related opportunity measure. Hybrid working is absolutely there. It is not our preferred operating model for the DWP—our people need to be face-to-face with our claimants, and that is very important—but we have opportunities in terms of GB for outreach and help through the flexible support fund and partnerships within our local communities, and that is something I encourage. The DWP is not only in jobcentres; it is working in youth hubs, it is partnership working and it is supporting communities in a completely different way—not everyone will come and meet us in a jobcentre.

The recent additional JCP closures mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West are not related to the wider network design. However, the Department is taking opportunities over the coming years, as I have said, to improve incrementally our jobcentre network and the quality of the buildings both for colleagues and for customers. For example, we should get those jobcentres into town centres and on bus routes. We should use the opportunity to take forward some of those new temporary jobcentres, which offer better quality buildings and, above all, a better quality working experience.

Let me turn now to hybrid working. The Department has introduced hybrid working, where colleagues are expected to spend 40% of their time in the office. It is anticipated that this will help those colleagues who may need to travel a little further to get to their new sites. Relocating individual teams into current roles or into existing smaller offices does not fit. What we do not want to do is create more smaller offices. We are trying to create hubs of 300 to 500 plus people. As I have said, those hubs work well in terms of people being able to pivot into the operational needs.

Chris Stephens: That was a helpful response to my questions on hybrid working. Does that suggest that all redundancies can be completely avoided if there were an offer of either hybrid or home working for staff? Is that the Department's intention?

Mims Davies: Let me take the hon. Gentleman back to the point that I just made with regard to Glasgow Springburn. A total of 138 people are moving to Atlantic Quay. In terms of the one-to-ones, only one person is at risk at this point. This is, of course, an ongoing process of conversations around the redeployment, retraining and retaining of staff. We have an ageing workforce. We need to future-proof things and look after people and bring them forward. As I have said, this is only one moving part of what we are doing with our 92,000 people.

Drawing on that, the DWP is taking advantage of shifts in post-covid expectations around customer service delivery—not at the expense of face-to-face work—making use of the opportunity of estate lease breaks in 2023 to enable the Department to achieve its future service delivery aspirations. I want to reassure hon. Members that our people are at the heart of this transformation and that their needs will not be overlooked. The transformation is being delivered in two tranches over

the next 18 months. Where possible, if an alternative strategic site has been identified, subject to colleagues' ability to move to that new site, they will transfer, in their current role, to that new site. Where no consolidation site is available, all efforts—I reiterate the words "all efforts"—will focus on retaining and redeploying colleagues.

I have consistently reassured hon. Members, whose constituencies are affected, that the driver for this programme is not a reduction in our headcount. Where possible, colleagues in offices that are due to close are being offered opportunities to be redeployed, or retrained so that they can undertake a new role in the DWP, or be offered opportunities with other Government Departments. We are currently working with 15 other Government Departments, which are madly keen on having those people with DWP operational experience join them. Absolutely, we note that recent announcements about the future of the civil service may have caused additional concern. The DWP will consider its response to the challenge and will come forward with its proposals in due course.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has been extremely generous in taking my interventions. She outlined the discussions that she has had with other Government Departments, which is very welcome. Can she outline the discussions that she is having with the trade unions within the DWP, because, as yet, that is not something that she has mentioned in her reply?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman keeps interrupting me. I can assure him that I will get to that in good time. Let me just follow through on this and then I will reply to his question.

Let me return to how we will support those who may be affected by our estate changes. Again, our focus continues to be on the best quality of estate, alongside retaining colleagues and supporting them. We are absolutely determined to continue to follow up on the conversations that we are having with individuals. Around 5,800 individual conversations with colleagues took place in 29 of the 43 affected sites. Pleasingly, following those conversations, more than 80% of colleagues have confirmed that they can move to a new site.

On trade union engagement, consultation is ongoing with the trade unions. Meetings are scheduled for twice a week, and they ensure that appropriate time is dedicated to discussions with the unions about their members' concerns. In the period from 6 January to date, we have spent more than 65 hours in discussions with the unions, and we are fully committed to continuing that as we deliver the programme's outcomes. Officials have also arranged a number of deep-dive sessions in consultation with the unions, including one with MyCSP on the civil service compensation scheme. I hope that that allays the hon. Gentleman's fears about our conversations, which are ongoing, important conversations. I do not want this transformational change to impact our operations and, above all, the morale of our staff.

A clear measure of the success of the DWP's updated hybrid working is that we have more flexible and inclusive workplaces that are capable of adapting to the needs of employees—those with health conditions, for example—and our customers. That has been welcomed by much of our workforce. In return, as I mentioned, the Department has been able to retain more people by enabling them to

commit to moving with their role to an alternative, larger site. At those sites, they will get more training, learning and progression.

On 11 May, the Department started the engagement of redeployment activity for about 1,000 colleagues in the first tranche who were impacted by the closure of their site. The process has already successfully matched more than 100 colleagues with new roles, and it continues to happen on a weekly basis. As a responsible employer, the Department has had to explore all options, including voluntary redundancy. That just might be an option for some, depending again on personal circumstances and on the outcome of our redeployment activity. However, voluntary redundancy is the absolute last resort, and it is boring, but I will continue to say that all our efforts are to retain, retrain and redeploy both within the DWP and in all other Government Departments. We will continue to do that until all avenues have been exhausted. Importantly, the scheme does allow our colleagues to

request a quotation to allow them to consider what it might mean for them if an offer is made. No offers will be made until September. Every effort throughout this period is about supporting colleagues with redeployment.

Colleagues will be delighted to hear that I will conclude. Reducing the back-of-house estate's footprint will deliver value for money for the taxpayer, with significant gross savings of £3.5 billion over a 30-year period. We will deliver better quality estates and better quality working experience and progression opportunities. I hope to have reassured the hon. Gentleman and the House that we at the DWP are doing everything we can to redeploy and support DWP colleagues who are impacted by the modernisation and that they will continue to be fully supported throughout the process.

Question put and agreed to.

1.33 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Financial Services Update

Thursday 23 June 2022

TREASURY

Main Supply Estimates 2022-23

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): I have today laid “Central Government Supply Estimates 2022-23: Main Supply Estimates”, HC 396. This is a replacement for HC 53 laid on 12 May which has today been withdrawn. This replacement includes updates as a result of the Government’s cost of living announcement made to the House on 26 May, ensuring Parliament has the most recent information available. Updates have been made to the estimates of the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Defence, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

[HCWS134]

Cost of Living Payments and Welfare Cap

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): In accordance with HM Treasury’s obligations to operate the welfare cap, set out in the charter for budget responsibility, the Treasury is required to determine items of welfare expenditure within scope of the welfare cap. Today, I would like to inform the House that the cost of living payments, which I announced to this House on 26 May 2022, are outside the scope of the welfare cap.

The welfare cap plays a key role in the fiscal framework, underpinning the Government’s commitment to sustainable public finances over the medium term by setting a predetermined cap for welfare expenditure in a target year, together with a pathway and margin for welfare spending to reach that point. The cap, margin and pathway were last set out by the Government at autumn Budget 2021.

The cap will be breached if spending in scope exceeds the cap plus margin at the point of formal assessment, which will next occur in 2024-25.

The welfare cap is designed to support the management of the more predictable elements of benefit expenditure. It already categorises benefits most directly linked to the economic cycle, such as universal credit payments to jobseekers, as outside the scope of the cap.

The cost of living payments are one-off payments, designed to support millions of the most vulnerable households facing cost of living challenges as a consequence of acute global economic pressures. Given their temporary and exceptional nature, we have therefore taken the decision to categorise these payments as outside the scope of the welfare cap. As the cost of living payments are outside the scope of the cap, they will not form part of the expenditure that will be formally assessed by the OBR against the cap and pathway.

[HCWS136]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I can today inform the House that the Government have announced an extension to our existing trading plan to sell part of the Government’s shareholding in NatWest Group (NWG, formerly Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS) for a further 12 months from 12 August 2022. This is a further step forward in the Government’s plan to return NWG to the private sector.

Rationale

It is Government policy that where a Government asset no longer serves a public policy purpose, the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to being able to achieve value for money. This frees up public resource which can be deployed to achieve other public policy objectives.

The Government are committed to returning NWG to full private ownership, given that the original policy objective for the intervention in NWG—to preserve financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. At Budget 2021, the Chancellor set out the Government intention to fully dispose of our NWG shareholding by 2025-26

The Government only conduct sales of NWG shares when it represents value for money to do so and market conditions allow. This extension represents continued progress in exiting the assets acquired as a result of the 2007-08 financial crisis and returning NWG to private ownership.

Trading plan

A trading plan involves selling shares in the market through an appointed broker in an orderly way at market value over the duration of the plan. Trading plans are an established method of returning Government-owned shares to private ownership, while protecting value for the taxpayer. This method was used in the sell-down of the Government’s stake in Lloyds Banking Group, in that case, from a lower starting point in terms of the Government’s percentage ownership.

The trading plan for the Government’s NWG shareholding will be extended for 12 months, terminating no later than 11 August 2023. Shares will only be sold at a price that represents fair value and delivers value for money for the taxpayer. The final number of shares sold will depend on, amongst other factors, the share price and market conditions throughout the duration of the trading plan.

Since the trading plan was established, it has successfully sold approximately 703.5 million ordinary shares for total proceeds of approximately £1.6 billion as of 22 June 2022. The Government currently has a c. 48.5% shareholding in NWG.

UK Government Investments and HM Treasury will keep other disposal options open, including by way of further directed buybacks and/or accelerated bookbuilds. The decision to extend the trading plan does not preclude the Government from using other disposal options to execute future transactions that achieve value for money for taxpayers, including during the term of the trading plan.

I will update Parliament with a further statement at the end of the trading plan.

[HCWS133]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Safeguarding Vulnerable People: Inspection of the National Crime Agency

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The National Crime Agency (NCA) leads the fight against serious and organised crime. It has the power to task other law enforcement partners and a capability, with local to international reach, to disrupt the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK.

This is the tenth HMICFRS inspection of the NCA and examines the effectiveness of the agency's existing safeguarding policies, structures and processes, the training provided and the safeguarding leadership and culture within the agency.

I have asked HMICFRS to publish the report; it will be published today and will be available online at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk. I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inspection found that the NCA has policies for both child and adult safeguarding and that officer guidance is comprehensive and easily accessible, though the understanding of these varies by directorate. The inspectors were encouraged by the work of the child protection and safeguarding team, particularly its child protection advisers, finding that those who used their services valued their work. However, inspectors found that the primacy of the investigations directorate in delivering safeguarding had led some officers to view it solely as the duty of investigators or other specialists, with a small team relied upon to take forward this work. The Inspectorate has recommended that the NCA should develop a safeguarding plan by no later than 30 September 2022, to make clear how it intends to put safeguarding at the heart of its work.

[HCWS132]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Update

The Minister for Local Government, Faith and Communities (Kemi Badenoch): All hon. Members will recognise the critical role local councils play in providing essential statutory services to their residents and being accountable to the communities they serve. That is why the situation at Nottingham City Council is of such concern.

Despite significant support, Nottingham City Council has struggled to resolve serious governance and financial issues. In November 2020, following a number of issues raised in a public interest report published in August 2020 by the council's external auditors Grant Thornton, a rapid non-statutory review was conducted into the council to review the serious governance and risk management issues associated with its energy company Robin Hood Energy. The report presented by Max Caller CBE highlighted serious governance failings, poor risk management and the pursuit of commercial ventures which had resulted in a significant budget gap and low levels of reserves.

The former Secretary of State appointed an independent improvement and assurance board in January 2021, chaired by Sir Tony Redmond and made up of independent experts, to offer the council advice, expertise and challenge as it sought to address these failings. The board have provided regular assurance reports to the Secretary of State on the council's progress throughout this time.

In December 2021, the council discovered unlawful accounting practices associated with its ring-fenced housing revenue account (HRA), covering the period 2014-15 to 2020-21 and totalling £15.86 million. In response, the council issued section 114 and section 5 notices and commissioned independent reports from an LGA associate (Richard Penn) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to understand the scale of the unlawful expenditure and decision-making processes that ultimately led to this situation. These comprehensive reports ("the Reports") can be found at:

<https://committee.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/documents/s133381/Kev%20Findings%20Report%20for%20Nottinham%20City%20Council.pdf>

<https://committee.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/documents/s133382/NCC%20HRA%20Phase%202%20Final%20Report%20260422%20002%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

The reports paint a deeply concerning picture of serious historic financial and governance failings. This includes the failure of the council and its wholly-owned company Nottingham City Homes (NCH) to maintain the integrity of its HRA ringfence, and NCH operating without strategic oversight given poor client management and governance by the council. The Penn report does not conclude that unlawful accounting practice was a deliberate mechanism to divert funds from the HRA to support the general fund, but provides evidence of cultural failings and a reluctance to escalate issues appropriately, which led to the situation remaining unchallenged over several years. The scale of the unlawful expenditure may also be more substantial than originally thought, with CIPFA now estimating that it could be up to £40 million.

In the light of this evidence, the Secretary of State is satisfied that Nottingham City Council is failing to comply with its best value duty, and is minded to implement the intervention package set out below to secure compliance with that duty. To that end, and in line with procedures laid down in the Local Government Act 1999, officials in my Department have today written to the council seeking representations on the reports and on the proposed intervention package.

I want to place on record that the Secretary of State recognises the actions taken by the current chief executive to address the unlawful HRA expenditure since it was first identified in December last year. He has worked closely and constructively with the improvement and assurance board since January 2021 in addressing the many challenges the authority faces. However, whilst the building blocks of recovery have been put in place, there are many difficult decisions ahead and the scale of the challenge cannot be underestimated. The Secretary of State agrees with the board's assessment that the HRA issue represents a "serious setback" and is concerned that further serious issues may yet be uncovered which could have a severe impact on the authority's ability to maintain and increase the momentum of the required improvements. This lack of assurance, along with the risk of progress stalling or slowing, is significant and

the proposed intervention is therefore both necessary and expedient to secure compliance with the best value duty.

The proposed package is centred on the appointment of commissioners to exercise certain and limited functions as required, for two years. It is envisaged this will be a shorter and narrower intervention than has been seen previously due to the council being subject to a non-statutory intervention since January 2021. The proposal is for the council, under the oversight of the commissioners, to re-appraise its improvement plan within the first three months of the intervention and report on the delivery of that plan to the Secretary of State every six months.

It is important that the council leads its recovery but that it does not lose momentum in making the necessary improvements. Sir Tony Redmond has forged constructive working relationships with the council leadership and has an intrinsic understanding of the scale and nature of the challenges facing the city. The Secretary of State is therefore minded to appoint Sir Tony Redmond as lead commissioner, subject to representations received on the proposed intervention package.

Given the gravity of the reports' findings, the Secretary of State is, consequently, proposing to direct the transfer to commissioners all functions associated with:

- the governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making by the authority;
- the strategic financial management of the authority under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972; and
- the appointment and dismissal of persons to positions the holders of which are to be designated as statutory officers,

and the designation of those persons as statutory officers under section 112 of the Local Government Act 1972.

I hope it will not be necessary for the commissioners to use these powers, but they must be empowered to do so if they consider that required improvement and reforms are not being delivered.

I am inviting representations from the council on the reports and the Secretary of State's proposals by 7 July 2022. We want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Nottingham, to make their views on the Secretary of State's proposals known. Should the Secretary of State decide to intervene along the lines described here, he will make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act and appoint commissioners. I will update the House in due course.

The Government do not take these steps lightly and recognise and respect the role of local councils in our communities and our democracy. The Government also recognise the importance of councils having an effective relationship with their local auditor. I urge all councils to consider whether they could be doing more to ensure they are delivering the good governance that residents deserve, including considering the governance risk and resilience toolkit developed by the centre for governance and scrutiny.

Despite rare cases like Nottingham, as a whole, local authorities in England have a good record of service delivery, transparency, probity, scrutiny, and accountability. It is a reputation worth protecting. Local councils must continue to act to benefit the communities they serve.

[HCWS135]

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