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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 5 September 2022

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 719

SIXTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 5 September 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I want to welcome back all Members and make a short statement. I know you want to be updated on the protest incident in the Chamber on Friday, and to be reassured that steps are being taken to minimise the risk of a reoccurrence.

On 2 September 2022, four groups of Extinction Rebellion activists came on to the estate as ticket holders on paid tours. One of these groups superglued themselves to one another around the Speaker's Chair. The Parliamentary Security Department and the Metropolitan Police Service worked closely together to ensure that all Extinction Rebellion protesters were removed safely and as quickly as possible from the House of Commons. Eight individuals were arrested and have since been released on bail.

A police investigation into the incident is now taking place in close liaison with the Parliamentary Security Department to establish the full circumstances of this incident. Given the number of protests and campaigns planned over the coming fortnight, and drawing on the events of Friday, the Parliamentary Security Department and the MPS have adjusted their posture accordingly. You will all understand why I cannot go into detail on what processes have been put in place.

As I wrote in my notice to you on Friday, it is a real shame that visitors who made arrangements to join the tours of the Palace of Westminster on Friday had their

visit disrupted and cancelled. The right of protest is a fundamental principle of our democracy, but the right of peaceful protest does not extend to unlawful activity and I reassure all of you that the Parliamentary Security Department and the police will take appropriate action to deal with any such acts on the parliamentary estate in future.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Overdose Prevention Centres

1. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on licensing overdose prevention centres. [901256]

11. **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of implementing a pilot project to evaluate the effectiveness of drug consumption rooms. [901266]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Welcome back, Mr Speaker. I endorse everything you have just said. We enjoy the right to lawful, peaceful protest, but we enjoy the right to open democracy as well. Those who behave in this way should feel the full force of the law.

Before I answer these questions, I will briefly remark on my three years as Home Secretary under Boris Johnson's prime ministership. A written ministerial statement in my name was tabled this morning—[*Interruption*—]shut up—outlining the work of the Home Office over the last three years to meet our manifesto commitments, which include some of the biggest reforms on security, migration and public safety, about which Mr Speaker has just spoken. I am proud to have served in this

Government, and I thank the Prime Minister, Home Office Ministers past and present, and a wide range of officials.

Drugs are a scourge on society that destroys lives, blights communities and fuels crime. There is no safe way to take dangerous drugs, so I do not support legalising drugs. Importantly, the drug strategy led by this Government will tackle drug supply, reduce demand and provide world-class treatment to those in need of help.

Rachael Maskell: Tragically, York saw a number of deaths over the summer caused by substance misuse. There were 4,859 drug deaths in England and Wales last year, up 6.2% on the previous year, and Dame Carol Black's second report highlighted that intervention services are not fit for purpose. It is important that we see change based on evidence. Will the Government look again at the impact of overdose prevention units and pilot them in places such as York?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the tragedy of drug deaths, and she highlights the incredibly important work of Dame Carol Black. I pay tribute to the work of Dame Carol Black, including everything she proposed on the drug strategy and treatment programmes. She also highlighted where funding needs to come together across the whole of Government, and a great deal of work is taking place on that.

The hon. Lady is correct. Not only does more work need to be done, but we need to have bottom-up solutions. Dame Carol Black has presented some strong proposals to the Government, and the Prime Minister and I have backed and supported them. It is right that that legacy continues, as it will help to save lives and re-establish rehabilitation programmes across the country.

Anne McLaughlin: Last week I spent an evening in Glasgow with families who, like me, have lost someone to drug addiction. They and I accept that the ideal situation is that people will conquer their addiction, but does the right hon. Lady accept that they can do that only if they do not die first? Does she also accept that, for those who continue to use, we should enable them to do so as safely as possible and as close to medical assistance as possible? The Royal College of Nursing supports drug consumption rooms. Will she support them? And will she support the families and the memory of all those who have lost their life to drugs? Will she give the go-ahead for just one pilot project?

Priti Patel: I totally recognise and understand not only the hon. Lady's remarks, but the scale of drug addiction and drug deaths—we have discussed this many times before in this House and it is tragic. Conquering addiction is not easy, which is why I stand by the work of Carol Black. It is pivotal in terms of putting forward long-term treatment programmes, because long-term treatment is really required. My views on drug consumption rooms, in particular, are known, but there are no easy solutions to this, because people who are addicted to drugs have taken drugs for a wide range of reasons. It is important that we seek to support them to conquer addiction and help them to rebuild their lives.

Knife Crime and Serious Violence

2. **Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con):** What steps she is taking to tackle knife crime and serious violence.

[901257]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Tom Pursglove): The Government take a dual approach, combining tough enforcement with programmes that steer young people away from crime. Since 2019, we have invested £170 million in the areas worst affected by violence to boost the police response. In those same areas, we have also invested another £170 million to develop violence reduction units, to tackle the root causes of violence. Those programmes have prevented 49,000 violent offences in their first two years.

Tom Hunt: Over the summer we had two very high-profile knife attacks in Ipswich. We know that this is inter-gang violence—it is often members of each gang who are targeted—but it often erupts in a public space and has a chilling effect within communities. I am pleased that we have secured extra funding from the safer streets fund and that we are getting our uplift to the 20,000, but does the Minister agree that our UK shared prosperity fund bid to get even more police presence during the day would help to tackle knife crime? Does he also agree that it is right that we look at the national police funding formula in order to provide long-term fairer funding for Suffolk police?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who pays laser-like attention to crime and policing issues in his area. He was at the forefront of arguing the case for the safer streets bid, which has, fortunately, been successful. It is very welcome that his area is seeing £8.9 million of additional police funding and we have seen 114 extra officers recruited. Building on the work that is already happening, those resources will come together to help to continue to drive down crime in his area. That is a priority for this Government, as it is for him, and I know he will continue to follow this closely.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last February, a constituent of mine, a young man, was attacked in the street by a man wielding a machete. There have been a number of further incidents since then, including last month on the streets of Leeds, where video shows two gangs squaring up to each other and holding these weapons. Why on earth is it still legal for anyone over the age of 18 to go into a shop and buy a machete?

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. It is important to note that since 2019 we have seen 72,000 weapons taken off our streets, but we cannot be complacent on this, which is why Ministers are looking at this issue of serious weapons, with a serious weapons review. I will want to see its conclusions as quickly as possible, but he can be absolutely assured that our drive and determination is to get these weapons off our streets wherever possible. It is not acceptable to have any life lost to crime in this way.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Deterrence is more important than almost anything else, and the Minister knows well of the tragic case in my constituency of Ellie Gould, who was murdered by a knife-wielding boyfriend. People there are rightly of the view that we must find ways of improving and increasing the sentences for knife murder if we can. So what discussions has he had with his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, who

are currently looking at guidelines for sentencing? When can we expect the results of that consultation to come out?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. We do have Ministers who are joint between the Home Office and the MOJ, which means that we have been able to look at some of these issues in the round. What I hope can give him some reassurance is the fact that, through serious violence reduction orders, which we are introducing through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, we are seeing a greater likelihood of people being caught, of being before the court and of receiving a custodial sentence. I think the whole House can welcome that.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): It was alarming enough to find out that foreign intelligence played a role in the trafficking of Shamima Begum and other British children to ISIS, but to find out that our Government were aware of this is incredibly disturbing and raises questions on the decision to revoke her citizenship. So will the Home Secretary tell us exactly when—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry, but that is not linked to the question; this one is on knife crime.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy I was not asking about knife crime.

Mr Speaker: I know. That is why you cannot ask the question. In which case, I will now call the shadow Minister, Sarah Jones.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The current Home Secretary says that her “record...speaks volumes”. On her watch, far more people are a victim of crime, far more criminals are getting away with it, nine in 10 serious violent offenders never see the inside of a court, police officers are forced to use food banks, and the police have declared no confidence. What does the Minister think the Home Secretary is most proud of: criminals laughing in our face as they get away with it, or thousands more people across this country blighted by crime?

Tom Pursglove: I think it is fair to say that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who I believe has done a sterling job in the role, can be proud of seeing burglary down by 24% nationally, neighbourhood crime down by 33% and vehicle offences down by 28%. We have got 72,000 weapons off our streets since 2019. Leicester, which I visited a couple of weeks ago, has a hugely successful violence reduction unit that is driving down criminality, steering young people away from that course. Some 49,000 offences have been prevented nationally, with a return that means that in the round we are seeing benefits to society: violent crime is not happening, because it has been prevented by the work that my right hon. Friend has done.

War in Ukraine

3. **Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to support those fleeing war in Ukraine. [901258]

25. **Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to support those fleeing war in Ukraine. [901280]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The UK Government rapidly created the UK visa scheme to support Ukrainians seeking refuge from Putin’s barbaric invasion, each for a three-year period with full access to work, public funds and services. The Ukraine family scheme was the first of its kind to be operational anywhere in the world, and we should be proud of the role that our country has played in helping.

Paul Holmes: The UK was the first country anywhere in the world to operationalise its Ukraine visa scheme, welcoming thousands of people to this country. May I congratulate the Home Secretary and her officials on this feat, which was undertaken in a matter of days back in March? May I ask her to reaffirm that this country will continue to offer the support needed by Ukraine and its brave people, as she has always shown during her time at the Home Office?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are consistently working hard to maximise the number of people in sponsorship schemes, as well as those coming through the visa routes. It is also worth noting that there has recently been an uptick in the number of people applying for these visas. That is because the scheme is not only successful, but generous, and is helping people who are in need of support right now.

Mrs Murray: I recently met one of the many refugees in my constituency. He was full of praise for how the system has worked for him, but concerns were raised about the lack of affordable housing in the south-west. What work is the Department doing with other Departments to ensure that there are no issues down the line?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: housing remains a challenge, as we have always found through all the schemes that we have run, particularly the resettlement and refugee programmes. Work has taken place across other Departments, particularly the Cabinet Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which is responsible for housing. I think that reflects the fact that the sponsorship scheme has worked because of the generosity of the British public, who have been housing Ukrainian nationals. Of course we hope that the scheme will continue to be as vigorous and strong in that sense.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Many six-month placements under the Homes for Ukraine scheme are coming to an end. For many reasons, not least the cost of living crisis, lots of them will not be extended, yet the Government have not set out a clear plan for what happens next. Families risk being placed in temporary accommodation miles away from where they have begun to rebuild their lives. Will the Home Secretary take urgent action to ensure that host families are properly supported and that measures are put in place to ensure that where a placement cannot continue, families are assisted into decent rented accommodation or accommodation with another host family?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right—there is no dispute there whatever. Other Departments are involved in housing, working with local authorities and ensuring a smooth transfer and transition. The Homes for Ukraine scheme, clearly, was there for six months; the transition period is taking place now, in many cases. A whole-of-Government effort is being co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office, working with other Departments. I think we should always reflect on and recognise the generosity of the British public, but also how Departments and local councils in particular have been providing support to make sure that that continues.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Prior to the implementation of the UK family visa scheme, to which the Home Secretary has referred, some concern was expressed by the Government that there needed to be additional checks because not everyone coming from Ukraine could be relied on. Can she give us an update on how those checks have proceeded and how many people coming from Ukraine were identified as fraudulent?

Priti Patel: Those checks are there for very good reasons—there is no question about that. When we look at the volatility and the instability in the region and many of the national security concerns, we can see that that those checks are absolutely legitimate. The record is clear in terms of the number of Ukrainian nationals who have come here. There are people who have been refused on legitimate grounds involving national security concerns, which we do not discuss publicly.

Antisocial Behaviour

4. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle antisocial behaviour. [901259]

The Minister for Security (Stephen McPartland): Antisocial behaviour is a menace to society. This Government have committed to stamping it out everywhere that it occurs. In our communities, we have already ensured that local agencies have the flexible tools to tackle it through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Of course, people are not just subject to abuse offline; despicable instances such as the racism online following the Euro 2020 final are why this Government will also tackle harmful content online through the Online Safety Bill.

Stephen Morgan: Portsmouth police go above and beyond to keep communities safe as I saw at first hand when I joined them on patrol at the Camber and the Hotwalls last month. However, they face an uphill battle following a 10% drop in the region's police community support officers and police officers since 2015. Will the Minister confirm today when the Conservatives will finally get tough on crime and give my local force the resources that it so desperately needs?

Stephen McPartland: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been very clear about ensuring that, with the police uplift programme, there are 20,000 more police officers, and that is making a huge difference. Local police and crime commissioners are responsible for working with local authorities to ensure that they

tackle antisocial behaviour locally, so I think that the hon. Gentleman should direct his comments to his local police and crime commissioner.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The boundaries between antisocial behaviour, gangs, drugs, and knife crime are increasingly blurred. An unwelcome recent trend in my constituency of Gloucester is that of an increase in young people's involvement. None of us wants to see children criminalised, but we need to act, not least in order to protect other young people. Can the Minister arrange a meeting where best practice on how to tackle this growing problem can be shared with many of us in this Chamber who have similar problems?

Stephen McPartland: I know the work that my hon. Friend has done to try to reduce antisocial behaviour within his own community, and I know that he has been working hard. He supports violence reduction units. There is a huge amount of money and investment going into sharing best practice among forces to ensure that we also protect these individuals. We know the huge problems that county lines are creating up and down the country, and there has been a massive investment in breaking county lines on which this Government have been leading the way.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): While the Conservative party has spent the summer infighting, our country and our communities have been left fearful about the plight of antisocial behaviour that is rife across Britain. Because of a lack of legislative support, families and the most vulnerable in our communities are left suffering from fireworks and nuisance into the early hours of the morning without any help, including in my constituency of Bradford West. Car theft has gone up, burglary has gone up, individual theft has gone up, car crime has gone up, and dangerous driving has gone up, and all the while families are feeling unsafe to walk the streets of Britain. The Government have simply gone and are nowhere to be seen. Can the Minister explain why, after 12 years in Government, the Conservatives have failed so badly?

Stephen McPartland: I am astonished. The reality is that antisocial behaviour in the year to March 2022 is down 37%. [Interruption.] My hon. Friends may also be intrigued to hear that, nationally, burglary is down 24%, neighbourhood crime by 33%, and vehicle offences by 28%. That has been made possible by the commitment the Government have made to increasing police numbers by more than 20,000. Perhaps the answer is that Conservative police and crime commissioners deliver for their communities.

County Lines Drug Gangs

5. **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What recent progress she has made on tackling county lines drug gangs. [901260]

14. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What steps she is taking to tackle the exploitation of children and young adults by county lines criminal networks. [901269]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Tom Pursglove): Through our drugs strategy, we are investing up to £145 million in the county lines programme to tackle ruthless gangs harming our communities. That includes providing specialist support to victims of county lines exploitation and their families. Since 2019, police activity funded by the programme has resulted in more than 2,400 line closures, 8,000 arrests and 9,500 individuals engaged through safeguarding interventions.

Jonathan Gullis: Over the summer recess I was proud to join our brave Staffordshire police officers on a drugs raid of a suspected county lines operation, sweeping the scrotes and their drugs off the streets of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Sadly, we have seen an increase in filthy drug thugs peddling their dirt on our streets. It is because of this that I ask my hon. Friend to join me in supporting the campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) to have monkey dust reclassified as a class A substance and increase the prison sentence on the parasites who plague our community.

Tom Pursglove: I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk about this issue in more detail. Monkey dust is a street name for certain cathinones. The Government recognise the harm of cathinones, which is why they are controlled under class B of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The penalty for supplying a class B drug is 14 years in prison, an unlimited fine, or both. There are no plans to reclassify those drugs, although the Government keep drug classification under review and will seek to take account of any new evidence of harms.

Helen Morgan: Over the summer I met residents and parents in North Shropshire who are concerned about the presence of county lines drug networks in our market towns. Our local police force has done a superb job in breaking up some of those lines, but more needs to be done. The Government promised an additional 311 police officers in West Mercia, but at the moment we are only at 165—far off target. Can the Minister reassure me that those additional police officers will be recruited into West Mercia to tackle the ongoing county lines problem, which exists in rural areas as well as urban ones?

Tom Pursglove: I thank the hon. Lady for approaching this issue so constructively, because the matter of county lines gangs is of huge concern to communities both urban and rural, as she alludes to. The team in the Home Office will work very constructively and intensively with her force to ensure that we see the uplift programme through, so that her constituents feel the maximum benefit of the highest number of officers possible out on the streets, catching criminals and deterring crime.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Thanks to the work of the Home Office, British Transport police are working alongside Hampshire Constabulary to help tackle the appalling problems we have with county lines in north Hampshire. Can my hon. Friend tell me whether that is a project that he continues to see moving forward? I have seen at first hand that it is an essential way of tackling the appalling movement of drugs from different parts of the south-east into my county of Hampshire.

Tom Pursglove: I thank my right hon. Friend for the way she approaches this issue and her positive advocacy for that initiative, which we are committed to. It is about continuing to roll out the county lines programme, with £145 million over the next three years, to tackle what is the most violent and exploitative distribution model yet seen. It is about safeguarding vulnerable people from being exploited, arresting and charging those running the lines, and stopping them exploiting people.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Local police have told me that they have seen a worrying rise in teenagers going missing, and there is inevitably an increase in county lines activity. Given the huge issues with county lines drugs gangs exploiting vulnerable children, will the Minister confirm whether the Government will be implementing the definition of child criminal exploitation in law and assessing whether police have the resources on the ground to deal with this terrible issue?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that what is happening in London is a considerable increase in police officer numbers, running at nearly 3,000 already recruited through the uplift programme, as well as additional funding in the millions and millions of pounds. The Mayor of London has the resources he requires to tackle these issues and this criminality. It is important that the hon. Lady has strong dialogue with him on that and, of course, the Home Office will continue to monitor progress on the issue.

Protestor Activity: Risk to Infrastructure and Public Safety

6. **Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** What steps she is taking to ensure that activities by protestors do not create excessive risk to national infrastructure and public safety. [901261]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): We live in a vibrant, open country, where we all enjoy the right to lawful, peaceful protest. However, I, the public and, no doubt, my hon. Friend are increasingly incensed by the attention-seeking antics of a small band of publicity-hungry lawbreakers intent on causing disruption for the law-abiding majority. We have a proud tradition of upholding the rule of law, and those who trespass and cause criminal damage should face the full force of the law.

Harriett Baldwin: As the Home Secretary says, the right to protest is fundamental to our democracy, but this new activity of gluing oneself to parts of our national infrastructure—indeed, gluing oneself to your Chair, Mr Speaker—is absolutely unacceptable. Does the Home Secretary need to give the police more powers to deter such activities?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises some really important points, and this comes back to your opening remarks, Mr Speaker, about the season of protest that seems to be taking place, which has actually become an annual thing, particularly with Extinction Rebellion and others. First and foremost, she asks about police powers. I give credit and pay tribute to the police, because they use specialist skills to de-glove or de-bond. But had we not

seen the measures introduced in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 earlier this year thrown out by Labour Lords, the police would have had the powers to deal with these types of protests. Of course, the Public Order Bill, which is going through the House right now, will absolutely double down and reaffirm those powers.

Small Boat Crossings

7. **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the number of people crossing the English channel in small boats. [901262]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Our new laws, brought in through the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, mean that we have legislated to introduce long-term solutions and to address legal entry into the UK. Of course, that means tackling the number of people coming over in small boats, but also introducing tougher criminal sentences. As my right hon. Friend will know, all these measures were opposed by the Labour party.

Mr Davis: In view of the uncertainty as to who will fill the Government Front Bench in the coming days and weeks, I will break the rules a bit by asking the Home Secretary to accept my thanks for her robust management of the most difficult Department of State. That is not to say that we always agree on everything, particularly on Rwanda, but we do agree that we must take back control, or keep control, of our own borders. The Australian experience demonstrated that pushback works, and we can learn from that. We can learn from the necessary increase in surveillance, we can learn from the increase in control and command by both the Australians and Frontex, and we can learn from the application of international maritime law. If we do all those things, I have no doubt that pushback will work with Belgium and France too.

Priti Patel: Despite the chuntering from the Opposition Benches, my right hon. Friend speaks a lot of common sense on these issues. This is important, primarily because when it comes to tackling channel crossings, we have specifically reviewed the whole Australian model, which, for the benefit of Opposition Members, is called Operation Sovereign Borders. That is effectively what the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 was built upon, including the proposition of pushbacks at sea—something that has been developed by the Home Office but has not been operationalised by the Ministry of Defence—surveillance tactics and many other measures.

Finally, for the benefit of our colleague on the Opposition Benches, there is no single solution to this issue, which is why, as my right hon. Friend pointed out and as I have said at the Dispatch Box many times, it takes multiple solutions to come together, including reform of the asylum system, deterrents and criminal sanctions, which the Opposition completely voted against.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I agree with the Home Secretary that it takes multiple ways of looking at the problem of channel

crossings. In July, the Home Affairs Committee produced our report on channel crossings. We were very keen to discuss the report with the Home Secretary but, sadly, she cancelled her appearance before the Committee. However, we hope that she will, in whatever capacity she holds in the coming weeks, attend the next Committee hearing in September to discuss her time at the Home Office. One of our key recommendations was to pilot providing UK asylum assessment facilities within France, enabling the juxtaposed consideration of claims in the same way that we already have juxtaposed immigration and passport controls in Dover and Calais. I wonder whether she might say what her solution to the problem would be.

Priti Patel: I would be very happy to attend the right hon. Lady's Committee. I think the date of 21 September has been set, although I am not sure whether that has been shared with her.

This is all about collaboration and working with our French counterparts—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Our friends.

Priti Patel: They are our friends. In fact, I spoke to my French counterpart last week. In that conversation, as ever, a range of issues on UK co-operation were discussed. Those discussions continue right now, including on work on deterrence and interceptions—points that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) would support. A range of issues, such as processing, are always under discussion.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Stuart C. McDonald.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Instead of the cruel and utterly failed Rwanda policy, or resurrecting impossible and dangerous pushbacks, we need safe legal routes, investment, asylum and modern slavery processing, and, as the Home Secretary has alluded to, close co-operation with our French allies. On that note, will she join me in stating clearly that President Macron is very much a friend rather than a foe, and will someone have a quiet word with the incoming Prime Minister about how important it is to work with France and avoid unhelpful, attention-seeking and counterproductive comments about our allies?

Priti Patel: With all respect to the hon. Gentleman, we clearly have a different stance on the policies and tactics. We debated these issues—and accommodation, refugees and so on—many times during the passage of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. I have worked closely with my counterparts in the French Government for three years, and I restate for the record that, on the basis of the discussions I had last week, of course they are our friends. It is important to say that in international co-operation on anything to do with migration—particularly illegal migration, at a time when 100 million people around the world are on the move because of global migration pressures—it is always right that we work in a united way with our international colleagues.

Albanian Migrants

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps she is taking to fast-track the removal of Albanian migrants without a right to be in the UK. [901263]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Over the last calendar year, I have overseen the enforced removal of more Albanian nationals than any other nationality. We regularly return Albanian criminals and immigration offenders to Albania via chartered flights, a process that is aided by the returns agreement that I have signed with the Albanian Government.

Mr Hollobone: Recent reports suggest that despite passing through many safe countries en route to the UK, when the very large numbers of Albanians who have been crossing the channel in small boats in recent weeks land on our shores, they claim not only asylum, but modern slavery protection. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time to reform our modern slavery laws to prevent an increased abuse of our good will?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is correct that over the summer the majority of arrivals in small boats from France—about 60%—have been Albanian nationals. He will be delighted to hear about the work that I have led on reform of the national referral mechanism, a key component of the reforms to the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which has been committed to within this Session of Parliament.

Afghan Citizens: Asylum Policies

9. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her asylum policies on Afghan citizens seeking refuge and humanitarian protection in the UK. [901264]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): Our United Kingdom has a proud history of providing sanctuary to those in need through our resettlement schemes. The new plan for immigration will ensure that our resources can be focused on those in most need of resettlement around the world, including in Afghanistan, rather than on those who can pay a people smuggler.

Deidre Brock: Does the Minister share my concern regarding the findings of nine expert groups last month, including Humans Rights Watch, which found the UK Government's resettlement schemes to be "unjustifiably restrictive", and that it is deeply concerning that the UK Government are not offering a safe route for many Afghan women and girls, or to oppressed minority groups?

Kevin Foster: Well, I look at our record, which includes last year's evacuation—the largest since the war—to bring people to safety here in the United Kingdom, and at the work we are doing week in, week out with colleagues, particularly in the Ministry of Defence, to bring more people to safety. We need to focus our efforts on those who need resettlement and safety and

are under threat in Afghanistan, rather than on those who prefer to be here than in another safe and democratic country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Government still hold in a special place in their priorities those Afghans who assisted the British armed forces when they were present in Afghanistan? May I thank the Minister and the Home Secretary for the work of those in the specialist hub, whether in Portcullis House or remotely, who have done outstanding work in enabling MPs on both sides of the House to help people fleeing from persecution?

Kevin Foster: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks about the work that has been done by Home Office teams via the hub. Those people who worked with UK operations, particularly the military operation in Afghanistan, would liaise primarily with our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, who hold the records and will do the relevant checks under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. We then look to work with them to facilitate the relocation of those people to the UK, where that is deemed appropriate.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We owe loyal-to-Britain Afghans a debt of gratitude and honour, yet with 10,000 of them still stuck in bridging hotels, at huge cost to their mental health and a cost of £1.4 million a day to the taxpayer, it looks as though Operation Warm Welcome has become operation cold shoulder. It is little wonder that the Minister for Refugees resigned yesterday in despair. Further still, the Government have broken their promises to vulnerable Afghan groups such as women judges and LGBT activists. Can the Minister therefore tell us why, if British Council employees and Chevening scholars can apply for asylum in the UK from within Afghanistan, pathway 2 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme does not allow women judges and LGBT activists to do the same? Does he accept that these failures put Afghan lives at risk, bearing in mind that the Taliban have already conducted at least 160 reprisal killings?

Kevin Foster: I know that whoever takes office this week can look forward to plenty of attacks but few alternatives from the hon. Gentleman. We are proud of what we have done. As I said, last year we arranged one of the biggest evacuations since the war years and a rapid process to bring people here. About 7,400 people have moved into new homes since the first ARAP flight in June, which is an unprecedented pace of resettlement. Yes, there is more work to do; we are working with local authorities to do that and to find more homes, but we have to be clear: it is about working with local communities, particularly given the size and scale of accommodation, particularly family accommodation, that needs to be provided across the country.

UK and Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership

12. **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on delivering the UK and Rwanda migration and economic development partnership. [901267]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I have secured a world-first migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda, and our innovative partnership means that illegal migrants will be relocated to Rwanda to build a new and prosperous life there. The number of people who can be relocated there is unlimited, and they will have support and care while their claims are considered.

Tony Lloyd: Does credible evidence of the use of violence and torture by the Rwandan security authorities not give the Home Secretary any pause for thought?

Priti Patel: First and foremost, as well as all our work with the Government of Rwanda—even prior to the announcement of this policy and the work that went into this partnership—plenty of in-country work has been undertaken. That is part of our country report and planning work, and all the advice that is taken in-country and across Government. With that, however, it is important to recognise that this partnership is very clear in terms of standards, the treatment of people who are relocated to Rwanda, the resources that are put in, and the processing of how every applicant is treated.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): There are various reports—not all of them accurate—about the limit on the number of people who can be processed under the partnership agreement with Rwanda. What action is being taken to increase capacity in Rwanda to accept more asylum seekers so that the full benefits of the partnership can be realised?

Priti Patel: It is important to emphasise again that the number of people who can be relocated is unlimited and, importantly, they have the support and capacity in-country—that is part of the resources that we have put in, and part of the programming approach that has been developed directly with the Government of Rwanda.

Deaths following Domestic Abuse

13. **Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to support the families of women who have died in (a) domestic abuse-related suicides and (b) suspicious deaths following domestic abuse. [901268]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amanda Solloway): Every domestic abuse-related death is a tragedy, leaving too many families in grief. This is why, in the tackling domestic abuse plan, we committed to significant reforms of the domestic homicide review process to ensure that lessons are learned, victims are supported appropriately and deaths are prevented in the first place. The Home Office is also providing £250,000 in funding to the charity Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse to deliver specialist and expert advocacy to families affected by domestic homicide, domestic abuse-related suicides and unexplained deaths linked to domestic abuse.

Kate Osborne: The Government's latest domestic abuse plan confirms the stark truth that action on domestic abuse is getting worse, with fewer domestic abusers being prosecuted. Three in four recorded domestic abuse cases are closed due to evidential difficulties or because

the victim is unable to continue. I hope the new Prime Minister takes the issue more seriously than she did as Minister for Women and Equalities. Will the Minister commit to bringing forward plans to support victims taking action and introducing a domestic abuse perpetrator register?

Amanda Solloway: I commend all the work that has been done on domestic abuse, and all the issues we have to face are not taken lightly. A central count of domestic abuse fatalities is crucial to building the evidence base for effective interventions and preventing future tragedies. This Government have been counting all domestic homicides, domestic abuse-related unexplained or suspicious deaths, and suspected suicides of individuals with a known history of domestic abuse victimisation since March 2020.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On 20 June, I stood at this Dispatch Box and asked the then Minister, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), where the Government's response to the domestic homicide sentencing review was. I said then that 105 women had been killed during the period of delay to that response. The then Minister—to be fair to the current Minister—assured me that she would write to me on the issue; she did not. Since I asked in June, there have been 18 more victims of femicide counted by the organisation Counting Dead Women, which will not account for the cases referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) because those are not as well known. May I ask what exactly is causing the Government such delay in responding to the QC-led report? They have had it for months and have promised the grief-stricken families of Ellie Gould and Poppy Devey Waterhouse that it will be delivered. Does the Minister wonder how many other women will have died by the time they finally respond?

Amanda Solloway: Such cases, whenever we hear of them, are always a great tragedy. There has been no delay, but I do give my commitment that we will get a response to the hon. Member—[*Interruption.*] We will get a response to her. I give her my guarantee.

Violence against Women and Girls

15. **Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** What steps she has taken to tackle violence against women and girls in the last 12 months. [901270]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amanda Solloway): We have published our tackling domestic abuse plan, which invests more than £230 million to tackle this heinous crime, and launched the “Enough” national communications campaign, which educates young people about healthy relationships and ensures victims can access support. We have been driving transformation in how the police and the Crown Prosecution Service respond to rape cases, with 19 forces participating in Operation Soteria, and we also continue to fund the specialist helplines that supported over 81,000 people in 2021-22.

Clive Efford: On 17 September, it will be one year to the day since the brutal, sexually-motivated murder of Sabina Nessa in my constituency. In the year she was murdered—to the end of March 2022—an astonishing 70,330 rapes were recorded, which is up from 16,000 in 2010, yet we have a charge rate of just 1.3%. Does the Minister not think that we owe it to the memory of people such as Sabina to improve those figures?

Amanda Solloway: These are all tragic circumstances, which is exactly why we are working on the reforms. Tackling violence against women and girls is a Government priority, and it is unacceptable that this preventable issue, which blights and limits the lives of millions, is allowed to continue.

Afghan Citizens: Asylum Policies

16. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What steps she is taking to support Afghan citizens relocated to the UK under the (a) Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and (b) Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy.

[901271]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): Together with our colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities we provide a range of support in accessing public services including essentials such as school places for children and housing. Around 7,400 people have moved, or are in the process of being moved, into new homes since the first ARAP flights in June 2021, an unprecedented rate of resettlement.

Sarah Olney: Of those who have arrived in the UK, around 10,000 Afghans remain stuck in hotels up and down the country at a cost to the public of £1 million a day. Most of them have been there for a year now, left in limbo due to the Government's failure to work effectively with local authorities. Will the Minister commit to opening up safe and legal routes so that those in Afghanistan who are at risk can come to the UK? That also requires working constructively with local authorities so that Afghans in this country can finally start their new lives properly, in a home rather than a hotel room.

Kevin Foster: We are working constructively with 350 local authorities to ensure people get the accommodation they need. Given the cohort, that is clearly a challenge as there are large families and a balance needs to be struck with local authorities meeting their housing duties to local people. This also involves working with others, but we are grateful to see the number of local authorities taking part; their reaction is far better than that of the Lib Dem leader of my local council who initially, until he made a U-turn, refused to take part.

Police Officer Recruitment: London Region

17. **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What progress she has made on recruiting additional police officers in the London region.

[901272]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Tom Pursglove): As I said earlier, data to 30 June shows that 2,952 additional officers have been recruited by the Metropolitan

Police Service as part of the police uplift. In addition, City of London Police has recruited 60 additional police officers as part of this unprecedented recruitment drive.

Julia Lopez: In his most recent letter to me, Mayor Khan admitted that the Met police now has more officers than at any time in its history thanks to the national uplift under this Home Secretary. He has also confirmed that he will push ahead with plans to sell Hornchurch police station, the only base for officers in my constituency. Since a major review is now under way into the Met on his watch, will the Minister encourage the Mayor to use this moment to reflect on his own performance and whether he is doing enough to make sure every part of the capital has bases from which officers can operate?

Tom Pursglove: It is welcome that the incoming commissioner has a 100-day plan. As my hon. Friend set out, the fact is that the Mayor has 3,000 new officers in London over and above what he had previously as a result of the uplift, and his resources are up by £164 million compared with 2021-22. The bottom line is that he has the resources to get on and do it and it is time for the Mayor to show up and deliver.

Topical Questions

T1. [901281] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Since I became Home Secretary in 2019 I have pursued the people's priorities: backed the police with a record £17 billion; expanded stop-and-search powers; better equipped the police; and introduced a police uplift programme that is well on the way to putting in place 20,000 additional police officers. Harper's law is in place, as is the police covenant and the support the police need to make our streets, transport network and our public safe both publicly and online. We have taken back control with a new plan for immigration that rewards talent, welcomes refugees, allows EU citizens to settle here, makes it easier to remove foreign national offenders, attracts businesses and deals with the issue of people smugglers.

I have also overhauled the Windrush compensation scheme and fixed the outdated nationality laws, supported law enforcement and the security services in fighting terrorism, including through the superb National Security Bill, and worked with our Five Eyes partners, the G7 and our international allies. In addition, we have collectively been combating the evils of violence against women and girls and changing the laws on trespass. But keeping our citizens safe is the Government's first duty and it has been my privilege to do so, serving in this Government but also in my service to our country.

Caroline Lucas: This Government are planning to remove refugees to Rwanda who sought sanctuary in the UK from torture and trafficking. This is a new and despicable low even from this Home Office. Can the Home Secretary confirm whether she has read the medical analysis from the charity Medical Justice, and will she find some moral backbone, immediately release

from indefinite immigration detention all those targeted with removal to Rwanda and finally abandon this shameful policy?

Priti Patel: Absolutely not, because the immoral aspect is the role of people smugglers and the criminal trade that facilitates people smuggling. Not only is the migration and economic development partnership the first of its kind, but it is being looked at by other countries around the world. Our processes are not only legitimate but show that a deterrent factor can be achieved through this policy. It is absolutely right that we ensure that people are detained on the basis that they will be removed to Rwanda at the soonest possible opportunity.

T2. [901282] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Tens of thousands of migrants crossing the English channel in small boats is a potential security risk, increasingly unsustainable in terms of accommodation and housing, and costing the taxpayer ever growing sums. May I seek an assurance that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's Department will work with the Ministry of Defence on a push-back policy, to be implemented as soon as possible, and continue to pursue the Rwanda processing plan?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Simon Baynes): The rise in dangerous channel crossings is unacceptable, as my hon. Friend has said. Indeed, there is a push-back policy in place. Not only are these crossings an overt abuse of our immigration laws, but they risk the lives of vulnerable people who are being exploited by ruthless criminal gangs. Our new Nationality and Borders Act 2022 is breaking the business model of these evil criminals. We have introduced tougher sentences for those who facilitate illegal entry into the country, with 38 people already arrested and facing further action since the Act became law.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As this may be the Home Secretary's last question time, may I recognise the unseen work that she and all her predecessors have done on national security and on warrants, which often goes unrecognised? I also join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Oliva Pratt-Korbel, Thomas O'Halloran and the other victims of devastating knife and gun crime, which has escalated this summer.

Stabbings are now 60% higher than in 2015, yet the number of violent criminals caught is at a record low.

"There is a serious problem in this country with gun crime...with gangs...with knife crime".

Those are not my words, but those of the incoming Prime Minister, so why have successive Conservative Home Secretaries allowed it to get this bad?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Lady knows perfectly well the Government's record over many years in boosting police funding—which neither she nor the Labour party supported—including the work under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which has all the right deterrents in place to go after criminals and ensure that they are given the right kinds of sentences, supports serious violence reduction units, and extends the capabilities of stop and search. Those are the very tools and tactics that the police have, and it is this Government who have

supported them every single step of the way—not just by backing, equipping and empowering them to go after criminals, but by working with the criminal justice system to ensure that the right sentences are given out.

Yvette Cooper: But the Conservatives have cut the funding for policing and they have brought in lots of legislation that has not worked. Stabbings are up by 60%, and over 90% of violent criminals now get away with it. That is way higher than it was just seven years ago. The National Police Chiefs' Council has said:

"Detection and charge rates for a range of crimes have fallen over the past five years. This has been impacted by austerity and the loss of thousands of police officers and staff...and...backlogs in the court system."

That is a damning reflection on 12 years of Conservative policies on policing and crime. On her last day in the job, will the Home Secretary tell us whether she thinks that 43 police chiefs are wrong?

Priti Patel: It is this Government who have delivered over 13,000 additional police officers. That is 69% of the 20,000 target that we have set to meet by March 2023. Not only that, but it is our Government who have been committed from day one to reducing serious violence by putting an end to tragedies. We have invested over £130 million in tackling serious violence, including £64 million for violence reduction units. It is important to remind the House, the public and the right hon. Lady that at every single step of the way, she and her party have voted against every single law enforcement measure that this Government have brought in, including our Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act. Quite frankly, I suggest—

Mr Speaker: Order. I need to step in now. We have to get through some topical questions: at this rate, we will not get any further. Can we get back to what topicals are meant to be—short and quick, both asking and answering? Anna Firth is going to give us a good example.

T3. [901283] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Under this Home Secretary since 2019, our police have removed over 50,000 knives and offensive weapons from our streets, keeping us all safe. But in Southend, knife crime, including this summer—

Mr Speaker: Order. You have missed the point—*[Interruption.]* You have to sit down. It was meant to be a short question, not continuing. Who is answering?

Priti Patel: I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend because she has been very strong on this issue. She is right: there is a great deal of work taking place. I would like to thank Essex police in particular for dealing with this issue in her constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call Stuart C. McDonald, the SNP spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): We were all shocked by the horrendous shootings in Liverpool and on the Isle of Skye over the summer and send our condolences to all who were affected. While our gun laws are comparatively robust by international standards, is it not now time for another comprehensive look at both policy and practice, to see what more can be done to stop guns getting into the wrong hands?

Priti Patel: There are two points that I would like to make to the hon. Gentleman, who is absolutely correct. First, the introduction of safety and security declarations, to which the Government are committed, will help with that, by tracking fast parcels that come into our country, often containing goods and materials such as firearms. Secondly—and it is a point of assurance—there is a force-by-force review of firearms licensing taking place right now.

T6. [901286] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Mayor of London's recent attempt to blame the heatwave and the school holidays for six murders in four days was as pathetic as his record of trying to help the police fight crime in the capital?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Miss Sarah Dines): As of June 2022, the latest data for hospital admissions for under-25s for assault with a sharp object—our primary metric for measuring serious violence—was down 17% in London compared to June 2021. This financial year, we have provided £12 million of funding to the London violence reduction unit, which brings together key partners to tackle violence, and £8 million in Grip funding for the Metropolitan police service's response to violence.

T4. [901284] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): There are 10,500 Afghan refugees still in accommodation, and I heard the Minister's answer earlier. When does he anticipate those 10,500 Afghan refugees will be in permanent accommodation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are working constructively with councils. To be fair, I have to say that Glasgow is stepping forward, as always, to find accommodation. It is about finding suitable accommodation, not just any accommodation for them. We have also had constructive discussions with the Scottish Government—credit where it is due to Neil Gray—about where we may be able to go further in creating housing, particularly in Scotland, to accommodate many of those families; we all want them to be found accommodation in a permanent home.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Will the Minister help me get more alley gates, better CCTV and more street lighting to tackle the scumbags who blight alleyways across Stoke-on-Trent, dealing and shooting up drugs and fly-tipping all over the community?

The Minister of State, Home Department (Tom Purslove): Of course, as well as the additional police funding that has been made available for my hon. Friend's force area, and the additional officer numbers through the uplift programme, it is fair to say that one of the important pieces of work that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been progressing is another round of the safer streets fund, which I am sure his area will be interested in.

T5. [901285] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): In April, a first-tier tribunal decided that the Home Office had incorrectly applied its own rules and that my constituent, Mr Simon Hagos, should indeed

be joined by his family as he first asked back in February 2021. Despite that, UKVI failed to issue visas to his wife and son, disregarding both their wellbeing and the law. Can the Minister tell me when the Home Office will finally fulfil its legal obligations to ensure a clear and timely response in this long overdue process?

Kevin Foster: I am happy to pick up that with the hon. Lady outside the Chamber. She will appreciate that we do not discuss individual cases on the Floor of the House.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Last year, 28,526 people arrived illegally via small boats. So far this year 26,000 have done so, and it is clear that the previous record will be surpassed. Will the Home Secretary join me in asking the new Prime Minister to make tackling this issue a national priority so that we can finally take back control of our borders?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is well aware of my views, so I do not need to add much more on that. This absolutely is a priority, on the basis of the new plan for immigration and making sure that is delivered, along with the legislation on reforming the national referral mechanism and the many other approaches we have spoken about.

T7. [901287] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm how many fewer police officers there are in England and Wales today compared with 2010, and how long it will take for those police officer numbers to be restored, given that we lost over 20,000 officers under the Tories after 2010?

Tom Purslove: The bottom line—I know the hon. Gentleman does not like it very much—is that we have recruited over 13,500 new police officers as part of the uplift, and the fact is that his party has not been supportive of those efforts. We are putting more police officers out on the beat, catching criminals and deterring crime.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): We are seeing the sinister rise of the vegan militia, which is seeking to hold to ransom families and farmers across the country. When the Public Order Bill comes forward, does my hon. Friend agree that we should legislate for farming sites, abattoirs and food production sites to be sites of national infrastructure?

Tom Purslove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this, and I know that she has been engaging proactively in her constituency of Rutland and Melton. I can say that the local police forces have been working with the sites affected to mitigate the risks of these protests, and we will of course keep under review the measures we introduce as part of the Public Order Bill, which is an important step change that we are going to bring forward.

T8. [901288] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): While the number of rapes reported to the police has hit a record high, the charge rate is at a record low. Does the Home Secretary agree that her Department has completely failed victims of this vile crime?

Priti Patel: I am going to correct the hon. Lady on this, because the top four forces for the percentage of adult rape charges received—Bedfordshire, Cheshire, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire—are leading the way, along with much of the work of Operation Soteria, of which she will be well aware. My team and I would be happy to discuss that with her, because these schemes are very successful in working with the CPS and getting charges brought.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I would like to thank the Met police for its very professional policing of the Notting Hill carnival. In the last week, my constituency has seen two murders and at least six stabbings. Can my right hon. Friend update me on what conversations she has had with the Mayor of London to really get rid of this epidemic of violent crime in London?

Priti Patel: All-change is coming in London with the appointment of the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and I have been working with him on his 100-day plan. My hon. Friend and her constituents can be reassured that the Mayor, in particular—through our dialogue during the recent work with Tom Winsor—will be held to account for delivery, and that the new commissioner will have a very forceful plan to deal with serious violence, including by ensuring that the application of stop and search continues and that more work is done to keep the streets of our brilliant city safe.

T10. [901290] **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** Constituents in Lliswerry are hugely frustrated by the persistent dangerous behaviour of groups of e-scooter and e-bike users on local roads and pavements. What are the Government doing to improve awareness of the law relating to the use of e-scooters and e-bikes and to support the police in tackling their antisocial use?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right on this. Work is taking place with the Department for Transport very specifically on these scooters, and police forces—through the College of Policing and the National Police

Chiefs' Council—are working on appropriate guidance to tackle not only the inappropriate use of e-scooters, but some of the criminality associated with them.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): In Ashfield, I have pensioners who cannot get to the local library or the post office because of a lack of bus drivers, but there is no lack of bus drivers in Kent, shipping illegal immigrants to their four-star hotels. Is it not time that we declared a state of emergency?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is well aware of the Government's work to deal with illegal migration. That continues to be robust, with our removals policies and the removals agreements that I have with countries around the world—not to mention Albania, which I have touched on. He mentioned the lack of bus drivers. If I may, I suggest that he makes representations to the Department for Transport, because that clearly requires more training and the issuing of more bus driver licences.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Home Secretary look at my ten-minute rule Bill on joint enterprise, which I will present tomorrow? Is it not a scandal that thousands of young people are in prison without a route for anyone to look at their case?

Priti Patel: I will, and I am happy to have a conversation with the hon. Gentleman about that.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary's extensive and robust work to tackle the number of Albanian economic migrants arriving in small boats. However, what more can she do to keep our country safe?

Priti Patel: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her diligent and professional work in the Home Office, where she championed the safety of women and girls. She is absolutely right about the safety and security of our great country, and when it comes to the checking of illegal migrants, she is well aware of the detailed work taking place, much of which we cannot speak about publicly for security reasons. That robust work will continue.

Business Statement

3.40 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): With permission, Mr Speaker, it may help if I inform the House that, following the election of the new leader of the Conservative party, the business managers have agreed that the Government will not move the Second Reading and other motions relating to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill today to allow Ministers to consider the legislation further. The remainder of this week's business is as I announced on 21 July.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. The phrase "the remainder of this week's business is as I announced on 21 July" will be interesting to follow, and I will watch closely. I hope that he had a good break, but the Government do not seem to have got their house or their business in order. This is the first day back, and the Government are already pulling their own business. Even though the data Bill fell well short on ambition, it was supposed to unlock growth and business opportunities. What do the Government have against those things? As if we needed more evidence of a zombie Government and a party divided, they will not even carry on with a pretty uncontentious Bill.

Why has this important Bill been pulled? Does the Culture Secretary not support her own Bill any more? When will it be rescheduled? Are the Government planning to drop it completely? Are the Government planning to drop any other legislation? Vital Parliamentary time is being scrapped this evening, and we could have used it to legislate for Labour's plan to freeze the energy price cap, which would stop families paying a penny more on energy this winter. Our soon to be Prime Minister said she wants to take "immediate action" on the soaring energy crisis, but where is the plan? We could have been doing that this evening. Will the Leader of the House give us any idea at all of when this Government or the next Government, or any Government, are going to get a move on and bring forward legislation to tackle this Tory cost-of-living emergency?

Mark Spencer: Mr Speaker, I am very much aware of your desire to move quickly and for us to keep comments to a minimum. The hon. Lady is aware that there will be ample opportunity to debate such things. We have three statements this afternoon on very important matters that happened over the summer, including in the health service. The Government announced a huge £37 billion investment earlier this year to support people with the cost of living. Once the new Prime Minister is established, I am sure that she will come forward rapidly with her

plan, and the shadow Leader of the House will see a united Conservative party that is firmly behind the Prime Minister delivering for the people of this country.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There are two things that we could have been discussing this evening that might have been helpful for the whole House. First, the interviews for the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards were held months ago, and everything has been agreed by all the various bodies, so I do not understand why we could not have discussed that appointment today. Secondly, why can we not implement the new code of conduct, which the Committee on Standards recommended in the summer?

Mark Spencer: Those are two important matters that I expect to come rapidly to the Dispatch Box in the very near future.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My question relates to today's business. You will remember, Mr Speaker, that at the end of the summer term you granted an urgent question on the issue of infected blood compensation payments. The Government then announced, in August, that £100,000 would be awarded to some of those infected, but not to all. Today a written ministerial statement has been tabled, which offers no opportunity for us to question the Government about the groups who are not included in the scheme, which was announced in August, not to the House, but in my view could have been made in July. I wonder when the Leader of the House might arrange for a statement to be made to the House so that we can question the Government on the infected blood scandal.

Mark Spencer: As the right hon. Lady will know, business questions will take place on Thursday, and there will be an opportunity then to discuss the future business as presented.

Mr Speaker: We now come to—yes—the one and only Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is nice to see you in your place, Mr Speaker, and it is nice to be back.

I understand the reasons for the postponement of tonight's business, but my constituents tell me that they consider the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill to be a welcome development, given the current conflicting theories about how the existing terms should be interpreted and the associated difficulties. They are worried about that. May I ask the Leader of the House when we will have the Bill before us?

Mark Spencer: I know how important this issue is to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. I am sure that there will be ample opportunity, at some point in the future, to debate the Bill. Business will be announced, in the usual way, on Thursday morning.

Ukraine Update

3.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

It is good to be back after the summer recess, and it is good to see you in your place, Mr Speaker.

I want to update Members about progress in Ukraine and UK support to date since the House rose for the recess. On 29 August, Ukraine embarked on a counter-offensive in the south of the country, around the city of Kherson on the west bank of the Dnipro river. As part of the shaping fires, Ukraine has inflicted serious damage on a range of river crossings with the aim of restricting Russian logistical support. That has had considerable success. I can report to the House that the Ukrainian forces have made real progress, assaulting on three axes, and especially on the advance to the south of the city of Kryvyi Rih. The grinding fight in the Donbas continues, but with Russia making few substantive gains in the east over the past two months. Since June, Ukraine has struck more than 350 Russian command posts, ammo dumps, supply depots, and other high-value targets far back from the frontline. Many of those have been with longer-range weaponry supplied by international partners, including the United Kingdom.

As of today, the Ukrainian army is engaging with Russian forces using both artillery and brigade-level operations. It is making real gains, but understandably, as we have seen elsewhere in this conflict, the fighting is close and hard, and Ukraine is suffering losses associated with an attacking force. My thoughts, and the Government's thoughts, are obviously with the men and women of the brave Ukrainian forces who are fighting to uphold our values as well as theirs, and to defend their land. However, Russia continues to lose significant equipment and personnel. It is estimated that to date more than 25,000 Russian soldiers have lost their lives, and that, in all, more than 80,000 have been killed, have been casualties, have been captured, or constitute the reported tens of thousands of deserters. This will have a long-lasting impact on Russia's army and its future combat effectiveness. Russia has yet to achieve any of its strategic objectives, and we are now on day 194 of what was expected to be a month-long campaign.

I know that Members will be worried by reports about the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is the biggest nuclear power station in Europe. On Friday 1 September, the United Nations International Atomic Energy Authority visited the plant accompanied by Russian media. No other international media were allowed to attend. Under the IAEA, an inspection was carried out, and the agency has left a team behind. It has already drawn attention to the violation of the plant's "physical integrity", and the United Nations remains gravely concerned about the dangerous situation in and around the plant. We will continue to monitor it, and ensure that we engage with Ukrainian partners to ensure that no one's safety is put at risk.

Earlier in the month, Turkey, Russia and the United Nations came to an agreement on grain exports from Ukraine; the so called "Black sea initiative" was put in place. This has now seen over 2 million tonnes of grain exported, with another 100 ships waiting to embark with grain from Ukraine's ports. I want to place on record the Government's thanks to both the United Nations and the Turkish authorities for facilitating this—it was

no mean feat. We have offered the Turkish military any support they require; to date, the Turkish Government have not requested any support, but we stand ready to do that. The United Kingdom continues to gift military aid to the Ukrainian armed forces to help resist the illegal invasion. Since the end of July, when this House rose, we have gifted a further three M270 guided multiple-launch rocket system platforms, and accompanying missiles. We are now working on an additional package of support. The total funding committed to this support is £2.3 billion.

In June, I recognised that training is as important as military hardware, which is why we embarked on establishing a network of training camps in the UK to train 10,000 Ukrainians. That was accompanied by specialist armed training across a number of countries in Europe. So far, we have trained 4,700, and I am delighted that over the summer we were joined by forces from Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Lithuania, Canada, Holland and New Zealand; they are all now in place alongside British military personnel delivering that training. The training cycle is now in its third iteration and, after lessons learned, we have now extended it to a five-week syllabus. We are already seeing this make a difference to the combat effectiveness of Ukraine, and we are evolving the course and feedback to make sure that the experiences do exactly what the Ukrainians need.

Support for Ukraine goes beyond the here and now. Being able to plan for the medium and long term requires international funding. So at the beginning of August, at the invitation of our Danish friends in the Danish Government, I co-chaired with them a conference in Copenhagen. So far, we have amassed pledges of up to €420 million of support, including through an international fund for Ukraine. We are working through the governance of the fund with our international partners and we hope to add to it when I present more details this week to the Ukraine defence contact group convened by the United States in Germany on Thursday. The fund will be used hopefully to support a range of measures, including ammunition production, to ensure that there is a sustainable supply over the long term in Ukraine.

I would like to place on record my appreciation of the Prime Minister's enduring support for Ukraine throughout the process, without which a lot would not have been possible. I am grateful, too, for all the support of all the parties in this House for the action we have taken. That allows us to lead on the world stage with determination and a focus on all the things that are right about Ukraine's defence from an illegal invasion and on the fact that we share such common values of freedom, and respect for sovereignty and the international rule of law. I hope all of us in this House do so—I know from experience that we do so. This Government's commitment to Ukraine remains unwavering and enduring, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, John Healey.

3.53 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome this statement on day one after the recess and on day 194 of Russia's brutal illegal invasion of Ukraine. I thank the Defence Secretary for the regular briefings he has given during this period to those in all parts of the

House and on all sides. On behalf of Members on all sides, may I say that we trust that he will remain in his post in the new Truss Cabinet?

I say on behalf of my party that we now stand ready to work with the new Prime Minister to maintain the UK's united support for Ukraine and united determination to stand up against Russian aggression. President Putin expected Ukraine to fall within six days. Six months on, the massively brave Ukrainian resistance, military and civilian alike, is stronger now than it was in February, and all the Government's moves to provide military, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian help to Ukraine will continue to have Labour's fullest backing.

We strongly support the UK's training programme for new Ukrainian army recruits, which the Labour leader and I saw for ourselves on Salisbury plain. I am humbled by the fact that those brave new recruits whom we met last month are now on the frontline, fighting in Donbas. I thank the Defence Secretary and Brigadier Justin Stenhouse for organising our visit. Will this training under Operation Interflex be extended beyond the initial commitment of 10,000 troops and beyond the basic soldiering skills currently covered?

We also welcome the extra long-range missiles and unmanned air systems announced over the summer. What is the strategy behind our military assistance? Is it designed to help Ukrainians hold current ground or take back more territory from Russian forces? What action has been taken to replenish our domestic stockpiles? How many new contracts have been signed? Has the production of replacement NLAWs—next generation anti-tank and anti-armour weapons—now finally started?

The war is entering a critical new stage, with Russia unable to deploy the overwhelming force needed for a decisive breakthrough and Ukraine well on the way to sapping the will of the Russian army to fight, hitting ammunition dumps, command posts and airfields deep into Russian-held territory. With the Russian military leadership under increasing military pressure, does the Defence Secretary agree that we are approaching another turning point, where Putin is likely to step up efforts to persuade the west to lean on Ukraine to agree to a ceasefire and negotiations? What are the Government doing to counter such activities?

What are the Government doing to explain to the public that the energy crisis and supply disruptions are not a result of Russia's war, but an essential part of Russia's war? Russia is fighting on the economic battlefield, not just the military battlefield. What action will the new Prime Minister take to help the country with escalating energy costs, rapidly rising food costs and the highest rate of inflation in this country for 40 years?

On the subject of the new Prime Minister, before the Tory leadership campaign, the Defence Secretary and Defence Ministers said that the invasion of Ukraine proved the integrated review right. They said:

"if more money were made available, there are other things that we would do more immediately than regrow the size of the Army."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 688.]

Then, towards the end of the leadership campaign, the Defence Secretary wrote of the new Prime Minister:

"I welcome her plans to update the integrated review, reconsider the shape of our forces, and increase defence spending."

I welcome his conversion to the arguments that Labour has been making for well over a year, but what does he

believe now needs updating in the integrated review? Will he halt his plans for Army cuts? Will the £1.7 billion cut in day-to-day MOD spending now be replaced?

Finally, very few people believed Ukraine would still be fighting Russia's invasion six months on. We now know that Russia's aggression will go on a lot longer. Will the Government set aside individual announcements and instead set out a grand strategy of long-term military, economic and diplomatic support, so that we can help ensure Putin's invasion really does end in failure?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for the support of the right hon. Gentleman and his party on Ukraine. I apologise to him that he did not get my statement earlier. I changed it at the last minute—I was taking a bit of time as I wanted to give the House as many facts as we could and declassify some material.

It is my ambition that Operation Interflex—the training of Ukrainian forces in the UK with the international community—goes on as long as necessary, for now. We set a target of 10,000 troops, but through this pipeline I envisage that we will continue to train as many as are sent by Ukraine, to ensure that we are providing forces for them during the offences they are engaged in. Last Thursday, I again visited Yorkshire and met some troops who had come back. I met one man who had been injured by shrapnel and another man who, not long after leaving, had used a British NLAW to destroy a Russian tank. The scheme has a double benefit: we are learning as we go and improving the curriculum to ensure they get the very best training—they already want to learn more about some things and less about others—and our own troops are learning on the latest battlefield what our enemy does and how we deal with it. That is incredibly important, and we will continue to supply and support them as long as possible. When they arrived for the first curriculum I went to visit them, and some of those guys were getting off the plane in their tracksuits, training in uniforms and then having to hand them all back. They now leave here with 50 pieces of uniform—equipped, ready to go, with much better battle training and so on—to go into the next phase of their training in Ukraine. We will continue to supply that.

How many are trained, again, is in the hands of the Ukrainians, but we already know that they will want more specialist training. That is where I often convene our international partners, because they might want to do that closer to Ukraine than in Yorkshire or wherever we are delivering it. Those are the two phases, but the training is still going strong. I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman came to visit, and I am happy to facilitate the leaders of the other parties or their Defence spokespersons to come and visit it as it progresses. I notice we have all the Vikings—the Danes, the Swedes and the Finns—all in the same camp, so come October time they will be able to teach us about working in the cold. That is very good.

Our strategy is to give the Ukrainians the absolute best chance either to negotiate, when they wish to, from a position of strength or to defeat Russia in their own country—to hold their position, to push back the Russians and, if necessary, to defeat Russia within Ukraine, to ensure that Russia comes to its senses and withdraws from its military and illegal action there.

[Mr Wallace]

We signed off last week on more replenishment of the high-velocity anti-air missiles, which are made in the same factories as the Thales NLAWs, to ensure that they are replaced. Right across the western industries there is a challenge with replenishment. Many of the supply chains have been dormant, and I think the right hon. Gentleman will know—as I think either he or the Leader of the Opposition made a visit to Belfast—that it is not as simple as switching on a tap. I have been very clear that we will place the orders, but we need to encourage the arms industry to invest as well.

It is not just for us to effectively pay for manufacturers to double their production lines; those lines will be full of customers, and we would like to ensure we get the balance right. Nevertheless, I will not sacrifice our readiness and our stocks to do that. The industry has letters of comfort from the accounting officer in the Department to say, “We will be placing orders, and you should start to proceed.” I met the head of BAE recently, who said it is already starting to expand its production, so that is on track.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne is absolutely right about the energy crisis. It did not come out of nowhere; some of it was about peak demand post covid, but President Putin is weaponising energy. He has weaponised a lot of other stuff over the years: he has weaponised cyber, political division in our countries, misinformation and corruption, and energy is just another plank in his arsenal. It is important that we communicate to our constituents that some of the deeply uncomfortable times that we all face are driven by a totalitarian regime in Russia that is deliberately setting out to harm us and trying to test whether we will sacrifice our values for our energy costs. That is very important.

For what it is worth, President Putin is sowing the seeds of the end of energy dependency, not only for Russia but around the world. We must all work on putting investments into renewables, which many Governments have talked about—I have been in this House under both Labour and Conservative Governments—but diversity of supply is also important. In the long term, Putin has put Russia in a weaker position. Switching off the pipeline instantly will just persuade Germany even more that it has to invest in something else, and I think that is a good thing.

I am delighted to join the right hon. Gentleman on a commitment to more defence spending; I wonder whether he will join us in our commitment to 3% of GDP on defence spending by 2030. I have always been very clear that as the threat changes, we should change what we do and how we invest. The Armed Forces Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), has made the point that it is not as simple as taking whatever extra money we get and doubling or increasing our troops; the lesson of Ukraine, as I have often said, is that history shows that when people spend lots of money on lots of new platforms and on certain numbers, they can hollow them out and not actually produce medium, small or large perfectly formed units.

If we have more money, I can assure the House that we will ensure that our soldiers and sailors are less vulnerable than they are today, that they have the 360° protection they need and that we invest in the enablers to make sure that the frontline is properly supported.

All the vulnerabilities that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown—across the western armies, not just in the United Kingdom—will be fixed. At the same time, we will make sure that we fix the forces we have with better maintenance, better spares and everything else, so we can be more available and readier.

It is always tempting at these times for people to come out with ideas that are like going back to the steam train. Some people still want to go back to the steam train. There is always a tendency to want to suddenly mass up, but if we mass up without the appropriate funding, we will be in a mess in 10 years’ time. I do not want to repeat that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although the commitment to 3% of GDP on defence is welcome, 2030 is further away in time than the entire duration of the second world war. It would be nice to see that commitment, which the Select Committee on Defence originally called for about six years ago, implemented a little sooner than the new Prime Minister plans. Can the Defence Secretary confirm that the extra expenditure on replenishing the arms supplies that we are giving to Ukraine is being met with extra funds from the Treasury reserve? What steps are we taking to ensure that the Russian people get the same message about the failure of Putin’s campaign that the rest of the world can clearly see?

Mr Wallace: On the latter point, in one sense it is sad, because it is people’s lives, but in Russia they cannot ignore the long and continued train of bodies to their loved ones and families. It was not missed by Soviets in the Afghan conflict. The terms “boys in zinc” and “load 200”, which are now in the Russian vocabulary, refer to the planes that brought back the dead bodies: zinc was what they used to wrap them. That is clearly before people in Russia. It is not helped by the misleading, dishonest and manipulative state information that tries to say that these people died fighting Nazis. The only people who are displaying a fascist tendency in Ukraine are the Russian regime; it is not in any way being extolled by the Ukrainians defending their soil. But we obviously do our best.

On the increase to defence funding, some of that £2.3 billion is replacing gifted equipment from our own stocks; that is already being done. We were able to release the GMLRS M270 because we received some others from another country, which we are refurbishing. We will continue to keep pace and make sure that we do not sacrifice too many of our own stocks. At some stages, there are also opportunities when our stocks come out of life or approach their sell-by date and are perfect for gifting, because they will be used. We have already planned to replace them. Some of the NLAW orders are actually quite old, because we knew anyhow that they were coming out of date; they were a 2003 weapon, so we had already started that process. I think it is NLAWs, but I can happily write to my right hon. Friend about the exact weapon system.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the update that he has given the House. Like many, we have been watching

over the summer period as Ukrainian forces take back their territory. In one sense, although we would rather none of this were happening, it is heartening to see that weapons being supplied by this country are being used so successfully on the battlefield. Let us be clear about what that represents and what arming Ukraine's armed forces represents: it is, by definition, an act against fascism and war to support those who are the victims of a campaign of genocide.

It is also heartening to hear of the training by UK armed forces and partnered armed forces that is taking place. I think my office is in the process of organising an opportunity for me and the leader of the SNP here, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), to witness it at first hand.

One thing that definitely worries me—we are starting to see it happen across Europe—is that the unity that we have all maintained over the past six months or so is starting to crack as winter arrives. We saw that in the massive demonstrations at the weekend in Prague and, I think I am right in saying, in Cologne. That is something that we must—absolutely must—stand against.

The single best way to end this war is for the Kremlin to recall every single Russian troop on Ukrainian soil. All the calls to end the sanctions now, as though that would somehow help to end the conflict in Ukraine, are a falsehood, but that takes us to another important aspect of the war, which is the information war. As winter bites, as bills go up, as the effects of the conflict start to appear in people's bank accounts, and as an obvious information war from Russia takes place in that respect, can the Secretary of State assure the House, or outline to the House—this is similar to what the shadow Secretary of State asked—how he will ensure that we are fully equipped to withstand that information war? Standing with Ukrainians is the right thing to do, and that is something we need to communicate well.

Mr Wallace: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, to not stand would be infinitely worse in a decade's time. If we do not stand together and deal with them now, these threats will not go away on their own. To the people in Prague or Cologne, I say that if someone gives in to the drug dealer or the guy that gets them hooked on heroin, he will be back for more in a good few years. We should not forget that, sadly, this is an opportunity to diversify our supply, and that will be better for everyone in the long run as well.

I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman will come and visit; if he has any problems, he should let me know. It was 3 Scots doing the training. I saw a lot of bemused Ukrainians, because the battle order that the 3 Scots wear in the field is a kilt. I saw them being piped through the battle runs. It was curious: I could tell that some had developed a love of the pipes, but that others had not. I will give them some more battle inoculation; that will be much better. It is incredibly important.

Again, there is a danger of the media narrative that people are losing interest crowding out the action. Chancellor Scholz recently announced another €500 million. President Macron said that we pay "the price of freedom". At the conference in Denmark that the Danish organised, there was no shortage of international attendees. In total, we pledged €420 million and I am hoping for more; the Dutch, the Danish, the Swedes and the Norwegians have all pledged money. Our actions are

the opposite of the narrative of "Isn't everyone bored?"—I do not think they are; I think the international community is strong.

Of course, people in Members' constituencies will feel it and respond, but again, I ask everyone in the House to make it clear to their constituents that part of the extreme gas prices that we are facing is a direct result of President Putin.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): First, I thank my right hon. Friend for mentioning Turkey's role in getting the grain out. Indeed, Turkey remains a valued and vital ally in the NATO alliance. I am sure that he, like the rest of the House, will have been horrified at the footage that emerged over the summer of the mutilation of prisoners of war through having their genitalia removed by scalpels, which was filmed and put out there. Those war crimes must be prosecuted. I ask him to reiterate the support that the United Kingdom is giving to the investigations into those terrible war crimes.

Mr Wallace: On the investigations, as Defence Secretary, I am not entirely on top of that relationship, but I know that the Attorney General visited Ukraine a few months ago and worked closely with the international prosecutor. We are assisting countries such as Canada in gathering evidence to submit to the International Criminal Court. Like my right hon. Friend, I was appalled by the crimes that we have witnessed. We saw the castration and heads on spikes. The reported number of people killed in Mariupol is in the tens and tens of thousands—it is unverified, but I saw 87,000 in an open media source yesterday. People should not forget the scale of the war we are witnessing. I never thought in my generation we would see such actions from Russia—directed from the top—on the edges of Europe. The tragedy is of history repeating itself.

I pay tribute to Lord Harrington, who has resigned today. He been an excellent member of our Government, who managed to smooth the way when it came to refugees and settlement. I am informed that the Ukrainian refugee scheme has been the largest resettlement scheme since the war, with 120,000 Ukrainians having settled here. I will do all I can to ensure that scheme is extended to keep people in this country. The fact that so many people have come here is a symptom of what is going on in their country, and we are determined to ensure that brutality does not win the day.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): That was going to be my exact question: on the next step of the scheme. None of us wishes to see Homes for Ukraine become homeless Ukrainians on our streets. Perhaps some other Departments are not as enthusiastic as the Defence Secretary and need to be rallied to provide a follow-on scheme—particularly given the meltdown in the private rented sector and the lack of a deposit scheme for the second phase—so that we can play our part in helping the 9 million refugees created by this vile conflict.

Mr Wallace: Although the scheme has some imperfections, as it was done in a rush, I think it is absolutely brilliant. I will be urging its extension and I know that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up,

[Mr Wallace]

Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), is keen for that too. I cannot speak for the here and now, but I will do what I can to extend the scheme. It has worked. It does work. Many of us will have met Ukrainians in our own communities. It is good to welcome them and do anything further that we can.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I first echo the comment of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), about how fitting it is that this should be the first statement the Government make on our return to Parliament?

So many Members on the Government Benches hope for the Secretary of State's continuity in his role in the new Administration, so that we can press our efforts as effectively as possible. May I just press him on something he admitted to about dormant supply chains? Our conventional armed forces are an important part of our deterrent posture, but dormant supply chains are no deterrence at all. What lessons are being learned about the future—not just for this conflict—about how to give real credibility to our deterrent capability through our conventional forces with active supply chains that can sustain a long period of warfare if necessary?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a point about one of the consequences of a hollowed-out armed forces. Those who save money in the areas no one notices—such as hollowing out ammunition stocks—because they are always spending on something nice, shiny and brand new, pay for it. Industry will not just keep supply chains open for nothing. One lesson is to ensure that whatever we put in the field and whatever military we commit to, we equip it properly, support it properly with the right logistics and ammunition, and create the relationship with industry so that it knows when we are going to top up or keep it at the right level.

It is also incredibly important to ensure that we invest in the skills base, which in some parts of the country is well invested in by the Government and the primes. Last week, I went to Barrow-in-Furness to see 1,000 young people starting in the submarine and shipbuilding skills academy to learn the skills needed to equip our armed forces and engineering capacity into the future.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I get very angry when I hear people such as Mick Lynch of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers suggest that it was the EU that effectively led to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and that there were lots of people who were fascist and Nazi in Ukraine. That infuriates me, so I am glad to hear what the Secretary of State has said today. It also infuriates me when I hear people suggest that this has only been going on for six months; it has been going on since 2014, and we in the west did not take it seriously enough. The most shocking statistic of all is that 10 people who have now been sanctioned by the UK were given tier 1 visas to live and work in this country. When are the Government going to honour their pledge to publish their review of the tier 1 visa scheme?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right. Actually, to be honest, the writing was on the wall for many of us in 2008. I remember his experience as a member of the all-party group. On our watch—all of ours—Russia has turned from a country that we had hopes for into, effectively, an authoritarian, intolerant state that is oppressing its own people. Let us not forget that accompanying this Ukraine invasion is a mass oppression of its own people. People who disagree with Russia, or even criticise it, go to jail. We should all put our hands up to say that none of us did enough back in 2008 onwards. [Interruption.] I am not the Home Secretary, but I would be delighted to see that published—[Interruption.] I think I will go back to the Back Benches. Look, when I was security Minister, I had deep concerns about all of those things. We did some work on tightening up the first time round, but there is always more to do.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I welcome the news that we have trained nearly 5,000 Ukrainians through Operation Interflex. What assessment has my right hon. Friend had from Ukraine about the effectiveness and usefulness of the training? May I also ask him about the capacity of training: are we training the numbers that Ukraine wants us to train and is he seeking further partner nations if this capacity could be expanded?

Mr Wallace: There are two parts to the training. First, can Ukraine release enough training population? It obviously needs people for it to carry out the fight—we can only train what we get. We are always pressing to do more, and we have plenty of capacity to do more. If Members have a training camp near them, or in their constituency, I urge them to go and see it. The dedication from Ukrainians of all ages, including the hours they put in, is phenomenal. I met a man in his 60s who had joined up and was being put through it. We have a lot more capacity. It is also great that our international partners have joined us, because that means they can take a share as well.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I know the Secretary of State will have had a good reason for mentioning 3 Scots, but I hope that he recognises the contribution of the Irish Guards in the training. Over the summer, I was talking to a friend who was very proud of the role that the Irish Guards were playing.

I thought that Olena Zelenska made a very powerful contribution yesterday. There are concerns about boredom, lethargy and support right across the western world as this conflict drags on. Her juxtaposition between counting the pennies as opposed to counting the pennies and counting the casualties powerfully spoke to many of us who want to ensure that our support is enduring and lasts as long as it needs to last. I ask the Secretary of State to bear in mind that there are supporters right across this Chamber who want to ensure that the public do not lose interest and continue to recognise the goal that we all seek.

Mr Wallace: Yes. I understand—and the hon. Gentleman, from the part of the world in which he lives, will also understand—the cost of standing up for freedom, the rule of law and doing the right thing. They do not come easily and at no cost. To be fair, I think the British

public know that. Apart from one or two emails in my inbox, I have not found many people who have remotely swayed from the opinion that we are doing the right thing in Ukraine. That applies to all parties. In my constituency, it does not matter whether they are voters from my party or not—[*Interruption.*] I notice that I have just had a missed call from the Foreign Secretary, so I hope that I am not being sent to be the Home Secretary after that—I hope she was not ringing me about that. We still have a united population, which is a good thing.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I commend the continued leadership that the Secretary of State and his team have shown over the past few months. It is particularly important to help stiffen the resolve of our European partners because we are in this for the long haul. On that basis, there has been speculation by recently retired generals that, given that this could drag on and that Putin sees little prospect of winning, he may resort to using battlefield nuclear weapons. What is the Secretary of State's assessment of that possibility and what does he think the response of NATO would and should be?

Mr Wallace: We do not hide from the fact that Russian military doctrine involves the use of tactical nuclear weapons under certain conditions—that is public knowledge. The conditions are not remotely met for that, but we have nevertheless seen President Putin evoke nuclear weapons in public more than 35 times, I think, in the last six months. Of course we are mindful of that and, as I have said all along, it is incredibly important that we calibrate everything we do in the west to make sure that this is about Russia in Ukraine and saying that Russia must fail in Ukraine. It is not a threat to the Russian state. The west and NATO are not organising against the Russian state; the international community is organising to help Ukraine defend itself. That message is loud and clear. The consequence of the use of tactical nuclear weapons would be global condemnation of Russia by all countries, including countries such as China, and I think President Putin is well aware of that.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The jury is not out. Our friends are our European allies, and our foe is Putin's regime and the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Maintaining western unity is really crucial, but each western country is facing the same economic problems of rising inflation and rising energy costs. What is the Secretary of State's strategy for maintaining that unity in the many years ahead?

Mr Wallace: All of us have come together more times in the last six months than we probably have in the last four years, and I have said that I am off to the US airbase at Ramstein on Thursday to meet some 40 nations that it has convened on many occasions. What I would say is that the political body of Europe is pretty solid. Yes, there are a few stragglers, but fundamentally it is strong.

The hon. Lady mentions rising inflation, which is considerably driven by rising energy costs. The rising energy costs are the result of President Putin using energy as a weapon. The reality for us on both sides of the House is that we can take some measures to take the

edge off the energy prices for our constituents, but the global price is driven partly by a man in the Kremlin who is determined to use it to try to punish us. The British, just like the French and the Germans, are tough enough to make sure we will not be bullied by that. What we have to do is work together to either mitigate it or find alternative fuel sources to try to reduce prices. In the meantime, we have the political challenge from the Opposition on how we will help our constituents.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I heard the Secretary of State's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on nuclear weapons, but is he aware that President Lukashenko recently announced that he has completely refitted the Belarus air force to be able to carry nuclear weapons? What effect does the Secretary of State think that will have on the Ukraine war?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I saw those statements by the President of Belarus. He has been remarkably canny in not entering his own forces into the war, although we have often seen Russian munitions launched from the territory of Belarus. I think it is inevitable that he will try to escalate that by saying that the Russians could give nuclear weapons to Belarus and that his planes could carry them, but that is why NATO has a nuclear deterrent and why Britain provides that nuclear deterrent. Somewhere out there in the Atlantic is one of our patrol boats, which never stop patrolling, to make sure that the nuclear deterrent is capable and ready. As much as that is not what some people wish, I am pleased that we have it now.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): During my time as my party's defence spokesman, the Secretary of State and his ministerial team have treated all my questions and inquiries with great courtesy. I thank them for that, and I wish them all the best for the future. Equally, last week, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) had an excellent briefing from the MOD as the handover between him and me takes place. Will the Secretary of State pass on our thanks to his officials as well?

Napoleon's Grande Armée and Hitler's Wehrmacht fell foul of the Russian winter, and the rest is history. Will the Secretary of State explain what we are doing to help our friends in Ukraine to train for a brutal and severe Russian winter? It can have a massive impact on tactics and strategy unless we are prepared for it.

Mr Wallace: The first thing to say is that the Ukrainians are as tough, if not tougher. A Ukrainian winter and a Russian winter are pretty similar, and their history shows that they are pretty good at dealing with them. We are in constant discussions with our Ukrainian counterparts and have already made provision for winter warfare clothes, and we will ensure not only that they are supported with that, but that it brings an advantage.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Will the Black sea initiative, which the Secretary of State spoke about, allow materials such as ammonia to come out of Ukraine? I gather from reporting that the initiative will only be in place for 120 days if all parties agree. Is there a contingency plan for ensuring that in the depths of winter there is a secure food supply?

Mr Wallace: I will have to write to my hon. Friend on what individual cargoes are available, but he is right that there is currently a time limit on the initiative. That is why working with our Turkish friends is so important to try to keep that going. It is also why it is important that, with 100 ships waiting, we make sure we get that grain out as quickly as we can.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware that some of us on the Opposition side of the House were a bit worried that he might have become leader of the Conservative party? I congratulate him on his determination to remain Secretary of State for Defence, and he will certainly have the support of many of us for the way he has handled that job in recent months. First, I wish to press him on the role of the BBC World Service in getting good news out around the world. It is a vital component and should be encouraged. Secondly, is the Royal Navy playing a full part? He mentioned it in passing, but we recently had the embarrassment of one of our new aircraft carriers breaking down, so is everything all right with the Royal Navy and is it able to play its part?

Mr Wallace: In the next few days HMS Queen Elizabeth, the other carrier, will depart to fulfil the duties of HMS Prince of Wales, which shows one of the benefits of having a second carrier. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments; I do not know what to say in response, but that job was not for me. Some people are braver than I am when it comes to that type of job, and I am lucky in this House in that I feel fulfilled, and there are not many people in politics who get to make a difference. As far as I go, I am delighted—but who knows; I might be off to the Home Office. We will carry on, working across the House, to make sure that we look after not only our troops and our people, but the people of Ukraine.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend the Defence Secretary for his outstanding response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; he has set an example that every other western Defence Minister should follow. The Royal Navy's naval mine counter-measures capability is world class, completely outstanding and second to none. Have we been able to share any of that expertise with the Ukrainian navy to help guarantee the exports of grain shipments from Ukraine across the Black sea?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right to observe the unique, often global, expertise of our mine-clearing capabilities. We have Ukrainians being trained in that right now in Portsmouth, and at the same time we are working with other Black sea nations in the same space. Obviously, with the Montreux treaty being invoked by Turkey, we cannot put military ships into the Black sea, but we are teaching and supporting Ukraine and our other colleagues in the Black sea.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): There has always been strong cross-party support for our military assistance in Ukraine, and I am sure that will continue. Like the shadow Secretary of State, I clocked the commitment that the incoming Prime Minister made on 24 July to update the integrated review in response to Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Will the Secretary of State

say a bit more about what preparations are being made to do that and, critically, whether in the interim there will be no cuts to capability, including personnel?

Mr Wallace: The size of the Army currently stands at about 79,000. There has not yet been a reduction from the 82,000 as such. In fact, I think it is higher than when I first started as Defence Secretary, so my record is in the wrong direction at the moment. We will obviously look at the issues around vulnerabilities. The integrated review identified Russia as our most pressing adversary, and I do not think that anybody is going to need to change that observation. If we receive more funding—I think the first preparation for battle will be with the Treasury, to make sure that we get the profile that makes the difference—I will of course be delighted to have a much wider conversation with all Members of the House about where they envisage us spending that money in order to make our armed forces the very best they can be. We have a role to play not just in Ukraine and Europe, but globally. That is one of our differences and I would be delighted to explore more with hon. Members.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): History can be a double-edged teacher. We know that the Soviet Union lost out in Afghanistan because public opinion among the people of the Soviet Union turned so firmly against it. Are we able to do more to make sure that real information is getting through to the Russian population, particularly older people who are dependent on state-controlled media, about what exactly is happening to their sons in Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: There are two parts to that. Obviously, we do our best to make sure that the people of Russia understand what is going on, and I would be delighted to arrange a briefing for the hon. Gentleman, if he would like one. On the wider issue, we should not forget that, although this is not getting out of Russia, the Russian people are feeling it themselves. It is not possible to ignore the cemeteries, with lines and lines of graves, the exodus of international companies, or the fact that the standard of living is starting to drop in some parts. The problem is that, in a country whose Government do not really listen to, or care much about, their own people, I am not sure that has a major effect on the decision makers, but we need to never stop telling the Russian people what is actually going on.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Following the International Atomic Energy Agency visit to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, Mr Rafael Grossi, the agency's head, spoke out very strongly about the risks to the integrity and safety of the plant from the fighting that is taking place around it. We understand that the report will be out in a week or so, but what is the Government's plan—indeed, what is the international community's plan—to take forward the report's recommendations? Does the Secretary of State think that the Russians understand the risks that are being taken with the safety of the plant through what has been going on, or does he feel that they do not care?

Mr Wallace: This is a personal view. Do I think Russia cares? Not really. I do not think it cares about anything that it is seeking to capture. It has destroyed

Mariupol and killed and brutalised everyone who seems to get in its path. One of the anxieties of the Baltic states is that, historically, the defence plans were to hold an invading Russia and to try to get there in a number of weeks and push them back, but the Estonians and the Latvians will say, “We don’t have a couple of weeks, because look at what they do.” It is no accident that we saw, on the Chernobyl site, Russia deliberately using its forces to frighten, to demand attention and to potentially use it as a hostage.

I am pleased, to be fair, that they let the UN inspectors turn up. I am pleased that they were allowed to leave people behind. Of course, as I said in my statement, the fact that no international media were allowed to accompany them is obviously a worry, and that relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) about the BBC World Service, which is one of our best soft power tools globally. It is highly respected. I am of an age to remember the late President Gorbachev—who, we should not forget, was a significant force for change in Russia in his time—saying that he listened to the BBC World Service during the short coup when he was captured and it was the only place he got news from. In these days of social media, the BBC World Service can be a rock in a storm.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): One of the major flanks drawing the international community into one place—there has been a focus on countries such as India—is the need to stop dependence on Russian energy, yet the energy crisis makes that ever more difficult. Will the Secretary of State say more about how he is holding the global community together to oppose Russia’s ongoing assaults, particularly its weaponisation of energy in this conflict?

Mr Wallace: I know that the hon. Lady is keen on environmental issues. Some of this starts at home, because we can all ensure in our countries that we do not just talk, but get on and invest both in renewables and, I would say, in more nuclear and alternative energy supplies. The United Nations General Assembly is coming up soon, and I noted that some of the G7 communiqués referred to capping Russian oil prices to send a strong message. We must ensure that all these international forums, which are now coming even more to the fore, are used to remind Russia that its actions are completely unacceptable. I urge India to be more strident in that space.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the head of the British Army said recently that the Army must be prepared, working with our allies, to successfully confront the Russian army. In that context, will the Secretary of State at least commit to examining whether it is appropriate for the Government to cut our Army by 10,000?

Mr Wallace: Obviously, it is for Her Majesty the Queen to appoint the next Prime Minister, but the new leader of the Conservative party has committed to more defence spending. I will absolutely look at how we can populate our armed forces to give us the best readiness and the best availability of equipment, and at how to ensure we can be more persistently present around the world, and that will involve considering force laydown and the required size of our forces. For

example, we simply do not have enough long-range artillery, and we do not have any ground-based, long-range, anti-air capability. That will come with more platforms and equipment, and it will come with more people, but not remotely as many people as an infantry battalion would. We should look in the round at what capabilities we need and at what that means for the number of people needed to man them.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As it becomes accepted that Russia has failed in all its objectives, and as the public accept the success of the Ukrainian defence, the risk is that that will lead to complacency about the dangers facing the Ukrainians and that public interest will start to wane. The Secretary of State spoke powerfully about the counter-offensive in Kherson and about the risk of increasing Ukrainian army casualties. Has our training and support for the Ukrainians had to change as they move from a purely defensive posture into starting to retake land? What further support might we need to give in this next stage of the conflict?

Mr Wallace: First, the curriculum has become less defensive and more offensive as we teach the Ukrainians how to assault positions and so on. As for what more we could do, I will give a small but important example. Historically, when a soldier was injured on the battlefield, they were evacuated to a company battalion or company aid post. However, owing to the existence of modern, cheap drones that can drop grenades, the Ukrainians are having to treat their people where they fall for longer before they can move them in, for example, armoured ambulances. That means they need more tourniquets, because securing the blood supply is more important than ever, given that the casualty will not get to an aid post as quickly. Those are the sort of the things that we look for in the training and feedback, and we then immediately try to buy it, source it or seek donations to try to help the Ukrainians on the battlefield. We were there back in 2015 training Ukrainians under Operation Orbital, and we have been there all along with the Canadians, the Swedes and the United States. It pays dividends in our relationship that we know what they need in the here and now.

The hon. Gentleman is also right about Putin’s longer-term strategy, and I think he is counting on two things. The first is the international community getting bored, not sticking around and splitting up, and he may just say, “I thought it would take three months, but it only took six.” Secondly, he is counting on the fact that his brutality is how to win a war, and we must not let that message be successful, because if Putin is successful, all our adversaries and all those around the world who think that brutality and breaking international law are the ways to win will take succour from that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Secretary of State for his strength of character and for putting, with gentleness, a bit of backbone into some of the other colleague countries, which were perhaps a wee bit hesitant when it came to replying and supporting Ukraine. Well done, Secretary of State. As of early this afternoon, it has been revealed that the Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine’s southern city of Kherson have postponed their referendum on joining Russia; it would seem that Russia has perhaps seen the writing on the wall, to use a biblical story. What immediate steps will

[Jim Shannon]

the Secretary of State take to ensure that Ukraine can maintain its full independence from Russian forces? Will he continue to garner the western countries to defeat Russia's illegal military action?

Mr Wallace: The best message we can send to Russia and our friends in Europe is that this House is unified—that is a really important step along the road. On the other issues of Kherson, a fake referendum was postponed, allegedly for “security” reasons, and I think we all know what that means. As for the steps we can do to make sure that that does not happen, we can help Ukraine retake Kherson.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement on the Ukraine update and for answering questions for a smidgeon under an hour.

Urgent and Emergency Care

4.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on our support for urgent and emergency care. I know that this is an issue of great concern to right hon. and hon. Members, and I wanted to update the House at the earliest opportunity on the work that has been undertaken over the summer.

Bed occupancy rates have broadly remained at winter-type levels, with covid cases in July still high, with one in 25 testing positive—that compares with about one in 60 currently. This is without the decrease in occupancy that we would normally expect to see after winter ends, and ambulance waiting times have also continued to reflect the pressures of last winter, although I am pleased to see recent improvements. For example, the West Midlands service is meeting its category 2 time of less than 18 minutes.

I would like to update the House on the nationwide package of measures we are putting in place to improve the experience of patients and colleagues alike. First, we have boosted the resources available to those on the frontline. We have put in an extra £150 million of funding to help ambulance trusts deal with ambulance pressures this year. On top of that, we have agreed a £30 million contract with St John Ambulance so that it can provide surge capacity of at least 5,000 hours per month. We are also increasing the numbers of colleagues on the frontline. We have boosted the national 999 call handler numbers to nearly 2,300, which is about 350 more than we had in September last year, and we have plans to increase this number further to 2,500 by December, supported by a major national recruitment campaign. By the end of the year we will have also increased 111 call handler numbers to 4,800. As well as that, we have a plan to train and deploy even more paramedics, and Health Education England has been mandated to train 3,000 paramedic graduates nationally each year, which is double the number of graduates that were accepted in 2016.

Secondly, we are putting an intense focus on the issue of delayed discharge, which, as many Members know, is the cause of so many of the problems we see in urgent and emergency care—I think that is recognised across the House. This is where patients are medically fit to be discharged but remain in hospital, taking up beds that could otherwise be used for those being admitted. Delayed discharge means longer waits in accident and emergency, lengthier ambulance handover times and the risk of patients deteriorating if they remain in hospital beds too long—this is particularly the case for the frail and elderly. The most recent figures, from the end of July, show that the number of these patients is just over 13,000—these are similar numbers to those for the winter months. We have been working closely with trusts where delayed discharge rates are highest, putting in place intensive on-the-ground support.

More broadly, our national discharge taskforce is looking across the whole of health and social care to see where we can put in place best practice and improve patient flow through our hospitals. As part of that work, we have also selected discharge frontrunners, who will be tasked with testing radical solutions to improve

hospital discharge. We are looking at which of these proposals we can roll out across the wider system and launch at speed. Of course, this is not just an issue for the NHS. We have an integrated system for health and care and must look at the system in the round, and at all the opportunities that can make a difference. For instance, patients can be delayed as they are waiting for social care to become available, and here too, we have taken additional steps over the summer. We have launched an international recruitment taskforce to boost the care workforce and address issues in capacity. On top of that, we will be focusing the better care fund, which allows integrated care boards and local authorities to pool budgets, to reduce delayed discharge. In addition, we are looking at how we can draw on the huge advances in technology that we have seen during the pandemic and unlock the value of the data that we hold in health and care, including through the federated data platform.

Finally, we know from experience that the winter will be a time of intense pressure for urgent and emergency care. The NHS has set out its plans to add the equivalent of 7,000 additional beds this winter, through a combination of extra physical beds and the virtual wards which played such an important role in our fight against covid-19. Another powerful weapon this winter will be our vaccination programmes. Last winter, we saw the impact that booster programmes can have on hospital admissions, if people come forward when they get the call. This year's programme gives us another chance to protect the most vulnerable and reduce the demand on the NHS. Our autumn booster programmes for covid-19 and flu are now getting under way, and will be offered to a wider cohort of the population, including those over 50, with the first jabs going in arms this week as care home residents, staff and the housebound become the first to receive their covid-19 jabs.

Over the summer, we became the first country in the world to approve a dual-strain covid-19 vaccine that targets both the original strain of the virus and the omicron variant. This weekend, the MHRA approved another dual-strain vaccine, from Pfizer, and I am pleased to confirm that we will deploy it, along with the Moderna dual-strain vaccine, as part of our covid-19 vaccination programme in line with the advice of the independent experts at the JCVI. Whether it is for covid-19 or flu, I would urge anyone who is eligible to get protected as soon as they are invited by the NHS, not just to protect themselves and those around them, but to ease the pressure on the NHS this winter.

Today I have laid before the House a written ministerial statement on further work that we have been doing over the summer, and I want to draw the House's attention to one particular feature in that statement which has garnered interest in the House in the past. In November 2021, the Government announced it would make £50 million of funding available for research into motor neurone disease over five years. Following work over the summer between my Department and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research and UK Research and Innovation, to support researchers to access funding in a streamlined and coordinated way, we are pleased to confirm that this funding has now been ring-fenced. The Departments welcome the

opportunity to support the MND scientific community of researchers as they come together through a network and linked through a virtual institute.

I commend this statement to the House.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and wish him and the ministerial team well as the new Prime Minister appoints her first Government. I also welcome what he said towards the end of his statement about the importance of vaccination and funding for motor neurone disease.

Emergency care is in crisis. After 12 years of Conservative Governments, the NHS can no longer reach patients on time. The outgoing president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said earlier in the summer that ambulance delays had got so bad that the NHS was now "breaking its promise" to the public that life-saving emergency care will be there when they need it. Twenty-nine thousand patients waited more than 12 hours in A&E in June, more than ever before. Ten thousand urgent cases waited more than eight hours for an ambulance last month. It is estimated that the collapse of emergency care that we are now seeing could be costing 500 lives a week. If the statistics did not paint a stark enough picture, no one can ignore the case of 87-year-old David Wakeley, whose family had to build a shelter around him as he waited outside for an ambulance, with broken bones, for 15 hours. What a shameful indictment on 12 years of Conservative mismanagement of the NHS.

There have been recent reports that the NHS will tell patients to

"avoid A&E as the winter crisis bites early."

That was in August. The simple fact is that we have gone from no crisis in the system in 2010, to annual winter crises, to the situation we have today where there is a crisis all year round—the worst crisis in the history of the NHS. There is no point in the Secretary of State blaming the pandemic or, indeed, the extreme heat we saw this summer, although they do not help. The reality is that, before the pandemic, the NHS had not hit the 18-minute response time target for emergency incidents since 2017. Will the Secretary of State, on behalf of the Government and his party, finally take some responsibility and admit what his colleague the Culture Secretary was honest enough to say, that the Conservatives left our health service "wanting and inadequate" when the pandemic hit?

The NHS needs Ministers to grip this crisis and work tirelessly to get patients the care they need, so where have the Government been all summer? It is almost as if, the moment the Conservative leadership candidates hit the road, the Cabinet turned on their "out of office" and hit the beach as the NHS slipped into the worst crisis in its history and the Government did diddly-squat on the cost of living crisis, which will also exacerbate people's health problems.

I pay tribute to St John's Ambulance for the vital work it does, and I am pleased it has now been formally commissioned to provide England's ambulance auxiliary. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this capacity is being used by the system today? Perhaps he might have a word with his colleague the Secretary of State for Education, or his successor, about recruitment, because

[*Wes Streeting*]

the shambles we saw on T-levels and the hand-wringing we saw from the exam boards is unacceptable and risks the pipeline of talent we need to staff the NHS.

Although extra capacity is important, let us be honest that it will not solve the ambulance crisis unless we tackle the delayed discharges that are causing logjams in hospitals. The Secretary of State talked about this, but let me be clear that one in seven hospital beds is occupied by someone who is medically fit to leave but cannot do so because there is no support available—some people are waiting up to nine months longer than needed. What is the answer to this staffing crisis? It has not been to pay care workers a decent wage so that we stop losing them to the likes of Amazon, and it has not been to provide a great career so that people in our country enter this important profession. The answer has been to pull the “immigration lever,” to quote the Government, and to recruit people from overseas on lower pay. How fitting that this Prime Minister’s Government ends with yet another broken promise. One year after promising to fix social care by hiking taxes on working people, where is the plan to tackle the workforce crisis without resorting to immigration every time?

Finally, the Secretary of State barely mentioned the cost of living crisis. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), has said the Government are worried that if people cannot afford to heat their home, more will lose their life to flu. Has the Secretary of State made an estimate of the number of people who could fall ill as a result of soaring energy bills? As this is rightly a concern, may I point out that there is a plan right in front of him to freeze energy bills, fully costed and ready to go, paid for by a windfall tax on the oil and gas companies? When will the Government stop dithering, delaying and talking to themselves and start acting for the country? Rising energy prices will also push care providers to breaking point, with some facing closure as they are unable to absorb increases of 500% or more. What plans does he have to prevent care home residents from being booted out this winter and to prevent care home doors from closing?

The reality is that this Government are now out of time. A new Prime Minister will be appointed tomorrow who has suggested charging patients to see a doctor. I did not think anything could be worse than fining people for missing appointments, but our new Prime Minister has somehow managed it. Public satisfaction with NHS services is at its lowest recorded level, and patients are struggling to access the care they need. Under Labour, patients could call 999 knowing that an ambulance would come when they needed it, but the longer we give the Conservatives in power, the longer patients will wait.

Steve Barclay: Let me start with the areas where the hon. Gentleman and I agree. The David Wakeley case was shocking, and we accept that there have been severe pressures, particularly linked to certain trusts; just 10% of trusts account for 45% of ambulance handover delays. His second charge was about what the Government have been doing on this over the summer. We have had a 100-day sprint with NHS colleagues, a taskforce has been set up and I have met those troubled trusts, particularly Cornwall, to look at how we better support them.

Some of the factors affecting ambulance delays are within the trusts’ control. Those include understanding why delayed discharge is much lower at the weekend, and things that they can do within the emergency department. However, as the hon. Gentleman recognised, some factors are beyond the trusts’ control, whether that is variance in performance on conveyancing by ambulance trusts, differences in hear and treat or see and treat, or the challenges in social care. We recognise that, as I said in my opening remarks, the heatwave and a covid infection rate of one in 25, compared with one in 60 now, created significant pressure on the ambulance system.

In addition to the taskforce, we have enacted a whole range of other measures. NHS England has tasked the system with putting in place an additional 7,000-bed capacity for the winter. We have been expanding emergency department capacity. One thing we funded in spending review 2020, when I was in the Treasury, was additional funding for trusts where there are emergency department constraints.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention mental health, but I know he takes an interest in it, so he will be pleased to know that over the summer we have particularly targeted action that can be taken in emergency departments and across the hospital estate in support of mental health, led by Claire Murdoch in NHS England. We have increased staffing by 16% and there is an extra £2.3 billion going into mental health next year compared with 2016. There is additional funding and workforce, because we recognise the pressures.

There is also bespoke action with NHS colleagues. Sometimes, relatively low numbers of patients—for example, patients needing palliative care, patients with dementia and patients with Parkinson’s—are particularly challenging in terms of delayed discharge, and their discharge may be delayed for an extended period of time. Although the quantum of patients may be modest, that leads to delay.

The hon. Gentleman recognised other things we have been doing over the summer, such as the St John Ambulance contract that has been put in place to help with auxiliary ambulances, the work on international recruitment—I do not accept that people are being paid less; that is bringing people in to work in important roles in our care sector—and the consultation on retire and return.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the cost of living. He will know that the new Prime Minister has made it clear that she will have further things to say on that over the next week, and I know there will be ample opportunity to debate that further in the House.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that Worcestershire is at the sharp end of ambulance pressures; I understand that Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS trust is one of six trusts that he has met in recent days to discuss those pressures. Can he assure me that he will do everything he can to reduce delayed discharge and address capacity at our A&E, so that I no longer have to witness situations such as the one I saw earlier this summer, with more than 10 ambulances waiting at the door of the emergency department?

Steve Barclay: I know my hon. Friend is a strong champion for this issue; when I was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I remember him lobbying me about how a

bridge from one bit of the hospital estate to another could provide additional capacity to meet the pressures his trust has faced. That is partly why we have been working intensively with the trusts that have the most severe cases of ambulance delays, looking through the work of the taskforce at best practice and what works best in those settings, and ensuring that the trust chief execs have the right level of support. It is important to recognise that the problem does not always manifest where it is caused. Quite often, challenges on the social care side, or further upstream in the conveyancing rate, put pressure on an emergency department and on the trust.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right about the abject failure in care that his Government have overseen over the past 12 years, but his statement did not refer so much to the pressures in A&E. It seems entirely wrong to me that if someone walks into an A&E department they are its responsibility, but if they turn up in an ambulance they are expected to sit in it for hours on end until the A&E is willing to take responsibility. Will the Secretary of State say more about dealing with the issue so that A&E departments realise that however someone arrives—whether they walk through the door or arrive in an ambulance—they should be the responsibility of the A&E, and the ambulance should be out fetching other people in the area?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member makes a very fair point. Within the question he raises is the unmet need where an ambulance does not reach a patient in the community, as opposed to the known risk once the patient is within the hospital trust's purview. On capacity in A&E, as I touched on in my statement, we put in £450 million at the 2020 spending review to upgrade A&E facilities at 120 trusts.

With respect to the hon. Member's specific point, he may be aware of the letter that the NHS medical director Professor Stephen Powis and the chief nurse Ruth May sent at the time of the heatwave about where risk sits within hospitals. The taskforce has been doing further work on pre-cohorting, post-cohorting and observation bays so that we can better free up that ambulance capacity and get it back on the road.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the focus on retention, training and recruitment. Earlier this year, I met people from the excellent Chertsey Make Ready Centre. They told me about the challenges that they face with staff wellbeing and staff retention, which are compounded by the horrendous abuse that they receive almost daily. Sadly, it is not limited to our paramedic workers: I met staff at the Crouch Oak practice in Addlestone in my constituency recently, and we spoke about some of the vile messages and threats that they have received. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking our health and care service workers for their fantastic work and in condemning the vile abuse that, sadly, some of them receive from a bunch of miscreants?

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking the staff for their work and in condemning the completely unacceptable violence, intimidation and abuse to which people are subjected. There should be zero tolerance of that from any hospital trust.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): We know that 117,000 people have died waiting for treatment on the NHS waiting list, and what we are hearing now is that 500 people a week are dying waiting for ambulances. Can the Secretary of State give us a date by which he can guarantee that people will not lose their lives waiting for an ambulance to come and get them and care for them?

Steve Barclay: What I can guarantee is that, through the taskforce, we are prioritising how we get ambulances back on the road and how we speed things up to reduce handover delays. We are looking in particular at the 10 trusts in which the issue is most acute, because there is an unmet need in the community if the ambulance is not there.

On the hon. Member's point about the backlogs with electives, we announced over the summer, as part of the work that we have been doing, a whole series of surgical hubs and community diagnostic centres. We are working with the Getting It Right First Time team, under Professor Sir Tim Briggs, on different patient pathways. A whole range of work is being done to reduce waiting times, which is why we have already cleared the longest waits—the two-year waits—and are now turning to the 18-month waits.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): National headlines do not often reflect the hard work of those in our local hospitals. Although there will be—indeed, there have been—cases of unforgivable waits, will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all the hard-working paramedics, first responders and emergency department teams who serve Medway, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals, supporting my constituents in their time of need? Will he update the House on any conversations he may have had with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about major planning applications that have progressed without the appropriate healthcare facilities being provided?

Steve Barclay: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking the paramedics in Medway, in Maidstone and beyond for all their fantastic work, especially given the pressures the system has been under during the summer. As for levelling up, a number of Members have raised with me the need to ensure that developers are making a sufficient contribution as part of their housing plans, and I shall be happy to draw that to the attention of my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is right to talk about the back door rather than focusing on the front door when it comes to the crisis in social care. About a quarter of the patients in our hospital in York are experiencing delayed discharges. However, if we do not pay care staff, we will never resolve the issue. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to putting those staff on a national pay scale, using "Agenda for Change" as a model?

Steve Barclay: This obviously involves debates with Treasury colleagues about pay—not just on the social care side, but in respect of the NHS and the interplay with pensions—but it is not just about that; it is also about ensuring that we have the right data, and through

[*Steve Barclay*]

the integrated care systems we are acquiring much better data to improve our ability to join up what is being spent on delayed discharge within the NHS with what is being done in the social care setting. I am sure Members will agree that not only is it often very damaging for frail elderly patients to spend a long time in hospital, but hospital is usually the most expensive place in the system for them to be. It is not just a question of having more money, although that is often the default; it is a question of thinking about how to get flow into the system in a way that will deliver not only patient care, but a more efficient service.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On checking my website, I saw that it was in late 2005—not a period of Conservative government—that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), the then Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Romsey and I were complaining about the closure of in-patient beds in small community hospitals. Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a role for such beds in enabling appropriate discharge from the larger hospitals, thus dealing with one of the main causes of people being stuck in ambulances without being able to be given a bed?

Steve Barclay: That, I think, relates to the point that I just made about the need for flow in the system and an appropriate step-down capacity. Sometimes patients are not yet ready to be discharged to their homes, but some additional physio or other support may enable them then to go home, which is where they usually want to be. This is all part of taking a much more integrated approach, and part of that must be improving the quality of data in relation to the activity that takes place within community settings.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): In July, the average wait time in London for an ambulance needed by someone describing the symptoms of a stroke was more than an hour—more than three times longer than the target time. Many of my constituents have told me that they are living with genuine anxiety and fear that if they or a loved one were stricken by illness or involved in a serious accident, the emergency help that they needed would not arrive in time. The Secretary of State has announced some measures today, but what my constituents want to know is when we can expect the time targets in London to be met once again, so that they can rest easy in the knowledge that if they need an ambulance, it will be there.

Steve Barclay: One of my reasons for going out with the London Ambulance Service—among others—over the summer was to answer the charge about what Ministers were doing, and to observe at first hand the challenges that the service had been facing. As the hon. Lady will know, performance has improved since the summer, but the service remains challenged. That is why we are considering a range of measures, such as boosting emergency departments, looking at pre and post-cohorting, looking at how we work with the taskforce, and looking at single points of access. One issue that paramedics emphasise to me is the need for, in particular, a better way for frail elderly patients to gain access to a single

point for social care provision. We are working closely on that range of measures with colleagues in the London Ambulance Service.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In recent weeks I have been supporting a constituent who has complained to the East Midlands Ambulance Service. The complaint centred on the fact that it took nine hours and 26 minutes following a 999 call for an ambulance to arrive at the home of my constituent's mother. When she arrived at Scunthorpe Hospital, it took another two hours and seven minutes before she was handed over to the hospital staff. I find it particularly disturbing that the letter from the chairman of the East Midlands ambulance service, after explaining the procedure and protocol that was followed, says:

“I can confirm that the 999 call had been responded to appropriately.”

Needless to say, my constituent, who is a retired senior police officer and well aware of pressures on the emergency services, would not agree that it was dealt with appropriately. If I forward the details to my right hon. Friend the Minister, could he follow up with the East Midlands ambulance service and come back to me? Hopefully, that will mean the service provided to my constituents by the ambulance service can be improved.

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to ensure that that specific case, which is obviously concerning, is looked at. As my hon. Friend will know from my earlier remarks, we are boosting the number of 999 call handlers—those numbers are up and there are around 350 more call handlers than in September 2021—and we are also training more paramedics. Numbers are going up, but obviously demand has increased exponentially as well.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A nurse in Barnsley East wrote to me about the incredibly traumatic death of her mother. When her mum suffered a brain haemorrhage, her dad called the emergency services twice. They told him to call back as they did not have an ambulance or a responder to help. An hour and 40 minutes later, the ambulance arrived but it was too late for her to receive any treatment, and she later passed away.

Sadly, this is not an isolated incident. Our emergency services are in crisis. They are understaffed and underfunded. What are the Government doing to prevent tragedies such as that from ever happening again?

Steve Barclay: We are putting in additional funding, whether that is the additional £1.5 billion put into GP capacity in 2020, the £450 million to upgrade A&E facilities across 120 trusts, the extra £150 million specifically put into the ambulance service, the £30 million put into the St John Ambulance contract over the summer, or the further £50 million that has gone into call handling to boost the 111 service. Significant additional funds are going in as part of the support for the significant pressure that we recognise there has been over the summer.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary for visiting Kettering General Hospital in July and for his subsequent confirmation in August that the hospital has won £38 million, as a 10% down payment, to start the

redevelopment of the hospital. During his visit, he visited the A&E department, which is one of the most overcrowded in the country, and saw the ambulances waiting outside. What is his assessment of the current state of play at Kettering General Hospital and its prospects for the future?

Steve Barclay: First I acknowledge on the record the campaigning that my hon. Friend and colleagues have done for a new hospital at Kettering. They particularly demonstrated the urgency of addressing issues with the energy plant, so I was pleased that we were able to get that enabling work done. All A&E facilities have been under pressure over the summer, which is why we have announced the additional funding. It is about boosting capacity in call centres, looking at how we address variation in performance among ambulance trusts, particularly on conveyancing, and looking at how we get more flow into hospitals. That is why, along with the hospital, I also visited a care home in my hon. Friend's constituency, in order to look at how we better address the issue of delayed discharge.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Can I bring to the Secretary of State's attention the planned closure of the Preston ambulance station on Blackpool Road, Preston, and the closure in Broughton, just outside my constituency, which are to be replaced by an ambulance station 5 or 6 miles away on Sherdley Road in Lostock Hall? The decision was made by the North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust without consulting any staff or hospital heads, including the chief executive of the NHS Trust in central Lancashire, and without consulting trades unions and other stakeholders, including the councils. Will he look into this matter and see what has happened? It will add 26 minutes to a journey from the proposed site to the Royal Preston Hospital, which cannot be in the interest of any patient.

Steve Barclay: I am happy to draw that case to the attention of the relevant parties and ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a written explanation.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I think that the Secretary of State is aware of the acute problems at Southend University Hospital and of the fact that A&E capacity is the issue. We are waiting for capital funding that was promised years ago to be released. I know that Health Ministers have been working on this over the summer. There were 15 ambulances there yesterday. Our hard-working nurses and doctors would love news on that funding to be forthcoming.

Steve Barclay: As I said in my statement, additional funding has been put in to boost A&E capacity. There was some £450 million of funding in the spending review in 2020, which has been applied across 120 trusts. Of course, the ICSs will look at the commissioning priorities in particular areas, and the NHS England taskforce is looking at trusts where there is acute pressure.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I am concerned that people across England and Wales, including in Shropshire, have died as a result of the ambulance delays we have seen for a long period. I have raised the issue a number of times in this place. I welcome the improvement in the response times of the west midlands

ambulance service, but I am worried that the regional data masks huge differences between rural areas such as Shropshire and densely populated urban areas. Will the Secretary of State consider the Ambulance Waiting Times (Local Reporting) Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) tabled earlier this year, so that the disparity between urban and rural response times can be properly understood and tackled?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady makes an important point about variation not just between regions but within regions. As a rural Member of Parliament, I get the point that there is often significant variation within a region. That has been a key area of focus. The federated data platform, which is due to come on stream in April, will give her local ICS much better data on what is happening and on what community capacity there is. Over the summer, we have worked with ambulance trusts to look at operational performance data on a much more granular level. That is why I have flagged to the House the issue that a small number of trusts are driving a large proportion of the handover delays. That is exactly the sort of variation that we are looking at.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the £25 million Government investment in the new emergency village at Blackpool Victoria Hospital, with the new critical care unit opening only a few weeks ago. That will make a substantial difference by easing the pressures at the hospital, which are contributing to unacceptable ambulance waiting times. Will he join me in visiting the hospital to see the substantial difference it will make to my constituents?

Steve Barclay: As my hon. Friend knows, my parents live very near the hospital in question. I know he has been a huge champion of the additional funding. If the opportunity arises, I would be very happy to visit. I pay tribute to the work he has done to secure the additional facility, which will benefit his constituents and those across the Fylde coast.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In July, I met the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and the chief executive of Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust to discuss the ambulance delays and the delays at A&E. They both told me the same thing: the problem is actually with exit block. They cannot admit people if they cannot discharge people. I have been told by Hull Royal Infirmary that at points over the summer, more than 170 people were in the hospital who should not have been there because they were waiting for discharge packages. That works out at more than a fifth of hospital beds being taken up by people waiting for adult social care.

A number of months ago, I raised in this place a letter from the Conservative-led East Riding of Yorkshire Council, which said that it did not have the adult social care carers to meet the needs of the population. This situation will only get worse. The Secretary of State has said that he is looking at an international recruitment taskforce. I recommend a simpler solution: pay people more, and then we might get the workers we actually need to deliver adult social care. This is already a crisis and it will only get worse.

Steve Barclay: A good example from Hull, which I visited over the summer, shows that this is not simply about money, although that is obviously a relevant factor. The hon. Lady will be familiar with the Jean Bishop integrated care centre in Hull, where the social care staff say that no one has left the service because they really enjoy working in an integrated way. The patient feedback is also extremely strong. That shows the sort of innovation we should apply across the system. I hope the hon. Lady would welcome that innovation in Hull being applied more widely.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State is aware of the pressures that Warrington Hospital has been under through the summer, particularly the wait times. I am grateful that he intervened and spoke to the chief executive about looking at some of the issues that it was facing. Having spent some time there and having talked to staff and the management, it is clear—I agree with him—that the real issue is delayed discharge. It appears that there is a 90-bed shortage in step-down care capacity in Warrington. Will he join me in urging Bridgewater Community Healthcare NHS Trust and Warrington Borough Council to make progress on increasing that capacity, so that we can try to address some of the issues in the emergency department?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a central role for the integrated care systems in future is to look at how they best use the better care fund, how we better integrate around step-down provision, and how we ensure that best practice is being followed through the delayed discharge, including regarding some of the additional pressures that Warrington faced specifically, as I know from when we spoke over the summer. He will also know that there had been additional funding for new capacity at Warrington, which strangely was not highlighted in the media coverage that I saw.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Two weeks ago, in the west midlands, it was being reported that some were waiting as long as 17 hours to receive service from an ambulance. It was also reported that at least 68 people have died since April while waiting for an ambulance, although that number was backdated to last August. It is now clear that our NHS is at breaking point due to a decade of Tory cuts; welcome to backlog Britain thanks to 12 years of Conservative Governments.

Trusts in the region report being poorly equipped for the burden of treating patients, with many reporting delays due to a shortage of beds. This crisis will only get worse in the coming months as we enter the cold period—a winter in the midst of one of the worst crises in living memory. What measures will the Secretary of State introduce immediately in response to the increased pressures that our NHS is facing, which are costing lives? Will he provide the extra measures that the NHS desperately needs to deal with this crisis—a crisis that was made by 12 years of Conservative Governments?

Steve Barclay: I fear that the question was written before the statement. In the course of the statement, we have covered the significant additional funding that is going in, whether that is in primary care with the £1.5 billion on GP capacity, the £450 million on A&E

capacity, the £150 million on ambulances, the £50 million on 111 call-handling or the £30 million on St John auxiliary ambulance capacity—to name just a few areas.

As to the hon. Gentleman's wider charge on Government funding for the NHS, I remind him that health funding is on track to be £4 in every £10 of day-to-day Government expenditure, which is a significant increase on 2010. We have also just been through a pandemic in which the fiscal response, as the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) will know, was about £400 billion. Significant funding has gone in, and the statement today has shown that a number of factors, in particular the integration between social care and the NHS, are at the heart of solving the issue of delays on ambulance handovers.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): For the week ending 12 August, there were nearly 1,000 excess deaths. We know that that is just the tip of the iceberg and it is likely to get worse; that is about 10% more than the five-year rolling average. What are the Secretary of State's estimates of how much worse it is going to get over the winter months, and what is he going to do about it?

Steve Barclay: I have set out a range of things that we are doing to tackle what we recognise are significant pressures facing the NHS, whether that is through the taskforce that we have set up, which is targeted on delayed discharge; the intensive work that has been undertaken with, in particular, the 10 trusts that account for 45% of ambulance delays; the improved capacity within our call handling; or looking at our data, as was raised earlier, on the variation in performance between ambulance trusts on areas such as conveyancing or within the integration between the NHS and social care. I pay tribute to the huge amount of work that is being done within the NHS and social care in recognising that there are significant challenges within the system, which is why so much work has gone into addressing that over the summer.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State might recall that in his previous Health incarnation, he responded to a debate about the crisis in the ambulance service in my constituency. It is worse today—much worse. I take the point about delayed discharge, but, even so, is it not better to have people moving into a hospital setting, rather than people not being picked up by ambulances? That is where the real risk is. Will he also guarantee that I get an answer to my letter asking that Rochdale, which lost its A&E service some years back, gets it back? That would make a material difference.

Steve Barclay: On the hon. Gentleman's second point, I will ensure that that particular letter to the Department is highlighted following this statement. On his first point, as I said in my statement, I agree that the greater risk is the unmet need if an ambulance does not arrive, rather than a patient who is in hospital. That is why Professor Stephen Powis and chief nurse Ruth May wrote to the system when there was pressure during the heatwave, flagging that as a specific issue. We have been working with trust leaders, including leading figures

such as Anthony Marsh, on pre-cohorting and post-cohorting, capacity in emergency departments, and where risk sits in the system. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This is about a lack of planning. I could say the same about the monkeypox response, because we still do not have the vaccines; they are now being watered down to half strength, because we have run out, they have not been delivered and we still have 100,000 to order. The ambulance situation is also about a lack of planning. My grandmother was admitted to the Royal Cornwall over the summer via A&E. The person before her waited 24 hours in an ambulance to be discharged. The person behind had been in a car crash, but the ambulance did not turn up for five hours and they had to make their own way to the hospital with a damaged lung. In Brighton, the Royal Sussex's A&E has been given a very poor Care Quality Commission report. All of these cases are because of the lack of move on beds in social care. In Brighton, a senior care worker can receive less than £10 per hour to work. People get more working in shops on the high street. This needs to be addressed urgently. Is it not time for a national pay, and terms and conditions, for care workers? It would cost the Department nothing, but would stop the loss of many of our workforce.

Steve Barclay: Far from there being a lack of planning, the very essence of integration between social care and the NHS through the ICSs is that we recognise the importance of both aspects working much more closely together. That is why we are bringing forward initiatives such as the federated data platform.

Monkeypox is outside the scope of today's statement, but I know the issue is of particular interest to the hon. Gentleman. He will know that, fortunately, we have not yet had any fatal cases in the UK and the rate of infection has been falling. We purchased the maximum number of vaccines that we could; I wrote to the relevant charities with the details. Although smaller doses are being delivered compared with the initial 50,000, we still have doses in the system. We expect a further 20,000 very shortly and a further 80,000 later this month. We have procured doses, we are getting them out and it is fortuitous that cases are falling, but we are obviously keeping the situation under close watch.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This summer I have heard some horror stories from constituents with life-threatening conditions about the

dangerous delays they have faced. When one constituent raised the issue with the NHS, she was told by the senior consultant at the A&E department that the NHS has collapsed. If senior frontline clinicians are saying that in the summer, God help us when we get to winter. I really fear where we are going to be, because there is no doubt that my constituent is very lucky to be alive. We have heard a lot of figures today about the number of excess deaths this year. Will the Secretary of State give us his estimate of the number of people who have died unnecessarily because they have been stuck in an ambulance waiting to get into A&E, or because an ambulance has not turned up at all?

Steve Barclay: Again, despite that colourful language, we have more doctors, more nurses and more paramedics. We are training more and meeting more demand, and significant additional funding has been applied to ambulance trusts, call handling and other parts of the system, including primary care. Part of reducing the demand on the ambulance system is related to GP capacity, which is why—to take that as an example—an additional £1.5 billion of funding has gone in.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his clear financial commitment to trying to address the issue of ambulance response. I also congratulate the new leader of the Conservative party. In her statement at dinnertime, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) said that the NHS is one of her main priorities.

The Secretary of State will know that this week is Air Ambulance Week, which runs from 5 September to 11 September. Today, Air Ambulance Northern Ireland stated that it has had its busiest year ever, so will the Secretary of State allocate additional funds to the devolved Administrations, particularly in Northern Ireland, to help cope with the increasing use of air ambulances due to delayed response times and extortionate waiting lists?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of the air ambulance. As a rural MP, I know full well the importance of the service it provides across the Cambridgeshire fens, and I know that it provides an essential service for his constituents. Again, if there are any specific issues, I am happy to ensure that the Department looks at them, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of the air ambulance within the wider response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for responding to 25 questions. We now move on to the final statement today, which is on energy prices.

Energy Update

5.36 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): The Government recognise that this is a deeply worrying time for households and businesses, as we see renewed highs in energy prices. These are of course largely a result of Vladimir Putin's illegal and barbaric invasion of Ukraine, as we discussed at the G20 meeting of Energy Ministers on Friday. The surge in the global wholesale price of gas meant that Ofgem announced on 26 August that the default tariff cap level from 1 October will rise to £3,549 for a typical household paying by direct debit. This represents around a £1,600 per year increase on the current level, and around a £2,300 per year increase on last winter's level. We see no reason to believe that gas prices will fall any time soon; prices will continue to be driven by geopolitical instability, with energy bills likely to remain high for some time to come.

The future outlook is uncertain, but we know that we need to support UK energy consumers to manage the impacts in both the short and longer term. That is why the Government have taken decisive action, including introducing a £37 billion package of support, which is targeted at those who are most in need of support. This includes a £11.7 billion energy bill support scheme, which is worth up to £400 for around 29 million households. In addition, targeted support includes more than 8 million households on means-tested benefits receiving a payment of £650. Over 8 million pensioner households that receive the winter fuel payment will also receive a £300 cost of living payment. Six million households that receive disability support will receive a £150 disability cost of living payment, and there is a £144 million discretionary fund for local authorities to distribute to those identified as being in need.

The Government are also focused on delivering a programme of work to tackle energy efficiency in order to target longer-term energy bill reductions. We are investing £6.6 billion in energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation over this Parliament. We will deliver upgrades to over half a million homes in the coming years through our social housing decarbonisation fund, home upgrade grant schemes and energy company obligation scheme, delivering additional average bill savings of £300.

We must continue to decarbonise, reducing our dependency on expensive, imported fossil fuels and bolstering our energy security through clean, home-grown energy. A net zero economy is not just critical to tackling climate change; it is also in our strategic interest as a means to reducing our reliance on global energy markets. That is why the Government's British energy security strategy, published in April, set out a series of bold commitments, which put Great Britain at the leading edge of the global energy revolution.

The Government are delivering on this, for example, in our latest renewables auction, awarding contracts for difference to a record 93 new renewable energy projects, which will total almost 11 GW of new generating capacity for Great Britain—enough to generate sufficient electricity to power around 12 million homes. The UK is already a world leader in offshore wind, with the biggest installed capacity in Europe, generating 12.7 GW

of electricity, enough to power around 10 million homes. We are continuing to increase this with another 6.8 GW in construction and a further 7 GW in preparation. We are increasing our nuclear ambition with the construction of Hinkley Point C and Government investment into Sizewell C, both of which could power 6 million homes. We are also launching Great British Nuclear, a body tasked with developing a resilient pipeline of new build nuclear projects. We have launched a major review into Britain's electricity market design, to radically enhance energy security, and to help deliver our world-leading climate targets, while reducing exposure to international gas markets.

We have facilitated the uptake of new products and services such as time of use tariffs, which reward consumers financially for using energy when demand is low or when excess clean electricity is available—for example, on sunny or windy days and nights. The Government also recognise the impact that rising energy prices will have on businesses of all sizes. We are in regular contact with business groups and suppliers, to understand the challenges they face, and explore ways to protect consumers and businesses.

We are determined to secure a competitive future for our energy-intensive industries, which are, of course, most vulnerable to energy price rises. We have therefore extended the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme for three years, and are considering further measures to support businesses, including increasing the renewable obligation exemption to 100%.

However, this Government recognise that we need to go further still. These measures were brought forward when estimated annual energy costs were expected to rise to £2,800. It is now clear that we are looking at a challenge on a greater scale. The Government are working closely with Ofgem and other stakeholders to ensure that consumers and businesses are protected from the volatile energy prices this winter and beyond. I know that tackling this issue will be at the top of the incoming Prime Minister's inbox, as we look to address both the short-term shocks and longer-term needs of the UK energy system.

When it comes to energy security, this Government have an excellent record. When it comes to energy prices, we will once again be rising to the challenge of ensuring that British consumers and businesses are given the support that they need for this winter. I commend this statement to the House.

5.43 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the brief advance notice that we had.

I think that we can all agree that this is a statement of astonishing vagueness and complacency. I had, for example, anticipated that the Minister might have a bit more urgency on the consequences of Russia's decision to cut off Nord Stream 1 today, and the effects that that will have on gas prices. I thought that he might have come to the House to tell us about that. We are closely tied to European markets. Does he accept that this announcement today puts an even greater sense of urgency on the need to protect the price of gas from outside the UK, both for businesses and for domestic customers, and what measures are the Government undertaking to make that happen?

For domestic customers, there is certainly an energy bill crisis in this country. We need urgent action now.

The Minister talked about funding for the last round of price cap increases, not the one we have now. I know that we have a new Government coming in, but we have heard nothing from the Minister or the Prime Minister about what the plans might be. In fact, all we have heard from the new Prime Minister is that there will be an announcement, but nothing about what the announcement might be. A clear and obvious announcement already exists, however: Labour's fully funded plan to freeze energy bills this winter, paid for by a further windfall tax on the oil and gas giants making record profits on the back of the energy crisis.

The Minister has an opportunity today to put flesh on the bones of any announcement. He should tell us whether he thinks that the Government should freeze energy prices. Also, does he think that the Government should implement the further windfall tax on the oil and gas giants, and if not why not—and if not, does he want just to protect the profits of the oil and gas industry as a whole?

As well as short-term support for households, we need a long-term answer to this crisis. We on the Opposition side of the House are clear that the best way out of a fossil fuel crisis is to get off fossil fuels. That is why Labour has called for a national clean energy sprint for renewables and a national home insulation plan. The Minister mentioned home insulation and talked about the Government's existing schemes, but he knows that, in relation to real need, they do not touch the sides. Does he recognise that we urgently need a national warm homes programme to insulate 19 million homes, and is he prepared to commit to that today at the Dispatch Box?

On future energy, the Government could fix many of the problems we face if they decoupled the price of electricity from that of gas. The Minister said in his statement that there is a very leisurely process of consultation and discussion, which I see from the discussion document "Review of Energy Market Arrangements" would not be enacted until 2025. Does he accept that that is a ridiculously long timescale for an urgent change we need now? Is he prepared to commit to decoupling the price of electricity from the price of gas now, particularly given the weight that renewables now have in the market? The Minister talked about offshore wind, but why has he not removed the Government's ludicrous ban on onshore wind, and does he intend even at this late stage to decide it is time we actually did that?

Finally, the incoming Prime Minister is obviously a fan of fracking, but the Minister told the House on 15 March:

"We are clear that shale gas is not the solution to near-term issues. It would take years of exploration and development before commercial quantities of shale gas could be produced."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 761.]

Does he stand by that statement and will he be communicating this view to the new Prime Minister?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his engagement, as ever. Let me try to deal with each of his points in turn.

First, on the Russian decision to cut off—or, as they put it, repair—Nord Stream 1, it is worth reminding ourselves that we are not dependent on gas from Russia,

as the hon. Gentleman knows. Last year less than 4% of our gas came from Russia, and this year there have been no deliveries of gas from Russia since March—50% of our gas is domestic, and 30% is from Norway. He is right that this has an impact on prices, however, and that is being discussed at the moment and I would expect to hear more from the new Prime Minister and her team in the coming days, as he well knows.

The hon. Gentleman asked about any future windfall tax. Again, I do not want to speculate on what might happen, but I will say what happened when Labour last proposed a windfall tax. The measure that we introduced—the energy profits levy—is projected to raise twice what Labour's proposal for a similar move would have raised at the time, and it has led to greater support for the most vulnerable customers. Labour's proposals would have raised about £600, but the Government's proposals raised twice that amount—about £1,200 for the most vulnerable households—and, as I said in the statement, there will be more to come on this.

The hon. Gentleman asked a very reasonable question about decoupling the electricity price from the gas price. Of course, this is one of the measures being looked at in REMA, as he rightly pointed out, and it will also be something of active interest for the Government. He asked about onshore wind, and he will know that the local partnerships scheme announced in the British energy security strategy in April has exactly mapped out how we see the changes in the onshore wind regime in England. There is no change as yet in Government policy on fracking, but that will obviously be a matter for the soon-to-be new Prime Minister.

Overall, the Opposition seem to make three central points: the Government failed to invest in renewables; the Government failed to invest in nuclear; and the Government failed to invest in energy efficiency. They are wrong on all three. On renewables, under this Government we have quintupled the percentage of electricity generated from renewables, from 7% of our electricity mix when they were in power to 40% in 2021, which is a very strong achievement. On nuclear, the Labour party's 1997 manifesto said there was

"no economic case for the building of any new nuclear power stations"

in Britain. Twenty-five years later, we have reversed that. We are building Hinkley Point C, and on Friday the Prime Minister was at Sizewell C announcing his support for that power station. On energy efficiency, we have actually increased the percentage of homes that reach the band C level of energy efficiency: we have trebled that from 14% of our homes in 2010 to a strong 46% today. When it comes to matters relating to energy—prices, taxation and energy security—this Government will take no lessons from the Opposition.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister said that the rise in price was a result of the attack on Ukraine. It is much more than that: it is a deliberate part of the attack on Ukraine. Is not the essential ingredient of any scheme that the Government bring forward that it encourages customers to reduce their consumption?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend of course makes a very strong point about Russia's deliberate weaponisation of energy in this conflict, which we wholly deplore and

[Greg Hands]

our international partners also very strongly deplore. On our energy use, my job is to make sure that we have the energy supply that this country needs, and I am confident in our energy supply and the energy security measures we already have in place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The only aspect of this rehashed statement to welcome is the acknowledgment from the Minister that the current proposals are insufficient to avoid a catastrophe. What we should be getting today is a proper updated statement on energy security and a net zero update that would reflect additional investment in renewables such as pumped storage hydro, Peterhead carbon capture and storage, what is happening with the Rough gas storage facility, the decoupling of renewables from gas, and grid upgrades.

The reality at the moment is that 6.5 million households are in fuel poverty, and if the energy cap increase goes ahead as planned, then 9 million households will be in fuel poverty. What is the Minister's red line for the acceptable number of households that will be left in fuel poverty? What does he say to the businesses that have had no support to date? Does he agree with Make UK, which says that 60% of manufacturing businesses are now at risk? What assessment has he made of the impact on agriculture and the food and drink industry, and does he agree that the tax cuts proposed by the incoming Prime Minister will adversely help the rich and do nothing for the lowest-paid workers? The incoming Prime Minister has talked of scrapping the green levy. Has he explained to the incoming Prime Minister that there is no single green levy, and that doing so would not actually be a solution for reducing household bills?

On nuclear, will the Minister confirm that Hinkley Point C is now nearly 50% over budget and is years late, and that EDF now wants a delay to the payment start dates? For Sizewell C, will he confirm that the upper estimate for construction and finance is £63 billion? That is £63 billion to be added to bill payers' bills, and it will not actually reduce energy bills in the future. In 2019, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's estimate for the nuclear clean-up cost was £131 billion. When will we get an updated figure? Surely that in itself indicates that we need to end this nuclear folly and madness.

Finally, does the Minister agree that his Government need to introduce a freeze in the energy cap and urgent support for businesses, and to review budget allocations to councils and devolved Governments, so that energy cost pressures on schools, the NHS, transport and care services can be properly funded during this time of emergency?

Greg Hands: I commend the hon. Gentleman on his ability to squeeze in so many questions. On additional investment in renewables, the Government are moving to annual allocation rounds on our renewable options. That is a strong achievement. The Government have invested a huge amount in renewables, particularly through the contracts for difference system, which I would

urge him to support. He will know that we made an announcement recently on where we are with Centrica and Rough gas storage, and that continues to proceed.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that fuel poverty is a devolved matter, so he may wish to have a word with the Scottish Government, which I have reason to believe he may be close to. He also mentioned businesses, and I remind him that the cost of energy for businesses is right at the top of the in-tray of our new Prime Minister. He mentioned the food and drink sector, and I am sure that is also the case for that sector. He asked about tax, and that will be a matter for the Treasury and for future announcements.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned nuclear budgets, and I am getting a bit fed up with the SNP's obsessive anti-nuclear behaviour. It is exactly that kind of no-saying that got us into the problem of not having enough nuclear power in this country. Thankfully, earlier this year the Prime Minister rectified that with the British energy security strategy, making sure that we get to 24GW of nuclear power by 2050. As for the cost of Hinkley Point C, the hon. Gentleman will find that the strike price, which was negotiated by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and by me, as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, compares very favourably with energy prices today.

Finally, I think I heard a complaint from the hon. Gentleman about budget allocations to councils, which was extraordinary, coming from the SNP. It is the party that has been hammering council budgets in Scotland, and then expecting them to collect the rubbish with vastly decreased levels of budgetary contribution. I again urge him to have a word with his friends in Edinburgh who are running the Scottish Government, to see whether they might be able to do something to improve the budget allocations for Scottish councils.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement and the support for individuals and businesses, but may I raise with him the issue of schools? Southend West is home to 30 excellent schools, and many heads have been in contact with me, concerned that they will not be able to pay the utility bills. One has even trailed in the local press the possibility of opening for only four days a week. Can he assure me that it is the Government's priority to make sure that our children's education does not suffer as a result of the energy crisis, as it did as a result of the coronavirus crisis?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. Schools are certainly at the forefront of our thinking for the coming winter. She is right that we need to make sure that schools are properly supported, and there are lessons to be learned from the pandemic as to how that was done. I am sure that her words will be well heard by Ministers, HM Treasury and the Department for Education.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A year ago I asked the Government why they had closed the Rough gas storage facility off the Yorkshire coast, leaving the UK with just 1.7% of storage for annual demand. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), told me that the question was irrelevant, and accused me of inducing panic and stoking alarm.

Given the reports that the Government are to U-turn and reopen the facility, will the Minister now admit that the closure was a mistake?

Greg Hands: The closure was a commercial decision, made by Centrica, not a decision made by the Government.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Energy Minister has a well-deserved reputation for getting things done, and I thank him for the prompt responses he has given to inquiries that I have made to his office, especially in respect of businesses. I sense that he understands the challenges, such as for the small engineering business I visited last week whose energy bill is £13,000 a year currently, and which has had a range of quotes between £37,000 and £68,000 for the renewal of its contract. The staff tell me that means that in the coming year they may not be able to replace a machine or take on a couple of apprentices as they would like to do. He has told us about the details that will be coming on short-term support—I am sure businesses will welcome that when it arrives—but I wonder whether he would say a little more about the long-term proposals to decouple the electricity bills from the gas price.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is truly a champion of businesses in his constituency and across the country; I know the important work he does on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, for example. He is right, in that most of the energy of businesses in this country is dealt with through long-term contracts. That is an advantage in giving certainty, but when it is time for the long-term contract to be extended or renewed that can lead to a very concerning rise in the price of that contract. The Government are keenly aware of that and it is absolutely something that our new Prime Minister and the team overall will be looking at.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): The Minister's statement was nothing but full of hot air. In the midst of a cost of living crisis, the worst in living memory, many of my constituents are struggling to pay their energy bills, as are others across the country. The words of wisdom from the outgoing Prime Minister were for people to buy a kettle for £20 and save £10 a year. Does the Minister agree that the Government are out of touch with struggling families and that the suggestion of a new kettle is not only insulting, but derisory?

Greg Hands: Look, that is not what the Prime Minister said; he did not say that the answer to the energy crisis was to buy a new kettle. He used the new kettle to provide an analogy as to how we have dealt with nuclear power in this country, further to the points I raised earlier, with the failure to have a long-term view as to how to save money on energy costs overall. The hon. Gentleman is wholly misrepresenting what the Prime Minister said—I suspect he is wilfully misrepresenting it—in his speech on Friday.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Pubs, grassroots sports clubs and an indoor play centre are examples from the local hospitality and leisure sector that have been in touch with me in the past few weeks to highlight the astronomical price rises they are expecting, putting their businesses in a perilous situation. These

sectors are often an afterthought for Government support, yet their importance in our communities should not be underestimated. So will the Minister place on the record that this Government recognise the value of the hospitality, leisure and indoor play sectors, and that they will be given the support they need to survive the winter?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend, an extremely well-regarded former Sports Minister, for her commitment to the sector. She is right to say that pubs, the hospitality sector in general, sports facilities and outdoor play facilities are vital parts of the social and economic fabric of this country. The Government are keenly aware of the importance of the impact of rising energy prices on businesses, and, as I have said, I am sure this is right at the top of the new Prime Minister's in-tray as we go forward.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last Wednesday, the Business Secretary tweeted his winter energy security update, a plan that fails even to mention energy efficiency, despite the BEIS Committee, the CBI and charities all calling for immediate action on insulation to keep homes warm and to cut bills. The Minister did at least mention efficiency in his statement, but there is still no sense of urgency and no plan at the scale required. We need a retrofit revolution. Why are the Government not tackling demand-side measures with far more urgency? Will he finally get on with a local authority-led, street-by-street home insulation programme?

Greg Hands: On energy-efficiency, the Government have extensive programmes in place, which I outlined in the statement. We have £6.6 billion going in over the course of this Parliament. It is important to recognise not only the amount of money going in, but the results we have had. In the 12 years of this Government, the percentage of homes rated A to C for energy efficiency has increased from 14% to 46%, which is a trebling of the amount of homes rated energy-efficient. Of course there is further to go, because 54% are insufficiently energy-efficient. A lot of work is still to be done, but the trebling of the number of homes well rated for energy efficiency is a real achievement of this Government.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting my constituency to meet industrial energy users. It is good that the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme is being extended, but firms in many sectors, such as engineering, glassmaking, ceramics or hospitality, do not qualify for the scheme despite relying on large amounts of energy for their core business, with many facing bill increases of 500%, 600% or 700%. What can be done to help them survive and to protect the jobs that my constituents rely on?

Greg Hands: I had a helpful and productive day in August, partly spent in my hon. Friend's constituency, and he and I ran a session for industrial energy users with Andy Street, the brilliant Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority. It is important to recognise that many businesses in this country are not in classic energy-intensive industries and therefore do not qualify as such, but are nevertheless big users of energy. We need to ensure that support is available so that such

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businesses can get through this coming winter. That is exactly the opinion that I have reflected within Government as we move forward.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): According to Electric Radiators Direct, Bradford ranks highest in the country for the difference between average resident income and average yearly energy bill. Friends of the Earth claims that 52% of neighbourhoods in Bradford are among the worst affected across England and Wales.

Everybody in the country knows and we in this House know that the energy profits levy is in fact a windfall tax—a Labour idea. We have another suggestion for the Minister: freeze energy prices. The Government can name it what they want. We have the ideas, and we are handing them over. What is stopping the Minister freezing energy bills?

Greg Hands: I am not quite sure about Labour's position. On the one hand, it says that we copied its windfall tax proposal, but it also says that what we have done is somehow inadequate. The energy profits levy is projected to raise twice what Labour's proposal was ever projected to generate.

When it comes to Bradford, that is exactly why we are ensuring that the assistance is as targeted as possible and goes to the most vulnerable and in-need households. That is why we have offered the one-off payment of £650 to more than 8 million households on means-tested benefits, the cost of living payment to 8 million pensioner households, and the £150 disability cost of living payment to 6 million households. In addition, we have the £144 million discretionary local authority fund for distribution to those identified as being in need. A huge amount of Government action has already taken place, and more is to come.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of Blackpool residents' strong objections to fracking, which has already been explored at the Preston New Road site a few miles outside my constituency. Fracking should take place only where it is supported by local communities and only if people can feel the benefit directly in their pockets. Does he agree that a few thousand pounds off energy bills would be quite an inducement for people living close to a fracking site?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a telling contribution on Blackpool's behalf that I am sure the Government will study closely. We are also studying the British Geological Survey report into this matter, to which the Government will respond in due course. Over the past year that I have been Energy Minister, I have heard my hon. Friend stick up for and make a strong case for Blackpool on several occasions in relation to fracking.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Lewisham Council's energy bill has already doubled from £7 million to £14 million a year, with bills set to go up further. But instead of setting out a plan of support, the Tories have spent this summer fighting among themselves and have even claimed that rising costs

should be found from existing public sector budgets—budgets that have already been decimated over the last 12 years. We need serious leadership and a plan now, so will the Minister commit that, in any emergency Budget, public services will be properly supported with rising energy costs?

Greg Hands: Public services have always been well supported by this Government throughout the 12 years that we have been in power. When it comes to future taxation, that is, of course, a matter for the Treasury and the Prime Minister.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for his answers on support for energy-intensive industries such as those in my area. He knows that Teesside is the centre of the green industrial revolution in the UK, with our nuclear power station at Hartlepool, wind power manufacturing on both the north and the south side of the river, and large-scale carbon capture, utilisation and storage and hydrogen production in Redcar and Cleveland. As well as looking at new measures to increase such supply, we must tackle demand. Does he agree that we should invest further in energy efficiency and retrofitting homes, as many families could save hundreds of pounds on their energy bills by simply insulating their homes properly?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is always a strong voice for Redcar and Teesside. I think that every single question he has ever asked me has included hydrogen somewhere. He is auditioning, I think, to be the UK's Mr Hydrogen. He has mentioned CCUS as well, which is a big priority of ours, and he is absolutely right to say that energy efficiency is so important. If we can reduce the amount of energy that is used to create the same level of heating in people's homes, clearly that is a massive gain. That is why we have invested £6.6 billion over the course of this Parliament in energy efficiency.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The annual energy costs of a bar on my patch in Shoreditch—it is part of a large chain—have gone up from £30,000 last year to £120,000 this year. All energy contracts are now being renegotiated, with some experiencing an uplift of at least 300%, and since the pandemic some electricity suppliers are refusing to supply the hospitality sector. The Minister has given warm words, but there are two issues there. Will he give us comfort that he will act on at least one of them by talking to the energy suppliers about making sure that more of them can at least compete for the business of these important hospitality businesses?

Greg Hands: As ever, the hon. Lady raises an important and telling point. It is worth reminding ourselves, as I said earlier, that businesses tend to have long-term contracts for their energy bills. Prices were lower but they are now rising. There is an advantage in being locked into lower prices for a longer term, but there is, of course, a disadvantage when that long-term contract rolls off and they have to replace it. She is quite right about that. I am happy to look into the specifics of the bar that she mentions. There is no obligation currently on energy suppliers to supply businesses, unlike their

obligation to provide to consumers, but I am happy to look into the specifics of the bar that she mentions in her constituency.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): There is clearly consensus across the House about the need to decouple the price of electricity from the cost of gas. I very much welcome the Minister's remarks that that is being actively looked at in government. May I encourage him to go a little further, given that we are in this little moment of an interregnum, exploit his licence and tell us what might be the obstacles to doing that quickly and, if we wanted to do it, how fast it could be done?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend invites me to go down a road of policy speculation. What I will say is that many markets and many countries are looking at this specific issue. There are various proposals out there. We are looking carefully at this issue domestically, and we are also looking to see what other countries, other markets and other jurisdictions are doing in this space.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I met a range of organisations during the recess. Most recently, I met David Findlater, the managing director of Calder Millerfield in Dalmarnock, which has been making bakery and butchery products in the area and employing local people for over 60 years, supplying supermarkets and fast food establishments. Its annual prices have gone up from £160,000 for electricity and £30,000 for gas to £712,000 for electricity and £80,000 for gas. It does not know how it will keep going as a business and meet those bills. It wants to hear urgently from this Government that help is coming. Will the Minister give it that assurance?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Member for her question. I share, and I think we all share, the concern about the rising prices facing not just consumers, but businesses up and down the UK. The Government are keenly aware of the issue, as I said; it is right at the top of what the Prime Minister will be looking to do, and I am sure that announcements will be forthcoming.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I listened to Edwina Currie this morning telling people to put foil down the back of their radiators to improve energy efficiency. She seemed to miss the point that many of my constituents are not even thinking of switching their radiators on in the first place. I just wonder about those in the left-behind neighbourhoods—the very poorest. In my patch, in Orchard Park, 29% of households are in fuel poverty before we even start, against the national average of 13%. What will the Minister do for those people on Orchard Park who are not able to switch their radiators on this winter?

Greg Hands: Obviously, we are very concerned to make sure that consumers are supported through the coming winter. That is absolutely at the heart of the existing Government's policy, and I am sure it will be part of the incoming Prime Minister's policies as well.

I ask the hon. Member to tell her constituents to have a look at what the Government have already done—the £39 billion-worth that we have already announced this year, not all of which has taken effect yet. For example, the £400 payment for 29 million households has not yet

actually come in. I urge the hon. Member to relay to her constituents that the Government are on their side, have already committed large amounts of public funds to this and, I am sure, will be committing more in the coming months.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Minister, his officials and Treasury Ministers and officials for ensuring that the discount on electricity bills will be paid directly to consumers in Northern Ireland rather than having to go through the Assembly and the Departments, which quite frankly would not have been capable of administering it.

I am disappointed, however, that in the Minister's statement today there was no mention of exploiting the resources that we have on our doorstep, namely the abundant supply of gas in the north-east of England, which could give a very quick supply of additional gas to the UK network. Is he not concerned that his increasing dependence on renewables—for which much of the infrastructure is dependent on the supply of rare earth metals, 60% of which are controlled by China—will leave us as dependent on China in future as Europe is on Russia today?

I have a more immediate question. The Minister has announced 93 contracts for difference. How will he ensure that the companies that get those contracts will not simply—as they are doing at present—refuse to activate them and sell electricity as if it were generated by the most expensive gas?

Greg Hands: I thank the right hon. Member for that list of important questions. He will know that the new taskforce has already started meeting to extend the energy bill support scheme, or provisions thereof, to Northern Ireland; that is welcome news.

I think the right hon. Member said that fracking would lead to quick supplies. I am not as convinced that he is that it would be quick, but as I said, we will be responding to the British Geological Survey in due course.

On dependence on renewables, the right hon. Member is right that a number of elements used in creating renewable energy resources are dependent on critical minerals, but that is exactly one of the reasons why the Government have recently launched the critical minerals strategy. We will be talking to all our international partners, as I do, about critical minerals and making sure that we have a diversity of sources of supply for them going forward.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I do not get any sense of urgency from the Minister about the plight of businesses negotiating energy contracts. I have been contacted by a family-run independent craft bakery that is about to celebrate its centenary and has been run by six generations of the same family. It employs 20 people in my constituency, but is facing at least a 300% increase in the energy costs in its contracts. We cannot leave businesses in that situation hanging. We have no date yet for the Government to come forward with a set of proposals. When will those businesses have some idea what support they will get from this Government? Businesses in that situation are just not going to survive for very long.

Greg Hands: Let us be absolutely clear: the new Prime Minister has said that there will be announcements very shortly on the support that will be there. The hon. Gentleman throws his hands up in the air, but he was first elected, if I am not mistaken, under the last Labour Government. When it comes to acting quickly, it took that Labour Government more than 10 years to reverse their policy on nuclear energy, so perhaps he might like to reflect on how quickly Governments can move, and see that this Government have moved incredibly fast to react to changing circumstances on both energy prices and energy supply.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): To continue the theme, small businesses will be among the worst hit by the soaring energy bills. Bath Aqua Glass is one of many businesses in my constituency that have told me their energy bill will go up 10 times—not 10%, but 10 times. The company's bill will go from £14,000 to £130,000. The whole energy sector is completely out of control. We Liberal Democrats have called for emergency covid-style support for small businesses. What are the Government doing, not just in the short term to support small businesses, but in the long term to fix the broken energy sector?

Greg Hands: I have already said that this is a priority for the new Prime Minister, and I would expect there to be announcements shortly on what is being done. Businesses are the core of our concern here in relation to energy prices. There is of course no energy price cap for businesses, and we recognise the challenges that businesses—particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that do not qualify as energy-intensive industries but nevertheless use a lot of energy—face at this time. That is exactly the sort of thing the Government are actively looking at.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): On Friday, I visited a pub called the Ring 'O' Bells in the Frodsham area of my constituency. I spoke to Phil, the landlord, whose projected bills are going up by several thousand pounds per month. Then I went along to the Devonshire Bakery, a family business that has been operating in my constituency for a considerable number of years, and which is facing a 400% rise in its energy bills. I say to the Minister that we need now to urgently step up and support businesses, not only in my constituency, but up and down the country, and we certainly need to hear that urgently from the new Prime Minister.

Greg Hands: I have already said that I think we will be hearing very soon from the new Prime Minister and her team, but the hon. Gentleman could say to Phil the landlord that this Government has had an excellent track record, when it comes to the pandemic, of providing support for businesses. I think that has been universally acknowledged as being an extremely strong element of support—£40 billion overall for businesses over the pandemic—and, if I were the hon. Gentleman, I would say to Phil, “Judge the Government on their actions.” There will be more to come, but I ask him to report to Phil the confidence that he should have in the Government's excellent record of supporting businesses through the pandemic.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The incoming Prime Minister has promised to deliver a plan to address the energy price crisis and is now thought to be considering

freezing energy bills. In my Birkenhead constituency, however, people are already struggling to pay their bills, with many fearing that they will be plunged into destitution this winter. Does the Minister agree that urgent action is needed to cut energy costs now and that no option should be off the table in tackling this crisis, including renationalisation, which has allowed the French Government to cap rises at 4% while bills in the UK have risen by 54% already this year?

Greg Hands: The French analogy is a bit of a misnomer, and the hon. Gentleman and I probably disagree on it. I think he is celebrating the nationalisation of the French energy industry, but I am not sure that is a good answer either for this country or for others. He says that further action is needed, and that is what I have pledged at this Dispatch Box. I ask him to look at the amount of money—£37 billion—that this Government have already put in to assist consumers with energy bills; I think it compares favourably with other European countries, up until the previous rise in prices.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In Scotland, we produce six times as much gas as we consume, yet the energy price cap has already increased by 40%. In Scotland, gas accounts for just 14.4% of electricity production, yet the energy price cap is about to increase by a further 80%. In Scotland, our annual electricity production comes almost entirely from renewables, yet households and businesses are being crippled. Surely even the Minister must accept this blatant failure of UK energy policy. Is it not time we recognised that Scotland does not just have the energy; we badly need the power?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I strongly disagree. When it comes to energy, it is the UK Government's reserved energy policy that is working well for the people of Scotland. Had we followed the SNP's energy policy of being against both nuclear and Scottish oil and gas, we would be in a terrible position and would probably be dependent on the good will of Vladimir Putin.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Forgive me, Minister, but it is already too late for some businesses. Alexandros, a very popular restaurant in my constituency, has announced that it is closing while it assesses whether it can afford to carry on with a £13,000 increase in its energy costs. This is going to be brutal for small businesses on our high streets, isn't it, Minister, without appropriate intervention?

Greg Hands: I have already said that this is a matter of very active consideration by the Government and that it is right at the top of the new Prime Minister's in tray. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the amount of support the Government have given businesses during the pandemic and over other matters recently. We have an incredibly strong record of supporting businesses, which is one reason we have such an excellent record on creating jobs and making sure that, by working with businesses, we have a robust employment sector in this country.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker, if you, I, the Minister or anyone on these Benches were to stop paying our energy bills,

we could be cut off or disconnected from gas and electricity, but it would take a long time because the company would have to go through a number of different procedures and we have rights. Not so those people on prepayment meters. In the statement, the Minister has talked repeatedly about those most in need of support. If people are on prepayment meters, it is almost always because they are on a low income and need more support. They already pay more than the rest of us, but all they can do is get into £10 of debt. The minute they go over that £10 emergency credit, they are disconnected. Is that fair? If he does not think it is fair, will he join my campaign to outlaw so-called self-disconnection? If not, are we to believe that he thinks we deserve better rights than our constituents who are really struggling financially at the moment?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady is right to raise the matter of prepayment meters and prepayment customers. She is, of course, right to raise the issue of the most vulnerable, which is exactly where the Government's overall package is targeted. The £37 billion goes hugely to disadvantaged people and households.

Ofgem has taken a number of actions on prepayment meters in recent times. It warned suppliers in June 2018 that prepayment meters should be installed only as a last resort for debt collection. It banned forcible installation for vulnerable customers in 2017. In December 2020, it introduced new licensing conditions, including an ability-to-pay principle and the obligation on suppliers to identify self-disconnection and self-rationing by prepayment meter customers proactively. A number of measures have been taken by Ofgem. Of course it will keep these things under review, and I am sure the Government will look at them as well. If there are more actions the hon. Lady thinks should be taken, I am happy to hear from her.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Many industries on Teesside and beyond that are dependent on natural gas as a feedstock are being ruined. CF Fertilisers has already ceased ammonia production in Billingham, while a second major local company told me that a decision could be taken within weeks unless something comprehensive is done, and it will close. The company has written to the Prime Minister. I await a response to my urgent letter to the Business Secretary on Friday, telling him that hundreds of jobs are at risk at that one company. The Minister spoke of some support to help energy-intensive industries, but it is totally inadequate to meet the needs of industry on Teesside and beyond. Will he please outline what assistance will be available for non-qualifying energy-intensive industries? Will he go away again and find another way to help the balance of industries, or is he prepared to see thousands of people lose their jobs?

Greg Hands: The Government are never prepared to see thousands of people lose their jobs, which is why we have taken such strong action in the last few years to make sure that our employment situation remains as robust as it is. Beyond that, the hon. Gentleman is asking me to make commitments that will be made by the incoming Prime Minister. He mentions CF Fertilisers, which is a company that we are keenly aware of. We have interacted with the company over a long period of time and will continue to do so.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Like many Members of this House, I am receiving desperate messages not only from individuals, but from hospitals, care homes, schools and small businesses. The energy bill for one pub in my constituency, Dylans-The Kings Arms, is due to rise from £22,000 to £124,000—a sixfold increase, or an increase of £100,000. One care home in my constituency emailed me today and said its gas bill alone will have a 15-fold increase, rising from £40,000 to £600,000. If a pub has no heating, patrons will not visit. If a care home does not have heating, vulnerable people become ill and possibly die. The Minister has already indicated that he does not know when an announcement will be made, but will he please give us an assurance that straight after this debate he will go straight to the new Prime Minister and encourage her and her new Cabinet to make an announcement this week—not just for individuals and households, but for businesses, care homes and schools?

Greg Hands: I do not think that the hon. Lady will have long to wait. I say to her that we absolutely share those concerns. All Government Ministers, at least in the Commons, are obviously constituency MPs as well, and we have these kinds of cases in our constituencies, including in my constituency. We are well aware of the big rises in energy prices being faced by many businesses at the end of their contract when taking up a new contract.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Manufacturing in this country is facing a truly terrible crisis. For example, OGM Moulding Innovation employs 220 people in England and Wales, including in my constituency of Caerphilly, and it faces a massive increase in its energy costs. Unless something is done urgently, it faces closing three factories. It does not qualify for special support, because it is not deemed an energy-intensive company. Nevertheless, it uses a huge amount of energy. My plea is very simple and straightforward: will the Government give a commitment that they will come forward in the next few days with comprehensive packages to help companies such as OGM Moulding Innovation?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his concern for his constituency-based business. As I said in answer to the previous question from the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), we are all keenly aware of the difficulties that many businesses are in. On the other engagement that we have had with the sector, the Secretary of State has been meeting energy suppliers. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has heard loud and clear from the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, Make UK and others. The Government are of course keenly aware of the situation, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman will have long to wait to hear the response.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): About three hours ago I spoke to Deborah Linton, who is the operations director of Dentec Hillington, which is a body repair shop just off London Road in my constituency. Its energy bills alone will rise by £54,000 this year, and the message that she wanted me to bring to the Minister is that businesses need action and need it now. I have a

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simple question for the Minister: will the Government have announced action when I visit the company on Friday?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman is inviting me to speculate on the date of future Government announcements, which I am not able to do, but I will say that I do not think he will have long to wait.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The issue around energy costs for businesses was a key priority for businesses I met in July. We know that business insolvencies are at a 60-year high at the moment. I am also getting a lot of feedback on the doorstep, when I meet constituents, who are concerned about how they will manage with the forthcoming energy price increase. We know that the new Prime Minister is not keen on handouts, but if there is not a reasonable offer from the new Prime Minister, what would be the Minister's assessment of the increase in debt, homelessness and insolvencies and, as a consequence of all that, the increase in excess deaths?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I have already said how well aware we all are of the increase in costs for businesses, but I think she paints an unhappy picture that goes beyond the reality of what businesses are facing in this country. If we consider the amount of support that the Government gave during the pandemic, and the level of employment in this country, including a record high in payroll employment, we see some really good economic figures coming out of that. Of course, we recognise that businesses are facing those big increases in energy costs, which is why I expect announcements to be forthcoming quite soon.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I am grateful to the Minister for his update on the £400 payment to households in Northern Ireland. Of course, if we had had an Executive going back as far as February, we could have done that ourselves. As he knows, the Northern Ireland energy market and system is very different from that in Great Britain, so in the event that the next phase of Government support has large elements that apply only to Great Britain, but with large Barnett consequentials for Northern Ireland, what contingency steps are the Government taking to ensure that, in the absence of a functioning devolved Executive, businesses and households in Northern Ireland have the same access to support as their counterparts in Great Britain?

Greg Hands: The Chancellor of the Exchequer convened the Northern Ireland taskforce with the specific objective of making sure that Northern Ireland does not miss out on UK Government support for consumers and businesses in future. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman more of an update than that, but it is a strong area of Government action to ensure that Northern Ireland, quite properly, is treated as part of the UK when it comes to all these matters, including, especially, Her Majesty's Government support for consumers and businesses.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In the Minister's statement and in many of his answers he has focused on what the Government have already announced, but

does he recognise that that does not come close to meeting the depth of the crisis that we now face? Does he accept the need for a freeze on domestic bills and action to match his words on businesses? Across my constituency, hundreds of small businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector, are at risk. Thousands upon thousands of jobs are threatened without decisive action. When can we expect it?

Greg Hands: The Government have provided enormous levels of support for exactly those kinds of businesses. The hospitality sector was a strong recipient of Government support during the pandemic. The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the £37 billion of support to consumers so far this year. He will not have to wait long to hear what the Government will be doing, but I ask him to judge the Government on their excellent track record in this space—in supporting businesses, particularly in the last few years. As I say, he will not have to wait too long to see further measures.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Housing associations that I have spoken to in Glasgow North are, first and foremost, concerned about the wellbeing of their tenants who cannot afford to heat their homes this winter, but leaving the heating off is also bad for the housing stock: damp and mouldy houses will be bad for future generations and will cost more to repair in the long run. Does the Minister understand that as well as a price freeze now, we need a long-term preventive approach to energy security, efficiency and insulation?

Greg Hands: That is one of the reasons we are investing £6.6 billion over this Parliament in energy-efficiency measures, which will include the ECO4—energy company obligation—measures that we debated in this House in July. We will have to see what energy-efficiency measures may be forthcoming from the Prime Minister in the coming days.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents are already cancelling their contracts with their gas companies. They are absolutely terrified. Churches and charities want to step in, but they are exposed to the commercial rates, with charities often seeing a tenfold increase. They want to provide warm banks to keep their communities safe, warm and well fed this winter. What steps are the Government taking to support charities and churches to ensure they can provide the warmth their communities need?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady makes a strong point that this is not just about consumers and businesses; everybody is being affected by the global rise in energy prices. This is not just a UK phenomenon, but a worldwide one. If she has cases of charities and others being unable to take out contracts or cancelling contracts, I would be happy to look into them with her to find out what is going on and to ensure that those vital services continue to get an energy supply.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Rising energy prices will disproportionately hit those on the lowest incomes, while tax cuts will disproportionately favour the highest earners. Considering the scale of the financial problems about to hit families, with some experts indicating that energy bills could hit £7,000 per

annum by next year unless there is some firm Government action, social cohesion should be the cornerstone of Government policy. Would not one way of doing this be to ensure that the broadest shoulders pay their fair share, by increasing the burden on higher and additional rate income taxpayers to support those in need?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to go down the road of Her Majesty's Treasury announcements on tax and other matters, which I am afraid I will have to resist doing. I think he will hear before too long what the Government propose to do on these vital matters.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): People are really frightened about how they are going to get through this winter. One of my constituents, who is a widow with long-term health issues, has written to me to say that she will have to cancel insurance for her pets—so if her pet becomes ill she will not be able to take them to the vet—and will get rid of her car, which is vital for her to get to medical appointments. She says that her gas and electricity bill was originally about £85 a month, but she has now received a direct debit statement saying that it will go up to more than £255 a month; her energy costs will basically triple. She is terrified about how she will manage this winter, as are many of my constituents. Will the Minister give us an assurance that he will impress on the new Prime Minister the scale of the catastrophe we face if the Government do not come forward with a major increase in support for people facing these bills?

Greg Hands: I am concerned to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent. Indeed, many of all our constituents are facing difficulties and prospective difficulties at this time. In relation to her constituent's car, the Government have reduced fuel duty at the cost of about £5 billion to the Exchequer, and that will help people to run their cars. We are acutely aware of the difficulties faced by consumers, but we have risen to the challenge. The £37 billion package announced for this year so far is a considerable amount of public spending to help consumers with bills, and there will be more to come.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Many people across rural Scotland depend on heating oil to heat their homes. Today I spoke to someone who was quoted 110p a litre, with a minimum delivery of 500 litres. Of course, once heating oil is gone—when the tank is empty—it is gone. If people cannot afford to refill the tank, they cannot heat their house. With winter approaching, that is a potential death sentence for vulnerable people in an already economically fragile part of Scotland. What will the Government do to help those people, and what reassurances can the Minister give to those who rely on heating oil that they will be protected from skyrocketing fuel prices this winter?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Member for that question because many consumers, up and down this United Kingdom, are dependent on heating oil. They are off the gas grid and heating oil is the principle means of heating their home. We need to be keenly aware of that, as the Government are.

It is worth recognising that there is a competitive market for heating oil. I often speak with the UK and Ireland Fuel Distributors Association, which is a trade

body, and with consumer groups in relation to heating oil. Obviously, prices have risen; they are closely related to the price of kerosene, for example, which has been quite volatile this year.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that households that have an electricity charging point will benefit from the £400 payment, and others will benefit from the payments to the more vulnerable, so it would not be right to suggest that those who use heating oil are not recipients of Government assistance. There is also the £1.1 billion home upgrade grant, through which the Government have committed to improve funding for energy efficiency and clean heating upgrades for those dependent on heating oil and other liquid fuels.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Some 60% to 70% of our energy is domestically produced. The price of producing it has not increased at all, so 60% to 70% of the bill increase is theft by the energy companies charging international rates to domestic companies. It is time we had wholesale market reform, to ensure that domestically produced energy is sold at production prices and not inflated prices for fat cats in the City.

May I ask the Minister specifically about the £144 million discretionary fund? Many of my constituents are use remeterage, whereby their landlords have a commercial contract but they are remetered at a higher price and are ineligible for any support. Will the Minister write to councils to confirm that they must offer parity for those people, if they can show they use remeterage and therefore are not eligible for the £400 support?

Greg Hands: I might have to write to the hon. Member on the question of remeterage. The £144 million discretionary fund is supposed to be disbursed at the discretion of local authorities, in the right way. I think his question is more about heat networks. In the British energy security strategy, we announced that heat networks will in future be regulated by Ofgem—I say that on the assumption that he supports the Energy Security Bill that is making its passage through Parliament at the moment.

The hon. Gentleman's point that somehow the UK can declare some kind of unilateral declaration of independence from global energy prices is, I am afraid, simply fanciful. Even Norway, which is one of the world's biggest domestic producers and almost certainly the largest surplus energy producer in the world, is facing these same challenges of rising domestic energy prices. It is simply not possible for the UK to isolate itself from these global trends. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Patricia Gibson.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The energy price cap is set to double. Businesses have received no support with energy costs, households have simply not received enough and those in park homes have been completely ignored so far. On top of that, the cost of supplier failures means that the poorest, who use less energy, will continue to be disproportionately impacted by punishing standing charges. Today the Minister has said nothing about any of these issues, because today's statement is about a zombie Government

[Patricia Gibson]

giving the illusion of activity. When will we see urgent and decisive action to tackle this increasingly painful and in some cases life-threatening crisis for businesses and households on the brink?

Greg Hands: There is a lot in that question. The hon. Lady raised a new issue, not raised in these questions so far—the issue of park homes. That is a serious concern, because around 1% of households in this country are not reached by the current £400 scheme, although they are being reached by other schemes. We have said clearly that we will announce measures to assist those living in park homes, houseboats and so on, which are not covered because they do not have a meter point. There will be a scheme announced this autumn to help them, with funding attached, as part of an additional scheme.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Like many Members, I already have a great number of distressed constituents getting in touch with me desperate for some sort of help. Today, though, I want to focus my comments more specifically on businesses, which we have been hearing about from Members around the Chamber. Last Thursday I met with farmers, who might be readily overlooked; it is essential that all sectors across our economy are considered. They have to keep their grain at a certain temperature, for example, to make sure that it is not affected by moisture and so on. I ask the Minister to ensure that all categories of businesses—care homes, farmers and so on—are considered. Specifically, I spoke to pub owners at a roundtable meeting last Friday. There were seven of them. Frankie, Phil, Ricky and Jake joined me. Several of them will be out of business in three weeks when their contracts end. I ask the Minister to implore the Prime Minister to act with absolute urgency on this issue.

Greg Hands: On farming, we are interacting regularly with the National Farmers Union, NFU Scotland, NFU Cymru, the Farmers' Union of Wales and the Ulster

Farmers Union to make sure that the voice of farming is heard loud and clear within this Government, including on energy prices. When it comes to wider announcements, as I have already said, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman will have too long to wait.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Like others, I want to make my point on this. On Sunday, just yesterday, one of my constituents closed his family shop, café and restaurant that he had owned for a number of years. It was a family enterprise that employed some 68 people. He said that he had spent much of his life in the village in which he had grown up, but he said that energy costs were so high that he could not continue to trade there. That is a fact of life. It is also a fact of life for butchers' shops, and I wish to make a plea for them. I have spoken to three butchers in the past 10 days. One of them said that his energy costs will go from £1,850 to £4,000. The contract runs out in September. A second one said that his electric costs will go from £2,350 to £4,500. His contract runs out in October. The third one says that his costs will go from £3,000 to £6,000. Refrigeration is important to them. The costs are already high, and they say that they will not stop there. I just ask the Secretary: what can we do for those people?

Greg Hands: I hear the hon. Gentleman loud and clear. Northern Ireland is very much at the forefront of our discussions and our considerations. As I said in answer to an earlier question, the Chancellor of the Exchequer launched a new taskforce in relation to Northern Ireland, recognising its difficult position of not having a Northern Ireland Executive and also recognising that electricity is a devolved matter. We are actively on that case to make sure that Northern Ireland consumers and businesses do not miss out on the support being given by the UK Government, quite properly treating the United Kingdom as a whole.

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

Point of Order

6.53 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 12 August, the Government made a significant policy announcement via a statement to BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme but without informing Members of this House. They said via the radio that they would not be purchasing Evusheld, a preventive covid treatment for the estimated half a million immunosuppressed and immunocompromised patients, many of whom are still shielding from covid-19. No "Dear Colleague" letter was circulated to Members of this House setting out the background and rationale for such a major policy decision, nor did I have any response to my request in a letter to the Secretary of State to meet with MPs virtually during the summer recess to explain his decision.

Outside this House, various arguments to refuse this life-saving treatment have been put forward by Ministers, but they simply do not stand up to scrutiny. It is therefore vital that Members of this House have the opportunity to properly scrutinise the Government here in public view in this Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you please advise whether the Government have given you any indication that they intend to make a statement this week, or perhaps issue a "Dear Colleague" letter? If not, can you please advise how we can bring the next Secretary of State to this Chamber to answer questions on why the Government continue to block a drug for the most vulnerable among us—a drug that is medically approved, clinically effective, cost-effective and in use by many other countries?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. I can confirm that Mr Speaker has not had notice of any statement on this subject. The hon. Lady will know the various ways in which she can continue to pursue the issues she has raised, but I am confident that those on the Government Benches will have heard her comments and I am sure they will feed them back to the relevant Government Departments. Clerks in the Table Office will also be able to give the hon. Lady advice on how she might pursue this.

We now come to the Second Reading of the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill. Not moved.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill [*Lords*] may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Mr Bone.*)

Telford Child Sexual Exploitation: Inquiry

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

6.56 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a privilege to have secured the first Adjournment debate after the summer recess, and I am grateful for this opportunity.

The independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford reported on its findings on 12 July this year, at a time when Parliament was in some turmoil, so I am particularly grateful to now be able to put on record the findings of that important inquiry and the response of the authorities to those findings.

This inquiry has relevance for every council and every police force, and it marks a turning point in the fight against CSE and the organisational culture and attitudes that for so long have allowed this horrendous crime to pass unnoticed. I am very glad that the Minister is on the Treasury Bench to hear and respond to the debate. I urge her and her officials to read the report, because this is a landmark inquiry and a turning point in this ongoing battle. The Telford inquiry is a testament to the victims and survivors and their families—to their determination and bravery—because it will improve safeguarding across the country, and there are many good people to thank for the role they played.

The inquiry was chaired by Mr Tom Crowther QC. He makes it clear at the outset of his report that inquiries of this kind can drive change only if organisations that are subject to criticism accept the spirit in which the comments are made and view the findings in a way that is self-critical and reflective. It is not enough to say, "Well, this happened a long time ago" or "Our practices have substantially improved." As Mr Crowther says in his report, in child welfare and safeguarding there is no place for corporate pride; there is no place for reflexive denial, deflection of blame or excessively optimistic statements.

Tom Crowther conducted his work sensitively and thoroughly. His report is measured and balanced, his recommendations constructive and clear. He shows insight into the silence around CSE and the way that authorities, not just in Telford, too often respond when questioned. He tackles, too, the key issues of institutional blindness and complacency and the failure to take CSE seriously.

It was back in the summer recess of 2016 when I first met with CSE campaigners, victims and survivors. I listened to their experiences and offered to help them secure this inquiry, which they felt would give them a voice and would mean that their experience was not just brushed aside and forgotten about so that people could move quietly on to other things. To them, it was an important part of their recovery. These meetings came after a high profile police investigation and successful prosecution known as Operation Chalice. A group of seven men in Telford were jailed for serious sexual offences against young girls, some as young as 13. It was apparent from the work of Operation Chalice that this was not a one-off, and that there were serious underlying problems.

When something has gone wrong, it is understandable that any organisation will feel uncomfortable when practices and procedures are challenged and scrutinised

[Lucy Allan]

and shortcomings are identified. However, child sexual exploitation is a horrendous crime that affects whole communities and damages young lives. No one in authority charged with responsibility for young people should shy away from improving practice when something has gone horribly wrong, and those that do embrace an inquiry such as this as if it were an opportunity—which, indeed, it is—are to be commended. That is why I welcomed the response of West Mercia police to the inquiry's findings. Speaking on behalf of West Mercia police on the day the report was published, 12 July, Assistant Chief Constable Richard Cooper said:

"I would like to say sorry. Sorry to the survivors and all those affected by child sexual exploitation in Telford...our actions fell far short of the help and protection you should have had from us, it was unacceptable, we let you down."

That acknowledgement that mistakes were made is exactly the right way to respond. It is the first step towards accepting that things went wrong. It also makes a huge difference to victims, and provides reassurance that culture and attitudes have changed and new ways of working can be adopted for the future.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The scale of the abuse suffered by young, vulnerable women in my hon. Friend's constituency over a number of decades is truly shocking and repugnant, as are the failings on the part of the authorities to which she has alluded, going back years and years. In Telford, Rotherham, Rochdale, Huddersfield, Halifax and countless other places, those vulnerable young women were failed by the authorities because they were too politically correct to call out what was going on. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is high time we had a new approach to dealing with this abhorrent crime, and that all police forces should be required to prioritise its investigation?

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making two important points: first that this happens throughout the country, and secondly that there is much more work to be done. He is also right to emphasise that the role of the police is vital. They can and should view the report by Tom Crowther—the Telford report—as a model to be followed, and note the way in which West Mercia police responded to its findings. That, too, can be a significant learning for many police forces throughout the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. It is hard to listen to stories such as this because they are so heart-rending and personal. I think we all accept that these issues are real for the hon. Lady and her constituency, but, as she has said, they are also real throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Every police force, every authority, every public body can learn from this report. Is it the hon. Lady's hope that this report will be dispersed across the United Kingdom by the Minister, if that is at all possible, so that all of us, everywhere, can learn for the betterment of the children?

Lucy Allan: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman—I call him my hon. Friend—who makes exactly the point that I would like the Minister to take away from today's debate. There is so much learning in the Crowther report that could be disseminated throughout the country.

In his report, Mr Crowther urges all stakeholders to commit to a reflective response, and refers specifically to Telford and Wrekin Council. He observes that the council has shown a reluctance to accept criticism, and goes on to say that its approach has been essentially defensive. He stresses that to foster a culture of openness and learning it is necessary to recognise and admit mistakes; but he found, instead, a long-standing culture of resistance to ever admitting that provision was imperfect. Disappointingly, that is what we saw when the council came to respond to this important report on its publication.

In a very brief statement, which was issued on the date of publication and which no one put their name to, the council did not acknowledge or recognise that any mistakes had been made, and the press release claimed that the inquiry had in fact found that the council had made significant improvements and that, in any event, the council was already carrying out many of the recommendations. The press release did say that it was sorry for the pain and suffering of the victims, but it very specifically did not make any apology for or any mention of the mistakes the council had made. There was no acknowledgement that it could have done things differently and no suggestion that the council had a responsibility for what went wrong. There was repeated reference to the fact that child sexual exploitation was a problem that dates back many years—as long as 30 years in this case—as if to create some kind of distance between what had happened and the people responsible.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): That is infuriating. We must never forget who is at the heart of this: it is the victims and their families who have had these traumatic experiences, and situations have been imposed on them for many years. The report referred to institutional blindness as a key point. Does my hon. Friend share my frustration? In order for us to reinstall trust in those organisations that have failed many of our constituents for a long time, we have to get those authorities to recognise and realise where mistakes have been made. That is why I am frustrated at the council's response. Does she agree that in order to get to the position of being able to reinstall that trust, we must get our local authorities, including Bradford Council in my constituency, to trigger an inquiry to get to the bottom of the issues to do with child sexual exploitation that have been going on in Keighley and my constituency?

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right that it is essential that councils not only acknowledge but know what has gone wrong. This happens in lots of institutions, not just councils. Too often it is easy for them to say, "Nothing happened here really," and to see it through their own eyes rather than view the reality through the eyes of an outsider or, indeed, the victim. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the suffering of victims. I do not think that any one of us who has ever spoken to a victim will forget what they have told us. It is an extraordinarily hideous crime—its deviousness, its manipulation and its way of making people do something they do not want to do without even realising that it is happening. It is the most hideous of crimes. I recognise how difficult it is to identify it, but that means that it is all the more important that inquiries such as this happen. It is such a healthy exercise to actually look at what has gone on, examine responses and challenge oneself. It is

very difficult to do that on the inside. I think that having an outside, independent person asking these questions in the same balanced, measured and blame-free way as Tom Crowther is vital, and there is scope for many more such learning opportunities in many other areas.

The response of Telford and Wrekin Council was not just a missed opportunity to learn lessons or reassure the community that it knew that things had gone wrong, but a clear indication and evidence of the resistance, the reluctance to accept criticism, the defensiveness and the corporate pride that Mr Crowther references in the inquiry report. It is that same reluctance to be open about shortcomings that created roadblocks to the inquiry taking place in the first place. Although I would not expect any organisation to be enthusiastic about such an inquiry, the resistance to it in this case was clear for all to see.

For two long years, the council gave various reasons why this inquiry was simply not necessary. First, it hid behind the national child abuse inquiry, which it claimed would cover Telford when it did not do so. Then, it said that it was going to cost too much, then that it had a good Ofsted report, and then that there was nothing to see anyway. When the council did finally agree to it, it took another year to appoint a chair, and when it did that, it produced 1.2 million pages of evidence for the inquiry to sift through. That shows that it was not taking seriously its duties to improve its procedures and practices, and that was extremely frustrating. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) mentioned being frustrated. Don't block it, don't stop it; just accept it as a learning opportunity and as an opportunity to do things better, because these are children and young people, and this is about lives being ruined. No one should stand in the way of making sure that best practice is in place.

For me, most disheartening of all was the formal response to the inquiry by the leader of Telford and Wrekin Council. The report had said,

"It is...the responsibility of the elected members, particularly the cabinet members, to give direction and to assert priorities; to determine what is essential and what may be foregone. I have seen...no indication that before 2016, a CSE response was ever regarded as an essential service. I consider that a glaring failure on the part of a generation of Telford's politicians."

Having read that in black and white on the printed page, the council leader who joined the cabinet in 2011, far from accepting responsibility and being humble about the shortcomings, in his response talked defensively about how proud he was of Telford, as if there had been criticism of our town—of course, there had not. He talked about the significant improvements, despite the report saying that such progress as there had been was "unconscionably slow", and he made repeated reference to the way that CSE dated back 30 years. He went on to say that he was only three years old at the time.

CSE is not all in the past. CSE is not something that happened 30 years ago. Forgive my frustration, but we had the same approach—the same institutional denial—with the maternity death scandal at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital. Before the Ockenden inquiry into maternity negligence, we saw the great and the good reassuring anyone who asked that there was nothing to see here, and that it was all in the past. But it was still happening at that very time, because there was a refusal to accept shortcomings or have any insight into the problems that the organisation faced.

The leader of the council is the corporate parent, the person ultimately responsible for young people in our borough. Instead of saying, "Yes we got it wrong, yes we made

mistakes, and yes people suffered as a consequence," he says, "Well, I was only three years old at the time."

I am heartened that all stakeholders have committed to implementing all the findings of this important report, and it is my job as Telford's MP, as the representative of victims and their families and all young people in Telford, to ensure that the recommendations are implemented, and to seek updates on their progress. We all know that it is the perpetrators who are to blame for horrific crimes. It is impossible, however, not to feel a deep sense of sadness and anger about the entrenched culture and attitudes that allowed CSE to go unchecked for so long. I invite the council to do as West Mercia police have done and acknowledge the shortcomings identified in the report, and apologise to victims, families and the community for those failings. I ask all stakeholders in Telford and Wrekin to work together with our community to implement all the inquiry's recommendations promptly.

I thank Mr Crowther for his excellent work and steadfast determination to get the job done, and all the victims who have worked with me on this issue and who were able to give their evidence to the inquiry. I hope that CSE victims and survivors in Telford and elsewhere feel confident that they are now being taken seriously and together have shone a light on this issue, and that no one anywhere will be complacent about CSE in the future. I know that the Minister will confirm that in her response.

I want to take this chance to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who at the time we were battling for this inquiry was the local government Minister. Without his help, I wonder whether the inquiry would ever have taken place. I am very grateful to him.

I doubt any of us would have been able to speak out on this issue but for the pioneering work of the inspirational hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). It was her support that enabled me to keep going to make this inquiry happen, and I commend her on her bravery on holding those responsible to account. It is not an easy job, as I can now say from experience.

I am privileged to be Telford's MP and to have the platform to speak up for victims. I am grateful that other hon. Members have taken the same opportunity. Together, slowly and bit by bit, standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, we will make change really happen.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amanda Solloway): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing this incredibly important and moving debate. She has worked tirelessly on these issues. Her perseverance has helped to ensure that the report has been published and that the horrendous way in which more than 1,000 children in Telford were failed has been exposed. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in commending her efforts, alongside those of other hon. Members present who are driving change on behalf of victims in constituencies across the country, including my hon.

[Amanda Solloway]

Friends the Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). I acknowledge the work of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) as well.

The abuse suffered by the many victims in Telford is truly sickening. My thoughts are with them. As has been so shockingly detailed, children were failed over and over again by those who should have protected them. I pay tribute to the victims and survivors in Telford and to all those who have shared their experiences. They have suffered unthinkable ordeals. Sadly, we cannot undo what happened in the past, but what we can and must do is take every possible step to ensure that others are not let down as they were.

The independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford has produced a thorough and measured assessment of how local services responded to child sexual exploitation as far back as the 1970s. I am grateful to the inquiry for its comprehensive and hard-hitting exposure of the scale of the failures in that response. The inquiry acknowledges that the frontline response of services in Telford has improved in recent years, and it is right that the 47 recommendations made for local frontline services in Telford have been accepted. The mode of offending and the failures of police and other services that are detailed in the report are all too familiar. Shocking though it is, the fact is that what happened in Telford has happened in many other places.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): May I say how much I admire the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan)? She has really battled to get this inquiry, and I know she will keep on battling to get its recommendations imparted.

I ask the Minister about two very specific things. First, I am very glad that pre-charge bail has come back into statute, but it has not really been implemented, which is really hampering ongoing investigations into perpetrators—not least because many have dual nationality, so we do not have the ability to take their passports away.

The other thing is that we are very fortunate in Rotherham because we have the National Crime Agency, but as I realised only very recently, perpetrators who have been brought in for questioning have to come in voluntarily to be charged. I wonder whether the Minister could look into charging powers, particularly in these very challenging cases.

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. If I may, given our current situation, I will get back to her on that point.

As the public rightly expect, there have been significant changes in how local authorities and the police safeguard children since the appalling abuse that took place in Rotherham, Oldham and elsewhere across the country was first exposed a decade ago. Recognition of child sexual exploitation has increased significantly in recent years, with individual police forces taking action to improve their responses. The National Police Chiefs' Council's lead on the issue, Deputy Chief Constable Ian Critchley, is working to drive up performance nationally. As with any issue relating to public protection and particularly the protection of children, the pursuit of

improvement needs to be relentless. We are supporting the police in that effort through investment and thorough strategic impetus.

We are already addressing, at a national level, many of the issues highlighted for the local frontline services in Telford. We are driving up data quality by funding child sexual abuse analysts in every policing region, as well as having made it mandatory since March for police forces to record the ethnicity of those arrested and held in custody because of their suspected involvement in grooming groups.

In July, we published an updated version of our child exploitation disruption toolkit, which highlights the need for police and local agencies to work together to gather and scrutinise data so that they can identify and disrupt offending. In addition, we fund the vulnerability, knowledge and practice programme, which identifies best practice and shares it with all forces. We are ensuring that the complexity and sensitivities of child sexual abuse investigations are understood by policing leaders through the College of Policing's training for senior officers on issues of safeguarding and public protection.

We are taking steps forward all the time, but we must not lose sight of the fact that things went terribly wrong in the past. Complacency must never be allowed to set in. It has been made abundantly clear to the police that protecting children must always be a top priority. There should be absolutely no doubt that we will keep shining a light on these issues, and where shortcomings are identified, we will take action to address them. That is why Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services has been commissioned to investigate how police forces across England and Wales handle cases of group-based child sexual exploitation. Unlike reviews of historical issues, it will give an up-to-date picture of the quality and effectiveness of forces' efforts to support victims and bring offenders to justice. We expect the inspection to report by the end of this year.

The failings uncovered in Telford and elsewhere undoubtedly demand a swift and strong local response. The Government are ensuring those lessons are learned right across England and Wales through our strategic national approach. We are working across central and local government, law enforcement and the wider criminal justice system, and we continue to be recognised as a global leader in addressing the threat.

Last year we published the "Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy", which highlights the vital importance of a joined-up approach and sets out firm commitments to drive action across every part of Government and across all agencies, including education, health, social care, industry, and civil society. More broadly, the "Beating Crime Plan" reaffirms our enduring determination to root out hidden harms and secure justice for victims in these cases. We are delivering on our commitments. We are putting victims and survivors at the centre of our approach, while relentlessly pursuing the perpetrators of these despicable crimes.

Of course, it is not for the police alone to tackle child sexual exploitation and keep children safe from harm. All statutory partners must play their crucial roles. While the inspection into group-based child sexual exploitation is primarily a policing one, we want to include local authorities in the response. The events in

Telford have highlighted the importance of an effective multi-agency response. Ensuring close collaboration between key partners is a key part of our strategy.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced the most significant reforms in a generation, requiring local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and chief officers of police to form multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. All the new partnerships were in place by September 2019. The partnerships have been supported by a Home Office- funded police facilitator, who has engaged with every force in England and Wales to ensure they understand their new responsibilities and are making the most of this opportunity to improve outcomes for children and young people.

In May we welcomed the publication of the independent review of children's social care, and the national review of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. Both reviews make recommendations on improving multi-agency working to strengthen child protection, with a sharp focus on professional expertise.

Victims and survivors have been failed in the past. That is utterly unacceptable. Through increased investment in specialised services, we are determined to ensure that victims and survivors get the help and support they need to rebuild their lives. Services protecting vulnerable children in Telford and Wrekin have been transformed since 2016, thanks to the work of committed social workers and senior leaders. They are now rated "outstanding" by Ofsted and are helping to bring about improvements in other underperforming local authorities to help to protect more families, as sector-led improvement partners.

Nationally, services include the rape and sexual abuse support fund and funding for police and crime commissioners to locally commission vital emotional and practical support services. The support for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse fund also supports

voluntary sector organisations to deliver a range of vital national services, such as support lines and counselling, to children, adult survivors and families affected by sexual abuse.

It is also essential that we send a clear and unequivocal message to all victims and survivors that they should come forward and report abuse. All agencies involved in tackling these crimes have a role to play in making that happen. They must strive every day to secure the trust of victims and command the confidence of the wider public.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Solloway: The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) knows how much respect I have for her, but I will continue, if that is okay.

Across the country, there are many amazing charities doing brilliant work to help victims to rebuild their lives. In my own constituency I have seen at first hand how the charity Safe and Sound transforms lives by providing one-to-one support to victims. I pay tribute to all involved with Safe and Sound and the work they do to support victims, and to other charities that do the same.

In closing, I would like to thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate for reminding us who is at the heart of this for all of us. The abuse perpetrated in Telford was sickening. The failings that occurred were shocking. We owe it to the victims there and in every part of the country to ensure that nothing like that ever happens again.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 5 September 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingent Liability (Letter of Credit) and Bounce Back Loan Scheme Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):

Contingent Liability (Letter of Credit)

Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a number of contingent liabilities arising from the issuance of letters of credit for the energy administrators acting in the special administration regime for Bulb Energy Limited (“Bulb”). These letters of credit replace previous ones provided, announced within past written ministerial statements, which soon expire.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

I have ensured that Parliament has been afforded the full 14-sitting-day notification period to allow the proper scrutiny of these new contingent liabilities.

Bulb entered the energy supply company special administration regime on 24 November 2021. Energy administrators were appointed by court to achieve the statutory objective of continuing energy supplies at the lowest reasonable practicable cost until such time as it becomes unnecessary for the special administration to remain in force for that purpose.

My Department has agreed to provide a facility to the energy administrators, with letters of credit issued, with my approval, to guarantee such contract, code, licence, or other document obligations of the company consistent with the special administration’s statutory objective. I will update the House if any letters of credit are drawn against.

The legal basis for a letter of credit is section 165 of the Energy Act 2004, as applied and modified by section 96 of the Energy Act 2011.

HM Treasury has approved the arrangements in principle. *Publication of latest bounce back loan scheme and lender performance data*

Today the Government provide an update on the performance of the bounce back loan scheme (BBLs), which was designed to provide rapid access to finance for small businesses affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The data in this release includes specific information on the value of loans marked as suspected fraud, and claims made and settled by individual lenders who are accredited for the scheme.

This data release is part of the Government’s ongoing commitment to transparency in relation to BBLs. The Government will continue to provide updates at regular intervals. This update will be published on the BEIS website to allow members to further scrutinise the data.

The data in this publication is as at 31 July 2022, unless otherwise stated. The data comes from information submitted to the British Business Bank’s (the Bank’s) scheme portal by accredited scheme lenders.

As of 31 July 2022, businesses have drawn a total of £46.6 billion through BBLs. The first evaluation of BBLs, published in June 2022, found that up to 500,000 businesses could have permanently ceased trading in 2020 in the absence of the scheme.

It is unfortunate that some have taken the decision to take advantage of this vital intervention by defrauding the scheme for their own financial gain. The Government have always been clear that anyone who sought to do so is at risk of prosecution.

Checks were put in place from the outset to reduce the risk of fraudulent applications being successful. Lenders are the first line of defence, and were required to make or maintain know-your-customer and anti-money laundering checks and use a reputable fraud bureau to screen applicants against potential or known fraudsters. Lenders reported preventing over £2.2 billion-worth of fraudulent applications as a result of these checks.

The Government remain focused on working with the Bank, lenders and law enforcement agencies to tackle fraud in the scheme. This work is supported by the Public Sector Fraud Authority, who have led the development of a sophisticated analytics programme to better understand the level and types of fraud committed against the scheme.

We are working with enforcement bodies including the National Investigation Service (NATIS) and the Insolvency Service to investigate instances of fraud, recover fraudulent loans and penalise fraudsters. Since September 2020, NATIS has opened 273 investigations into BBLs fraud, with a total value of £160 million. Some 78 suspects have been dealt with to date, with 49 arrests made. Meanwhile, Insolvency Service activity on BBLs fraud has so far resulted in 242 director disqualifications, 101 bankruptcy restrictions and 1 criminal prosecution. This enforcement activity is in addition to recovery work being undertaken by lenders as part of their obligations under the BBLs guarantee agreement.

At spring statement 2022, the Government announced an additional £48.8 million of funding over three years to tackle public sector fraud. This included further investment of £13.2 million in NATIS, effectively doubling their capacity to investigate BBLs fraud, and £10.9 million to enhance the Bank’s counter-fraud and assurance work programme.

Headline figures

£28.3 billion: the outstanding balance of total drawn loans making payments on schedule

£4.7 billion: the amount that has been fully repaid by borrowers

£3.2 billion: the outstanding balance of loans in arrears that haven’t yet progressed to defaulted

£1.4 billion: the outstanding balance of loans defaulted that haven’t yet progressed to claimed

£2.6 billion: the outstanding balance of loans claimed that haven’t yet progressed to settled

£1.2 billion: the total settled amount (the amount paid out to lenders under the BBLs guarantee agreement)

£1.1 billion: the total drawn value flagged by lenders as suspected fraud

Notes:

The values stated above will not add up to the total drawn values as set out in column 1 of table 3 (Detailed loan status by lender). That is because the above figures

do not take account of events which can reduce outstanding balances—for example: partial repayments of a loan, certain recoveries received in respect of a loan, and amounts written off loans by lenders.

To aid the reader's understanding of the data, the terms used in this publication are defined at the end.

All businesses remain responsible for repaying their loans under BLS and are fully liable for the debt.

It is important to recognise that it is still relatively early in the life of the scheme, and therefore it is too soon to definitively assess the performance of the BLS scheme as a whole. Data being collected from accredited scheme lenders is subject to refinement, addition, and correction over time. Please see "Limitations and further considerations" for further background.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-09-05/HCWS292>

[HCWS292]

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood: Interim Compensation

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The infected blood inquiry has heard first-hand details of the terrible suffering experienced by the victims of infected blood over many years, and the urgent need to address the financial uncertainty faced by many.

This Government commissioned Sir Robert Francis QC to produce an independent study with options for a workable and fair framework of compensation for those infected and affected by the tragedy. A copy of Sir Robert's report is in the Library of this House.

Following Sir Robert's detailed evidence given to the inquiry in July, the chair of the infected blood inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, delivered an interim report to the Government. In accordance with section 26 of the Inquiries Act 2005, a copy of Sir Brian's interim report has been laid before Parliament. In his report, Sir Brian made the following recommendations:

- "(1) An interim payment should be paid, without delay, to all those infected and all bereaved partners currently registered on UK infected blood support schemes, and those who register between now and the inception of any future scheme;
- (2) The amount should be no less than £100,000, as recommended by Sir Robert Francis QC."

On 16 August, I wrote to Sir Brian to confirm that the Government have accepted his recommendation in full and that we will be making an interim payment of £100,000, by the end of October, to all infected beneficiaries and bereaved partners registered with the four national support schemes. The date of effect of the recommendation is 29 July 2022, the date that Sir Brian delivered his report. Any infected person or bereaved partner registered with one of the four schemes operating in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland on that date will be eligible to receive the payments. Sir Brian's recommendation—which this Government accept—was careful not to exclude any eligible person who, for whatever reason,

may have not registered themselves with their relevant national support scheme. Should they do so in future, before the inception of any future scheme, they will also be eligible for such a payment, subject to successful application to the scheme.

The intention is that payments will be tax-free and will not affect any financial benefits support an individual is receiving. In advance of the payments, the four support schemes will write to beneficiaries, confirming tax exemptions and benefit disregards, and provide practical details about how the payments will be made. The UK Government will provide the funding to ensure that those eligible, wherever they are living in the United Kingdom, will receive the payment.

As recognised by Sir Robert Francis and Sir Brian Langstaff, this group of victims is the immediate priority for the Government because we recognise that, tragically, many of these individuals will not see the conclusion of the inquiry.

However, I am mindful that there will be people deeply affected by this tragedy who will not benefit from these payments. Sir Robert's detailed compensation framework study makes carefully considered recommendations about the further scope of compensation, including that carers and bereaved relatives—a cohort of affected people not currently supported by financial support schemes—should be compensated. In his interim report, Sir Brian makes specific reference to bereaved parents and children but notes the complexities in determining the approach to their compensation.

To those individuals and others who are out of scope of these payments, I would like to emphasise that the interim payments the Government have announced are the start of the process and not the end. Sir Robert's study has been warmly welcomed by the inquiry and, without prejudging the findings of the independent inquiry, I fully expect his wider recommendations to inform the inquiry's final report when it is published in mid-2023. Until that time, the Government will continue work in consideration of the broader recommendations in the compensation framework study so that we are ready to respond promptly when the inquiry concludes its work.

[HCWS279]

Launch of the Public Sector Fraud Authority

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Further to the written statement dated 7 July, I am writing to update the House that the Public Sector Fraud Authority launched on 3 August 2022.

The Chancellor's spring statement, issued on 23 March 2022, provided £25 million of funding to establish the PSFA, which brings together experts from across sectors in an integrated way with the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. Staffed by counter-fraud experts and backed by leading data analytics tools and techniques, it will put a greater focus on performance and outcomes. It will also build deeper and broader expert-led services to support Departments and public bodies to reduce the impact of fraud. The functions and services of the PSFA will be built over the next two years.

The authority has launched with a target of detecting and preventing £180 million of fraud in its first year and will work with Government Departments and public bodies to agree longer-term targets by December.

The PSFA will modernise the Government's counter-fraud response by:

Agreeing ambitious counter-fraud plans for departments and public bodies and reviewing progress;

Regularly and directly briefing Cabinet Ministers including HM Treasury and Cabinet Office on the latest fraud landscape;

Providing expert support to Departments and public bodies about the fraud risks and threats they face, then helping to design defences against them and test their effectiveness;

Building a new national counter-fraud data analytics service that will provide advanced data capabilities—such as social network analysis—to surface, fight and prevent fraud against taxpayers; and

Enhancing the use of fraud intelligence across the public sector, and with other sectors, to combat specific threats.

Ahead of a permanently appointed chief executive officer of the authority, it is led by interim chief executive officer Mark Cheeseman OBE, an internationally recognised expert in public sector fraud who led the creation of the Government's counter-fraud profession and the establishment of the international public sector fraud forum.

The PSFA will be supported by a cross-sector advisory panel that will provide expert advice and help shape the strategic approach to public sector fraud prevention and reduction. The chair of the advisory panel will be announced in September.

[HCWS278]

DEFENCE

Bearskins Clarification

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): On 11 July in a debate in Westminster Hall on bearskins, I referred to data on potential faux fur products that had previously been shared with the Department, but I also stated that the Ministry of Defence had not received recent results data. Whilst my statement was in line with advice I had received, further work has revealed that this was not correct, and I wish to correct the record.

In May 2022 a letter was sent to the Prime Minister by PETA, copying Defence Ministers, enclosing a report against two of the five initial criteria that faux fur would have to meet in order for further work to be done to consider it as a replacement for the guardsmen's caps. This was passed to officials in the Ministry of Defence, who responded on 15 June 2022 requesting that the report should be sent by the organisation that had conducted the tests direct to our partner, Leidos. We understand an email containing the report was sent but was blocked by Leidos's spam filters and deleted. Subsequent to the debate, the email was re-sent, copying the MOD. After the MOD forwarded a copy to Leidos it was safely received.

To date, the Ministry of Defence has not seen a set of verifiable data that demonstrates a single sample of faux fur meets the five criteria. We are aware of testing that was carried out in December 2020 by an accredited testing house against three of the criteria, although the material only passed one of those tests: water penetration. As I have explained, we are also aware of further testing, conducted in April 2022. The MOD does not

believe from the information we have seen that the organisation that conducted those tests is accredited by either the UK Accreditation Service or the International Laboratory Accreditation Co-operation. In order to consider taking any proposed product forward, we need test results that have been conducted by an independent and accredited testing house.

Consequently, we have not to date seen evidence that a suitable faux fur product exists to be considered as an alternative.

Currently, the foot guards' ceremonial caps are sourced exclusively from Canada, which is a regulated market and a declared party to the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora. A CITES permit is required for the export of pelts from Canada to the United Kingdom. Canadian and international laws provide strict trade regulations to protect against unlawful trade in black bears, both within Canada and internationally. No bears are hunted to order for the Ministry of Defence; pelts are a product of legal and licensed hunting authorised in Canada by provincial and territorial Governments with the goal of long-term population sustainability.

[HCWS288]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

DCMS Update

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): I would like to inform the House of a number of DCMS updates.

Over summer recess we also reached another key milestone in the transformation of the UK's broadband networks—announcing that over 70% of homes and businesses across the country now have access to lightning-fast, gigabit connections.

It has also been an incredible summer of sport, with my Department helping to successfully host both the UEFA Women's Euros and the Birmingham Commonwealth games.

Building on the spectacular performance of the Lionesses at the Euros final, I wish to inform the House that on 2 September, the Government have officially launched a review of the future of women's football.

Launch of the future of women's football review

The Lionesses' Euros victory rightfully put women's sport at the centre of the agenda. Record numbers of viewers watched their success: 574,875 tickets were sold at the tournament, with sell-out crowds wherever the Lionesses played. The final also broke the attendance record for a Euros final—in either the women's or men's game. While it is right that we celebrate and reflect on that success, we must now refocus to ensure that this success translates to the continued growth of the women's game.

The fan-led review of football governance, conducted in 2021, recognised the different issues that the women's game faces in comparison to men's football. The fan-led review therefore recommended that women's football should receive its own dedicated review. Government accepted this recommendation. Rather than the issues

of financial mismanagement and fit and proper owners that the fan-led review considered, the review of the women's game will focus on capitalising on popularity and continuing to grow the game.

The review will be chaired by former England and Great Britain footballer Karen Carney MBE. Karen has extensive knowledge of women's football and the issues affecting it, having had a very successful playing career and later moved on to become a respected broadcaster and columnist on both women's and men's football. Karen's unique experience will be invaluable in ensuring that the review makes proposals that help to continue the growth and success of the women's game.

The review will now commence with stakeholders and fan groups having the opportunity to provide evidence on the issues affecting the women's game. There will be a particular focus on assessing the potential audience reach and growth of the game, examining the financial health of the game, its financial sustainability for the long term and the structures within women's football.

The findings and recommendations arising from this review will be set out in a published report next year.

We have further updates to make on the gifting of Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games assets, and the removal of facsimile services from the universal service order.

Gifting of assets following the conclusion of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games

During the summer recess my Department has been working with the organising committee of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games to prepare to donate the sports equipment assets to Sport England for onward distribution to community organisations in Birmingham and the west Midlands. This will ensure maximum legacy opportunities for communities and sporting organisations to benefit from the games.

It is normal practice when a Government Department (in this instance an arm's length body of the Department) proposes to make a gift of a value exceeding £300,000, for the Department concerned to present to the House of Commons a minute giving particulars of the gift and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from making the gift until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

As the games equipment was being passed to Sport England immediately after the conclusion of the games, and with the games having taken place during summer recess, DCMS wrote to Dame Meg Hillier MP as chair of the Committee of Public Accounts, and Julian Knight MP as chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee on 29 July 2022, informing them of the proposed course of action.

Ministers at HM Treasury have approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before the House of Commons, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval of the gift will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

I inform the House today of the Departmental minute which sets out the detail of the decision, which has been laid in both Houses.

The distribution of sports equipment from Sport England onwards is expected to commence in October.

A copy of the departmental minute will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Removal of the Fax USO

Tomorrow, the Government will amend the Electronic Communications (Universal Service) Order 2003 to remove facsimile services from the USO. This will come into force on 1 October 2022.

DCMS previously wrote to Ofcom to consult it ahead of potentially removing fax from the universal service order. This was in light of the industry-led migration from the public switched telephone network to all-internet protocol telephony, which will mean that fax machines will no longer work in the same way. This was in accordance with section 65(4) of the Communications Act 2003 which states that, before making or varying the universal service order, the Secretary of State must consult Ofcom and such other persons as they consider appropriate.

After a public consultation, Ofcom concluded it would be appropriate to remove fax from the USO. Ofcom noted the low usage of fax, as well as the availability of reliable alternatives, many of which are free of charge. DCMS officials conducted further investigations with the healthcare, tourism, legal, and energy sectors, and found that the use of fax was minimal and alternatives are being sought where its use still continues.

DCMS is content that it is appropriate to remove fax from the telephony USO. As a result, the designated providers BT and KCOM will no longer be required to provide fax services. We are making this change now given the ongoing changes to the UK's telephone networks, as well as recognising that the limited existing use of fax services makes their inclusion in the USO unnecessary.

Fax services will remain available on existing PSTN connections until the service is withdrawn by the industry in 2025. BT has also indicated that fax services may continue to function over its digital voice services, though they are not guaranteed in the same way. Furthermore, the move from fax services to alternatives will have already been a part of many sectors' preparation for migration to all-IP. DCMS has been working closely with other Government Departments to raise awareness of this change and others expected as part of PSTN migration.

The Government will also be making a minor clarification to the USO with regard to the term "publicly available telephone service", as recommended by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments in 2011.

[HCWS284]

EDUCATION

Contingency Fund Application: Departmental Update

The Minister for School Standards (Will Quince): I hereby give notice of the Department for Education's intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund.

This follows the Department's announcement on 11 March that a new independent Government body will be created to support teachers in delivering excellent curriculum content as part of world-class lessons. The body will help every child in the country reach the true height of their potential.

The body is expected to become fully operational from autumn following a transition phase, which will include procurement and development of new resources. The first new resources will be available to teachers by September 2023. The body has been incorporated as Oak National Academy Ltd.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £2,809,000 and capital of £3,869,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Education. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £6,678,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

We will seek a movement of funding in budgetary requirements at supplementary estimate. Accessing the Contingency Fund allows the Department to manage the expenditure associated with establishing and launching the new body.

I am therefore seeking parliamentary approval for costs of £6,678,000. The advance will be repaid upon receiving approval of the supplementary estimate.

[HCWS277]

Student Loan Interest Rates

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Andrea Jenkins): I am announcing today a temporary reduction in student loan interest rates effective as of 1 September 2022.

The Government announced on 13 June 2022 that the student loan interest rate would be set at 7.3% between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023, in line with the forecast prevailing market rates. The Government confirmed that should the actual prevailing market rate turn out to be lower than forecast, a further cap would be implemented to reduce student loan interest rates accordingly.

I am announcing today a temporary cap to the post-2012 income contingent repayment undergraduate and postgraduate loan interest rates in line with the latest actual prevailing market rate. Subject to parliamentary approval, the cap will come into effect on 1 September 2022 and last for a period of three months.

The post-2012 undergraduate and postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rates will be 6.3% between 1 September 2022 and 30 November 2022.

From 1 December 2022, the post-2012 and postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rates will be 7.3%, as announced on 13 June 2022, to align with the forecast prevailing market rate. As before, should the actual prevailing market rate turn out to be lower than forecast, the post-2012 undergraduate and postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rates will be reduced accordingly.

[HCWS286]

Children with No Recourse to Public Funds

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Brendan Clarke-Smith): Today I am providing an update following a consultation undertaken by my Department to consider access to the two-year-old early education entitlement for children from families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The purpose of the two-year-old early education entitlement is to provide early education and support to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds in England.

Some families with an irregular immigration status have a NRPF condition designated by the Home Office. This condition restricts these families from drawing on welfare support and other passported Government support, and previously this has meant that their children, regardless of their own circumstances, have been unable to access the early education entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

The Department announced on 24 March 2022 that we would extend eligibility for free school meals to children from all families with NRPF subject to income thresholds and that we would consult on whether there are any additional groups of children from NRPF families who should be eligible for the two-year-old entitlement that we have not already identified.

I am pleased to confirm the publication of our consultation response on gov.uk. This confirms that the additional groups that have been identified are:

- (1) those with a UK ancestry visa
- (2) those with temporary protection status under Section 12 of the Nationality and Borders Act; and
- (3) those with pre-settled status with no qualifying right to reside.

We have now permanently extended eligibility for the two-year-old early education entitlement to children from all families with NRPF, subject to the income thresholds as follows:

- £26,500 for families outside of London with one child.
- £34,500 for families within London with one child.
- £30,600 for families outside of London with two or more children.
- £38,600 for families within London with two or more children.

A maximum capital threshold of £16,000 applies in all areas.

These thresholds were developed to create comparative thresholds with broad equivalence with families with recourse to public funds and who qualify for the early education entitlement due to being in receipt of welfare benefits.

This permanent extension begun on 1 September 2022. We have published guidance to support local authorities in implementing these changes.

This will help to ensure that every child gets the best possible start and receives the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

[HCWS276]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): This Government have consistently been clear that the failure of the water

companies to adequately reduce the amount of storm sewage discharges is unacceptable. We are the first Government to set a clear requirement on water companies to reduce sewage discharges and set this in law.

Today, I have laid in Parliament the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which sets out strict new targets to crack down on sewage discharges. This will start the largest investment in infrastructure ever undertaken by the water industry, an estimated £56 billion of capital investment over the next 25 years. This will eliminate 80% of discharges by 2050.

Designated bathing waters will be the first sites to see change. By 2035, water companies must ensure that overflows affecting a designated bathing water are compliant with strict standards to protect public health. We will also see significant reductions in discharges at 75% of high priority nature sites. By 2050, no storm overflow covered in the plan will be permitted to operate where this will cause any adverse ecological harm.

The first steps in achieving these targets are already being taken. Water companies are investing £3.1 billion already between 2020 and 2025 to deliver 800 improvements to storm overflows, which will deliver an average of a 25% reduction in discharges by 2025.

Storm overflows are a Victorian sewer system design feature. Achieving the targets will require large and complex infrastructure projects which will take time to deliver. It is right that we carefully balance our ambitions to improve and protect the environment with the need to limit the impact on consumers, particularly when households are facing pressures. If new evidence shows it is possible to go faster, without disproportionately affecting consumers, we will not hesitate to do so and we have set a review of the targets in 2027 for this purpose.

We will not hesitate to hold companies to account where discharges are happening illegally. This is happening now, with record fines and the largest ever criminal and civil investigation into water company sewage discharges being launched by Ofwat and the Environment Agency.

We have also made clear that water companies must be transparent about how executive pay and shareholder dividends align with the services they provide their customers. This Government supports Ofwat's recent proposals to take further enforcement action against companies that do not link dividend payments to their environmental performance, or those failing to be transparent about their dividend pay-outs.

Water is one of our most precious commodities—water companies must now show their commitment to clean up our environment, protect public health and bring these harmful discharges to an end.

[HCWS281]

TREASURY

Approved Mileage Allowance Payments

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Alan Mak):

The Government have become aware of a technical inaccuracy in its responses to a number of parliamentary questions, correspondence and a parliamentary e-petition response on the subject of approved mileage allowance payments (AMAP) from March to August 2022.

The response stated that actual expenditure in relation to business mileage could be reimbursed free of income tax and national insurance contributions. This is in fact only possible for volunteer drivers. Where an employer reimburses more than the AMAP rate, income tax and national insurance are due on the difference. The AMAP rate exists to reduce the administrative burden on employers.

The guidance available on gov.uk has been correct throughout and the Government believe that the number of taxpayers who could be affected is very small.

HMRC is also taking steps to bring this inaccuracy to the attention of employers and employees where necessary. Should any cases arise HMRC will work on an individual basis aiming to ensure that any taxpayers who relied on incorrect information are not disadvantaged.

[HCWS280]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccination Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The covid-19 vaccination programme continues to protect the UK against the virus. As of 30 August 2022, over 126 million doses have been provided, including 45.2 million first doses, 42.6 million second doses and 33.5 million third primary and booster doses in the UK. This represents uptake of 93.5% for the first dose, and 88.1 % for the second dose.

Vaccines remain the best protection against covid-19. Given that winter is expected to present another severe challenge from covid-19, we continue to urge everyone to play their part by taking up the covid-19 vaccine and, where eligible, the autumn booster offer without delay.

If eligible, the NHS will invite you to come forward for your vaccine via SMS, emails and letters. If you are unvaccinated and eligible for covid-19 vaccinations, you can still come forward and book an appointment.

The independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has published further advice on the covid-19 vaccination programme. Her Majesty's Government have accepted this advice and I am informed that all four parts of the UK intend to follow the JCVI's advice.

Autumn vaccination programme:

The JCVI advises that for the 2022 autumn booster programme, the following groups should be offered a covid-19 booster vaccine:

- Residents in a care home for older adults and staff working in care homes for older adults
- Frontline health and social care workers
- All adults aged 50 years and over
- Persons aged five to 49 years in a clinical risk group
- Persons aged five to 49 years who are household contacts of people with immunosuppression
- Persons aged 16 to 49 years who are carers

For the 2022 autumn booster programme, the primary objective is to augment immunity in those at higher risk from covid-19 and thereby optimise protection against severe covid-19, specifically hospitalisation and death, over winter 2022-23.

Following appropriate data to demonstrate quality, safety and efficacy, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency authorised Moderna's BA.1/wild-type bivalent vaccine for administration as a covid-19 booster vaccination on 12 August 2022 and Pfizer's BA.1/wild-type bivalent vaccine on 3 September 2022. Covid-19 bivalent vaccines target two different variants of covid-19, which broadens immunity and therefore potentially improves protection against variants of covid-19.

The UK, following the JCVI's advice, now intends to deploy authorised bivalent vaccines throughout the autumn programme for those eligible.

The JCVI published advice stating that the autumn booster vaccine dose should be offered at least three months after the previous dose.

Eligible persons aged 18 years and over may be offered booster vaccinations: 50mcg Moderna mRNA bivalent Omicron BA.1/wild-type vaccine; 50mcg Moderna mRNA wild-type vaccine (Spikevax); 30mcg Pfizer BioNTech mRNA wild-type vaccine (Comirnaty) or 30mcg Pfizer BioNTech mRNA bivalent vaccine (Comirnaty).

Eligible persons aged 12 to 17 years may be offered booster vaccinations with: 30 mcg Pfizer BioNTech mRNA wild-type vaccine (Comirnaty) or 30mcg Pfizer BioNTech mRNA bivalent vaccine (Comirnaty).

Eligible persons aged 5-11 years may be offered booster vaccinations 10 mcg Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA wild-type vaccine (Comirnaty) paediatric formulation.

In exceptional circumstances the Novavax Matrix-M adjuvanted wild-type vaccine (Nuvaxovid) is approved for primary course vaccination in adults aged 18 years and above and may be used when no alternative clinically suitable UK-approved covid-19 vaccine is available. Deployment is expected to start at the beginning of September 2022.

Nuvaxovid

On 3 February 2022, the Novavax covid-19 vaccine, Nuvaxovid, was authorised by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, authorising the deployment of the vaccine after it has generated appropriate data to demonstrate quality, safety and efficacy. The JCVI has provided deployment advice on Nuvaxovid and it is expected to be deployed at the end of September 2022. Nuvaxovid may be used "off-label" as a booster dose for persons aged 18 years and above when no alternative clinically suitable UK-approved covid-19 vaccine is available.

The agreement to provide an indemnity as part of the contract between HMG and Novavax creates a contingent liability on the covid-19 vaccination programme. Putting in place appropriate indemnities to be given to vaccine suppliers has helped to secure access to vaccines much sooner than may have been the case otherwise.

With the vaccine offer expanded for autumn for the groups as listed above and the deployment of Nuvaxovid in exceptional circumstances, I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG has taken on in relation to further vaccine supply via this statement and the departmental minutes laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses increases the statutory contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

Deployment of effective vaccines to eligible groups has been and remains a key part of the Government's strategy to manage covid-19. Willingness to accept the need for appropriate indemnities to be given to vaccine

suppliers has helped to secure access to vaccines, with the expected benefits to public health and the economy alike, much sooner than may have been the case otherwise.

Given the exceptional circumstances we are in, and the terms on which developers have been willing to supply a covid-19 vaccine, we, along with other nations, have taken a broad approach to indemnification proportionate to the situation we are in.

Even though the covid-19 vaccines have been developed at pace, at no point and at no stage of development has safety been bypassed. These vaccines have satisfied, in full, all the necessary requirements for safety, effectiveness and quality.

We are providing indemnities in the very unexpected event of any adverse reactions that could not have been foreseen through the robust checks and procedures that have been put in place.

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when other covid-19 vaccines or additional doses of vaccines already in use in the UK are deployed.

[HCWS290]

Work of the Department during the Summer Recess

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): Over the summer recess, the Department of Health and Social Care has made significant progress in many areas, both to prepare the NHS and social care systems for the winter and to lay the foundations for further improvements in the coming years.

In respect of preparations for winter, the Department has worked closely with NHS England and other Departments across Government to:

- Widen and launch the covid autumn booster programme, including through the first approval worldwide of two "bivalent" vaccines, which protect against both the original and omicron strains of covid-19;

- Increase capacity in primary care, including through additional roles in primary care;

- Put in place plans to boost the NHS's capacity by the equivalent of 7,000 beds, including through the use of innovative "virtual" beds;

- Increase the numbers of call handlers in both the 999 and 111 services respectively, with a target of having 2,500 call handlers in 999 and 4,800 call handlers in 111 by the end of December; and

- Agree a new ambulance auxiliary contract with St John Ambulance, providing at least 5,000 hours of extra support each month.

The Department, the NHS and local authorities also continue to work together to address ambulance handover delays and delayed discharges, including by identifying the actions for which NHS leaders are responsible, and those for which social care leaders are responsible, thus supporting accountability.

Over the summer recess, we have also been focusing on increasing the NHS and social care workforce, by drawing on both domestic and international sources, with the aim of increasing the capacity of the NHS and social care systems both in the short term and over time. Our international recruitment taskforce is developing plans for implementing a "support hub" to help care providers recruit from abroad, and the Department is laying regulations to help increase the capacity and

capability of the professional regulators to test the standards of overseas recruits. We also launched a consultation on 28 August with the aim of extending “Retire and Return” NHS pension changes through to 31 March 2023, allowing retired and partially-retired NHS staff to continue to receive important pension changes if they re-enter the workforce. Further work is also under way, including the consideration of further options on the pensions of healthcare professionals.

The Department continues to work closely with NHS England to address the covid-19 waiting times backlog—104-week waits were virtually eliminated, in line with the elective recovery plan, and the NHS is making good progress to address 78-week waits by April 2023. In support of this:

A further 50 surgical hubs were given the go-ahead over the summer, in addition to the existing 91 surgical hubs;

A further seven community diagnostic centres were given the go-ahead. The programme has so far delivered an extra 1.7 million tests; and

Choice of provider at the point of GP referral will be available to all patients from April 2023 at the latest, supported by information to be made available to patients through the NHS app

A number of reforms looking to the long-term needs of the NHS and care system are also now under way:

Work led by Professor John Deanfield is considering how we better embrace home testing for a wider range of conditions through a modernised NHS health check;

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is expediting work to consider how to improve the uptake and adoption of well-evidenced MedTech; and

Standardised, modular hospital design—delivering scale and process efficiencies—will be adopted as the default for cohorts 3 and 4 of the new hospitals programme. Enabling works for the new hospitals at Whipps Cross, Kettering and Hillingdon have been unlocked, and the strategic outline case for Shrewsbury and Telford has been approved.

Good progress continues to be made on the development of framework 15 and the NHS workforce plan. The future needs of the NHS and social care systems are best met by a workforce which is trained flexibly, which is adaptable, which embeds new roles in clinical practice, and which allows all health and care professionals to practise at the top of their competence.

Taxpayers expect the Department and the NHS to continue to be effective stewards of public money. We have therefore imposed further controls on the use of consultancy, professional services and contingent labour, with the aim of generating at least £170 million of additional savings over this financial year, with further recurrent savings thereafter. We have also instituted new mechanisms to assist transparency: more than 50,000 people work in national and local NHS organisations which do not provide direct patient care; and to help those who work in the NHS and the wider public understand more about the value delivered, we are today publishing an organogram of the Department—to be made available on a searchable platform over the coming days—followed by searchable organograms for NHS England and the other national arm’s length bodies by the end of September. Integrated care boards are being asked to emulate this approach.

There has also been progress on a number of other very important issues including:

The publication of the women’s health strategy;

The launch of the Government’s dementia mission; and

Confirmation of interim payments to those who have been infected by contaminated blood and bereaved partners

In November 2021, the Government announced it would make £50 million funding available for research into motor neurone disease over five years. Following work over the summer with DHSC and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research and UK Research and Innovation, to support researchers to access funding in a streamline and co-ordinated way, we are pleased to confirm that this funding has now been ringfenced. DHSC and BEIS welcome the opportunity to support the motor neurone disease scientific community of researchers, as they come together through a network and link through a virtual institute.

The Department has taken these actions to help the NHS and social care systems be better prepared for the winter challenges ahead and beyond.

[HCWS291]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2018-2020: Past Reports

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amanda Solloway): Twelve past reports of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse have today been laid before the House, in compliance with the Inquiries Act 2005. These reports were published by the inquiry between August 2018 and November 2020. The reports are also available on the NCSA website and will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS285]

Work of the Home Office

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today I am updating Parliament on Home Office delivery since my statement of 31 March 2022. The Department is committed to delivering better outcomes for the public and will continue to work to deliver a safer, fairer and more prosperous United Kingdom.

Reducing crime

The first job of any Government is to keep its people safe, which is why we have made it our absolute priority to get more police on our streets, cut crime and protect the public. Over the last three years the Home Office has worked hard to achieve these priorities and improve confidence in policing.

In July 2021, my Department published the “Beating Crime Plan” which sets out our approach to driving down crime, restoring confidence in the criminal justice system and better supporting victims. It balances the prevention we need to keep our citizens safe, with the enforcement required to deliver swift and certain justice for those who choose to break our laws.

We are delivering the commitments we made in the plan. As of 30 June, police forces in England and Wales have recruited 13,790 additional police officers, 69% of

the 20,000 officers targeted by March 2023 under the police uplift programme. Moreover, we are focused on cutting crime in areas with the highest levels of crime.

As part of our commitment to excellence in the basics, every neighbourhood in England and Wales will have a named and contactable police officer and league tables have been introduced for 999 call answering times.

I removed restrictions on section 60 searches that have been in place since 2014. These restrictions have limited when officers could use the vital power and decreased their confidence in deploying it. Since 2019, stop and search use has increased by around 85% and has contributed to over 70,000 deadly knives and offensive weapons being taken off our streets.

In January 2020, we launched the place based safer streets fund, directing £120 million of investment to the worst affected areas to tackling acquisitive crime, neighbourhood crime, antisocial behaviour, and violence against women and girls, and improving public safety for all.

Since 2019, we have invested £170 million into the multi-agency violence reduction units and a further £170 million into bolstering the police response to serious violence in the areas most affected by serious violence. The Government will invest £130 million in 2022-23 to tackle serious violence, including murder and knife crime. Together, these programmes have prevented 49,000 violent offences in their first two years of activity, providing a saving of £3.16 for every £1 spent.

We are continuing to invest in the future of young people and intervening early to divert them away from a life of crime, including through the £200 million, 10-year youth endowment fund, which has supported 195 projects and already reached more than 64,097 at-risk young people.

We know that the drugs trade is at the heart of much of the homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime that blights our communities. Our 10-year cross-Government drug strategy provides £300 million of dedicated investment over the next three years, to drive work on tackling drug supply and reduce drug demand.

Our work is achieving results on the ground. Under our county lines programme, between November 2019 and March 2022, the police closed 2,400 lines, made over 8,000 arrests, and safeguarded more than 9,500 people. Our work on Project ADDER, which focuses on the response to addiction, diversion, enforcement and recovery has supported over 700 organised crime group disruptions, more than 12,500 arrests, 6,000 out of court disposals started by police, more than 14,000 drug treatment interventions by outreach workers, and diverted people away from offending and into recovery support between January 2021 and February 2022.

Our work at the border has delivered consecutive annual increases in drug seizures in each of the past three years. Last year, thanks to our investment, the police and Border Force made 223,106 drug seizures in England and Wales during 2020-21, a 21% increase on the previous year. We have also launched the new conflict stability and security fund counter supply of illicit commodities programme to enable priority countries to disrupt priority threats' supply chains more effectively, focused on class A drugs, illicit firearms, and cash trafficking.

The Home Office has supported important legislation through Parliament, to reduce crime, support victims, and put the law-abiding majority first.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 was passed in April. It doubles the sentences for assaults on emergency workers, introduces Harper's law, and puts the police covenant in statute. It equips the police to combat crime and create safer communities, while overhauling sentencing laws to keep serious sexual and violent offenders behind bars for longer.

Meanwhile the Public Order Bill will further enhance the police's ability to deal with disruptive protests that prevent ordinary people going about their daily lives and divert police resources from communities where they are needed most to prevent serious violence and neighbourhood crime.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act was passed in March. Hundreds of individuals and entities were designated within hours of it becoming law. The Government has sanctioned over 1,000 individuals and over 100 entities. The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill will allow us to bear down further on kleptocrats, criminals, and terrorists who abuse our financial system, strengthening the UK's reputation as a place where legitimate business can thrive while dirty money is driven out.

Tackling violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse, has been supported by major funding and the landmark Domestic Abuse Act. It means action to prevent and raise awareness of these crimes, including investing £3 million per annum in prevention projects, improved support for victims, directly supporting thousands of victims and children, and tackling perpetrators through an ambitious £25 million package of behaviour change programmes and research to reduce further violence. The Home Office provides funding for a number of helplines and online services to support victims of VAWG, including domestic abuse. This includes specialist domestic abuse helplines for elderly, deaf and disabled, LGBT and male victims, as well as teachers and employers. In 2021-22, over 81,000 people used the national tackling VAWG helplines for support.

The tackling child sexual abuse strategy, published in January 2021, has driven improvements in education, social care, health, law enforcement, and industry. We are working with international partners, to ensure we are doing all that we can to keep children safe online and in our communities in the UK and around the world.

Reducing the risk from terrorism to the UK & UK interests overseas, securing a safe and prosperous UK

The threats we are responding to are becoming more complex and they increasingly overlap. In May, this year, the National Security Bill was introduced to Parliament. It completely overhauls and updates outdated espionage laws and provides updated investigative powers and capabilities so that our law enforcement and intelligence agencies can deter, detect, and disrupt a wide range of modern-day threats from hostile states.

The US Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco and I released a joint statement in July announcing that the UK-US data access agreement will enter into force in October. It allows UK and US law enforcement to directly request data held by telecommunications providers

in the other party's jurisdiction for the exclusive purpose of preventing, detecting, investigating, and prosecuting serious crimes such as terrorism and child sexual abuse and exploitation. It will have a transformative effect.

The Government are committed to tackling the threat from all forms of terrorism. In the last three years, I have proscribed four extreme right-wing terrorist groups, including Sonnenkrieg Division and Feuerkrieg Division. I also proscribed the Islamist group Hamas in its entirety and we supported the successful US prosecutions of two members of Daesh: Alexandra Kotey and Elshafee Elsheikh.

We opened the world-leading counter-terrorism operations centre in June 2021, including a cutting-edge counter-terrorism operations suite and state-of-the-art forensics laboratory. For the first time it brings together all the London-based elements of counter-terrorism policing to ensure they can discover and disrupt threats more quickly.

The Home Office delivered the first UK policing counter-drone capability, which was used effectively at the G7, COP26 and the Commonwealth Games. A combination of deterrence communications, effective use of airspace restrictions, and new police equipment, powers and procedures is reducing the incidence of misused drones and facilitating their tracking and seizure.

We have passed key pieces of legislation such as the Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Act 2020 ended the automatic early-release of terrorist offenders. In addition, the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act was passed in 2021 and which ensures that sentences reflect the severity of the offence and strengthens the monitoring of suspects.

To enhance our ability to protect the UK we have also passed the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021, which provides the police powers to better protect the UK from malicious drone use. We completed a call for information last year on the Computer Misuse Act 1990, to ensure that our legislation and powers continue to meet the challenges posed by the threats in cyberspace.

Tackling illegal migration, removing those with no right to be here, and protecting the vulnerable

The Nationality and Borders Act is the cornerstone of the Government's new plan for immigration. Since receiving Royal Assent on 28 April 2022, I have wasted no time in implementing the Act, delivering a fair but firm system to ensure that we can better support those in genuine need of asylum, deterring illegal migration, especially dangerous small boat arrivals; breaking the business model of vile criminal gangs; and removing from the UK those with no right to be here.

We have already achieved significant changes in the system with the first raft of reforms, including: the introduction of fixes to the asylum system; new and tougher criminal offences for illegal entry and people smuggling; and nationality law changes that allow fairer access to British nationality.

The reforms will build towards a new national age assessment board and scientific age assessment methods to protect children, modern slavery reforms and a new one-stop process and appeals to stop repeated, unmeritorious and last-minute claims seeking to frustrate removal.

In July 2021, I signed a new agreement to strengthen UK-France co-operation on tackling illegal immigration across the channel. Through our joint action with France, we prevented more than 23,000 crossings in 2021. So far in 2022, over 17,000 people have been prevented from crossing the channel in small boats, around 70% more than to this point in 2021. In addition, the UK-France joint intelligence cell, established in July 2020, has, with France, dismantled 21 small boat organised criminal groups, securing over 500 arrests. In the few months it has been operational, the NABA has already resulted in a further 82 arrests, 62 charges, 10 convictions with sentences handed down of 5.9 years following the introduction of the NABA legislation. This includes 38 arrests, 32 charges and 1 conviction for facilitation. Also there have been 23 arrests for illegal entry, 17 charges and 7 convictions.

We successfully transferred primacy for operations in the channel to the Ministry of Defence, as part of the whole of Government effort to counter channel crossings by irregular migrants. This sees border force, immigration enforcement and service personnel working side-by-side to ensure the UK's borders are protected and to effectively manage pressures in the channel.

In April 2022, I announced the world-leading migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda. It is part of a suite of measures under the new plan for immigration to tackle the increasing number of small boats arrivals since 2019 by deterring them from making dangerous crossings. The partnership will see those travelling to the UK through illegal, dangerous and unnecessary methods considered for relocation to Rwanda, where they will have their asylum claim processed. While there are ongoing legal proceedings, the partnership arrangement fully complies with all national and international law and we prepare for delivery.

We deported 11,532 foreign national offenders between 2019 and March 2022. Since April 2020 we have used 151 charter flights and so far this year, we have returned 1,741 FNOs and other immigration offenders. To support this work, we have agreed new international returns agreements with international partners Albania, Serbia, Nigeria, and most recently Pakistan.

In addition, since 2019, we have helped over 11,000 people return home through our voluntary return service and other initiatives; offering practical support and assistance to those who wish to return to their home countries but have no means to do so.

The UK continues to welcome refugees and people in need of protection. Our safe and legal routes have resulted in over 320,000 people coming to the U.K. Since the Hong Kong BN(O) route was set up in January 2021, over 140,000 BN(O) status holders and their family members have chosen to take the UK up on this offer and have applied for the BN(O) route as of 30 June 2022.

In February 2021, the Home Office completed our commitment to resettle those 20,000 people fleeing conflict in Syria. An additional 1,838 refugees were resettled through the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme.

Through the UK resettlement scheme (UKRS), we have expanded our geographical focus beyond the middle east and north Africa to continue to offer safe and legal routes to the UK for some of the most vulnerable

refugees around the world. 1,685 vulnerable refugees have been resettled through the UKRS since the launch of the scheme in March 2021 and since January 2019, 8,710 refugees have been resettled across all the Government's resettlement schemes, not including Afghan schemes.

We helped over 15,000 people to safety from Afghanistan in the biggest and fastest emergency evacuation in recent history. A further 5,000 more people have been helped to enter since the evacuation. This January the Government launched the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme which will see up to 20,000 people from Afghanistan and the region resettled to the UK over the coming years. This is in addition to individuals relocated through the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. In less than a year, almost 7,400 Afghan evacuees have been provided with permanent homes.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine we set up some of the fastest and biggest visa schemes in UK history. The Ukraine family scheme had received 58,600 visa applications by 23 August 2022, of which 50,100 visas had been issued. We had received 149,900 Ukraine sponsorship scheme visa applications, and issued 128,800 visas, by 23 August 2022.

In June we also announced that the Homes for Ukraine scheme will also allow eligible children under the age of 18 who are not travelling with or joining a parent or legal guardian, to come to the UK in carefully defined circumstances.

This record of delivery demonstrates the efforts of the Home Office to get on with the job of protecting the public, keeping our borders secure and the British people safe from harm.

Enabling the legitimate movement of people and goods to support economic prosperity

In 2019, we had uncontrolled immigration from the EU. Since then, we have ended free movement and launched a points-based system, creating a single, global immigration system, attracting and retaining the brightest and best global talent, while realising the enormous potential of our domestic workforce.

We have made significant progress in digitising the immigration system, making further improvements to how applicants apply for, access and prove their immigration status to others.

In terms of operational processing, between January and July 2022, 96.4% of UK standard passport applications were completed within the published processing time of 10 weeks. The Passport Office is working hard to investigate and conclude the reducing number of cases which fall outside 10 weeks. We plan to recover work in progress (WIP) to base levels across all workstreams in time for year-end WIP target levels, so that we are prepared for the levels of intake next year which we anticipate will be similar to those of 2022.

We are currently facing extremely high pressure globally across our visa network, caused by a significantly increase in visa demand following the easing of travel restrictions and the prioritising of Ukraine family scheme and Homes for Ukraine applications in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine. We are working hard to reduce the current processing times as quickly as possible by flexing staff resource and utilising agency across our visa routes as well as pursuing a programme of transformation and

business improvement initiatives which will speed up decision making, reduce the time people spend in the system and reduce the numbers who are awaiting an interview or decision. We have also recently reintroduced priority and super priority services in a number of our visa routes to improve the customer experience.

Ahead of our exit from the European Union, Border Force recruited 1,570 new staff and trained a total of 8,000 in new policy and processes. We worked with HMRC to operationalise new inland border facilities, effectively creating 5 new ports; and delivered complex and interrelated change across a total of 125 ports.

We have further expanded our points-based immigration system to attract the most promising international talent to the UK and maintain our status as a leading international hub for emerging technologies. In May 2021, we expanded our global talent route to allow recipients of international awards, including the Nobel prize for physics, to automatically qualify for the visa. In 2022 we introduced the global business mobility, high potential individual and scale-up visa routes.

Since 2019, we have continued to increase border efficiency through the increased use of eGates, expanding their use to passengers from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea & USA, in addition to British, Irish and EU nationals, and with Border Force now operating 288 eGates at 15 ports. National rollout of the eGate upgrade, which has introduced a new operating system, Border Crossing, and upgraded the software, was completed six months early.

Since I overhauled the Windrush compensation scheme in December 2020, interim payments rose from £250 to £10,000. As at the end of June 2022, £53.8 million had been paid or offered under the Windrush compensation scheme, with £43.9 million paid out across 1,098 claims. Our One Home Office cultural transformation programme features an increased focus on ethical decision-making with new routes for colleagues to escalate concerns and think more about the "face behind the case".

By 30 June 2022, we had concluded nearly 6.5 million EU settlement scheme applications, granting status in over 5.9 million applications. Over 450,000 individuals have been supported to apply to the EUSS by our network of grant-funded organisations across the UK. This includes victims of human trafficking and domestic abuse.

In 2021, we removed the ability for EU, EEA, and Swiss nationals to travel on an ID card, unless the holder is protected by the citizens' rights withdrawal agreements, given they were one of the most abused documents at the border.

All these achievements represent a record of delivering on the people's priorities, a record of which I am very proud.

[HCWS287]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The UK-Ukraine Digital Trade Agreement

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): On 24 August, the Government launched negotiations with Ukraine towards a bilateral digital trade agreement, the proposed UK-Ukraine digital trade agreement.

The UK is standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in the face of unjustified aggression from Putin, and I remain committed to ensuring that trade policy plays its part in supporting Ukraine now and throughout its economic reconstruction. In addition to the immediate actions we have already taken to liberalise tariffs and starve Putin's war machine of funds, we need to put in place longer-term measures to support Ukraine and play our part in securing its future as a prosperous, stable and democratic partner in Europe.

The UK is increasingly recognised as a global leader in digital trade, with a network of international agreements that drive productivity, jobs and growth. In 2021, under its G7 presidency, the UK brokered agreement on the ground-breaking G7 digital trade principles, while earlier this year the UK-Singapore digital economy agreement—the world's most innovative trade agreement—entered into force.

As a result, in my discussions with our Ukrainian partners, we have agreed that we should seek to negotiate a digital trade agreement to play an important role in supporting Ukraine's reconstruction objectives. Ukraine has strong digital ambitions, and it has identified greater digitalisation of the economy as one of its areas of focus.

Ukraine sees digital trade as part of its vision for the future, and the UK is ideally placed to help Ukraine benefit from the opportunities this presents.

In addition to furthering our vital support for Ukraine, this agreement will also be good for British businesses. The current UK-Ukraine free trade agreement contains limited digital and e-commerce provisions. Expanding these commitments will remove barriers to digital trade and enable UK exporters to service Ukrainian markets more easily.

As digital trade is now the foundation of modern global trade, securing this agreement will send a strong signal of the United Kingdom's support for our Ukrainian allies in response to the ongoing conflict, and further cement our position as a forward-thinking trading partner in the modern global economy.

I will continue to keep the House updated as negotiations develop.

[HCWS289]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Rough Sleeping Strategy

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Greg Clark): On 3 September Government published their new strategy to end rough sleeping in England.

This Government have made the unprecedented pledge to end rough sleeping within this Parliament, and this strategy will help us to deliver that goal. Working with our partners across Government, in local authorities and the sector, we have delivered remarkable progress so far, with rough sleeping levels in the most recent annual rough sleeping snapshot at an eight-year low in England. However, we face significant challenges if we are to end

rough sleeping for good, and we must work across Government and with local partners to step up our efforts.

The strategy will build on that progress and help us end rough sleeping for good by bringing forward a bold new approach backed by £2 billion of funding over the next three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping in England.

For the first time, we are defining what we mean by ending rough sleeping—that rough sleeping will be prevented wherever possible, and when it does occur, it will be rare, brief and non-recurrent. We will bring forward a new data framework, which will enable us to track progress against the definition and ensure all local and central partners are doing their bit.

We will embed a “prevention first” approach so that rough sleeping is better prevented before people reach the streets. This means ensuring the landmark changes in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 are fully embedded, to prevent more people from reaching a homelessness crisis, as well as bringing forward investment so that nobody leaves a public institution, such as prison or care, to the streets. As part of this, we will provide new funding over the next three years to expand the accommodation for ex-offenders programme so that people at risk of homelessness, including rough sleeping, in all parts of England are supported into long-term, settled accommodation.

We will also empower local authorities by extending our flagship rough sleeping initiative to 2025, with up to £500 million of funding so that local areas can provide the tailored support needed to end rough sleeping over the next three years. We will complete delivery of the Housing First pilots in Greater Manchester, Liverpool city region and the west Midlands, providing a further £13.9 million over two years on top of the £28 million already invested, and expand Housing First more widely through £32 million within the rough sleeping initiative.

This will sit alongside £200 million of new funding for the single homelessness accommodation programme, which will deliver up to 2,400 much-needed homes for vulnerable people at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping, including young people and those with the most complex needs, alongside expanding existing accommodation programmes that we know work.

We will act across the system to reduce rough sleeping. We will ensure new local integrated care systems in the NHS consider the health and social care needs of those sleeping rough in their area in the development of their strategies. Jobcentres will work closely with local authorities to support people experiencing rough sleeping to access benefits and employment advice. We will be launching a new homelessness employer covenant with Crisis to help employers recruit and support employees who have been homeless or rough sleeping.

A quarter of people sleeping rough nationally are not from the UK, rising to nearly half in London. Since the pandemic we have seen local authorities looking to exhaust all options to support this group away from the streets; we want to see this continue. For those here legally but with restricted eligibility for public funds, we want to see them get appropriate support to sustain a life away from the streets. For those here illegally, we want to ensure people return to their home country swiftly and receive the appropriate support to do this.

As part of the strategy we are announcing allocations for areas in England in a range of key initiatives including the rough sleeping initiative, rough sleeping accommodation programme, rough sleeping drug and alcohol treatment grant and Housing First. Full details of allocations can be found on gov.uk.

While we have taken the significant step of committing to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824 in full, we must make sure the police, local authorities and other agencies have the powers and tools they need to respond effectively to begging, support vulnerable individuals and help communities feel safer. Government are currently consulting on the need for appropriate replacement legislation to ensure the police and other agencies remain able to protect the public, while also embedding rehabilitation and support at the heart of our approach.

The whole of Government are united in ending rough sleeping. In order to achieve this, all partners, across central and local Government, voluntary organisations, delivery partners and the public must work together as one.

We want our ambitious approach to be matched by bold local delivery and expect all those involved in ending rough sleeping to play their part. We want to ensure rough sleeping is ended in a way that is sustainable in the long term, and this strategy lays the foundations for the long-term system change needed to support that.

This strategy shows that this Government are committed to ending rough sleeping, and we will continue to work with local and national partners to achieve this.

A copy of the rough sleeping strategy will be deposited in the Library of the House.

[HCWS283]

Work of the Department during the Summer Recess

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Greg Clark): Since I was appointed on 7 July, I have been privileged to lead the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in its work to spread opportunity in all parts of the United Kingdom.

This statement updates the House on progress that has been made during the summer recess. All relevant documents referred to will be placed in the Library of the House.

We have delivered stronger local leadership.

A devolution deal has been signed with York and North Yorkshire to create a Mayoral Combined Authority comprising the City of York and North Yorkshire Councils and covering a population of 818,000 people. The deal, which is subject to ratification by the councils, includes a £540 million investment fund over the next 30 years, and over £22.5 million to support the building of new homes on brownfield land and to drive green growth in the area; the devolution of the adult education budget; an integrated transport settlement and confirmation that the Government are minded to provide additional support for the regeneration of the York central brownfield site, subject to an agreed business case. The first mayoral election would be in May 2024 and the new Mayor would take on the functions of the police, fire and crime commissioner. There will be a locally run public consultation, and the secondary legislation to implement the deal is subject to consent from councils and parliamentary approval.

A devolution deal has been signed with Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire to create an East Midlands Mayoral Combined County Authority. The deal is subject to ratification by the councils, and to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill receiving Royal Assent. The deal includes a Mayor for the 2.2 million people of the area, to be elected in May 2024. Both the Government and the four councils place great importance on the involvement of the 15 district and borough councils in the area. The deal establishes an investment fund of £1.14 billion over the next 30 years—the joint largest of any devolution deal so far—over £17 million to support brownfield development and further investment, subject to business cases, of £18 million to support local housing and net zero priorities. The deal also includes devolution of the adult education budget and an integrated transport settlement. There will be a locally run public consultation and the secondary legislation to implement the deal is subject to consent from councils and parliamentary approval.

Other deals named in the levelling-up White Paper are progressing well, notably with councils in Suffolk and north-east England, and with Cornwall, as well as additional trailblazer deals with the west midlands and Greater Manchester.

We have taken decisive action to restore good governance to councils in England that have let down local residents, in Slough, Liverpool, Nottingham and Thurrock. In making interventions, we have established an approach that help from within the local area should be pursued wherever possible and we are grateful to Mayor Steve Rotherham for stepping forward to guide the future of Liverpool City Council and to Essex County Council for leading the intervention in Thurrock.

We have tightened rules to prevent councils in England from using creative accountancy to avoid the spirit of the financial frameworks which are there to protect taxpayers, and have advised consultancies that they should not facilitate such practices at the taxpayers' expense.

We have published for consultation the draft policy and strategy statement for the Electoral Commission required by the Elections Act 2022, in which combating electoral fraud through so-called family voting in local and national elections is emphasised.

We have provided further opportunities to level up across the United Kingdom.

Round 2 of the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund was opened on 15 July and closed on 2 August. Over 500 applications have been made from every part of the United Kingdom. Analysis of the bids is currently taking place and results will be announced in due course.

Over 50% of the allocations from the future high street fund have now been made.

On 1 September we published, with the Welsh Government, the prospectus for a freeport to be established in Wales.

In addition to the eight freeports in England, good progress is being made towards the designation of green freeports in Scotland, in a joint process with the Scottish Government.

We have delivered for our communities and faith groups and protected vulnerable people.

The British people have now welcomed over 120,000 refugees from Ukraine through the “Homes for Ukraine” and “Ukraine Family” schemes. We would like to pay tribute to the work of Lord Harrington of Watford, who led the “Homes for Ukraine” programme.

We have supported the next phase of the welcome programme to support people from Hong Kong with BN(O) visas in settling into the United Kingdom.

With £1.3 million of new funding we announced a new deal fund to support faith groups to support vulnerable people and communities.

Nearly 90% of the £150 council tax rebate has been paid out by councils to residents.

Because everyone deserves a home that is habitable, whatever its tenure, we have launched a consultation on setting a decent homes standard for private rented properties.

To help people with the cost of living during this time of high inflation, we have launched a consultation on setting a lower cap on maximum social housing rent increases in 2023-24.

On 3 September the landmark rough sleeping strategy to end rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament was launched, on which a separate ministerial statement is being made.

We have accelerated moves to provide justice for leaseholders in buildings that are unsafe because of cladding.

We have reopened the building safety fund for applications.

We have worked with lenders who have agreed to restart lending on affected properties.

We have issued contracts to developers to make good their pledge to remediate unsafe buildings for which they are responsible.

We commenced the primary legislation that will enable us to establish an industry scheme to penalise developers who fail to discharge their responsibilities.

We launched a call for evidence to enable us to address the specific problems of leaseholder-owned and commonhold buildings.

We have taken steps to increase the pace of development.

In order to accelerate development, we have set out measures to speed up the planning process for nationally significant infrastructure projects like nuclear power stations and offshore wind farms.

We have set out measures that will reduce the levels of nutrient pollution entering our most sensitive watercourses, thereby allowing stalled housebuilding to proceed while protecting the environment.

We have emphasised the importance of the beauty and the enjoyment of our built and natural environment.

We have strengthened the powers of councils to require takeaway restaurants to clear up litter they generate in our high streets.

We have launched the levelling up parks fund in England to create or restore 100 green spaces in our urban areas with the least access to parks.

A major planning application on the south bank of London has been called in for public inquiry to assess, among other things, the impact of the proposed development on the historic environment.

And we have extended the ability of cafes, pubs and restaurants to take advantage of the great British summer with al fresco dining.

I am proud of what has been delivered in eight weeks, and I am grateful to my officials in Government Departments as well as to partners in local councils, businesses and voluntary organisations across the United Kingdom for their intense work this summer. It shows what can be achieved to the benefit of all our citizens when people work together in joint endeavour.

[HCWS282]

TRANSPORT

Transport for London: Long-Term Funding Settlement

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Following my statement to the House on 13 July, I am writing to update the House that today we have agreed a

new longer-term funding settlement between Transport for London and Government. The final extraordinary funding settlement expired on 3 August and I have agreed with the Mayor of London a new settlement until 31 March 2024 or until Transport for London reaches financial sustainability, whichever is the sooner.

This longer-term settlement includes over £1.1 billion of additional grant funding until March 2024 for London transport, which will unlock almost £3.6 billion worth of critical infrastructure investment, with a number of projects set to revolutionise travel across the capital.

As a result of our longer-term settlement, major upgrades will be delivered for Londoners, including new Piccadilly line trains and the modernisation of the District, Metropolitan, Hammersmith and City and Circle lines—maintaining the London Underground's world-class status. Further benefits include: supporting the long-awaited repair of Hammersmith Bridge; vital improvement to Elephant and Castle station and a London Overground extension between Gospel Oak and Barking Riverside to service more than 10,000 new homes in east London.

As part of the settlement, the Mayor will be required to continue work on the introduction of driverless trains on London Underground, in use on the Docklands Light Railway for more than 35 years. At a time when strikes are crippling both the underground and national rail systems, never has this work been more important.

Alongside all of this is Government's continued commitment to mitigate TfL's loss of passenger revenue from the ongoing uncertainty of demand following changes to travel patterns since the covid-19 pandemic. None of this would have been possible without Government funding.

The settlement letter requires Transport for London to modernise and control its operating costs, to make it a modern, effective, efficient and financially stable operator. It is a settlement that is fair and proportionate to London whilst also taking into account funding provided elsewhere in the country and the cost to the national taxpayer, at a time of great pressure on national finances.

It comes on top of the over £5 billion of funding support the Government have already provided to TfL since the beginning of the pandemic and Government's commitment to over £1 billion per year until 2025 for London transport through business rates retention.

Through all of this, Government are continuing to work with the Mayor and TfL to ensure London's transport system delivers for the public and businesses and contributes to the country's economy.

[HCWS275]

Buses: £2 Fare Cap and Bus Recovery Grant

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): On 3 September, we announced plans to invest up to £60 million to introduce a £2 bus fare cap on a single bus ticket on most services in England outside London. This will start no later than 1 January 2023 and will be in place for a period of three months until March 2023.

At a time when many are struggling with the rising cost of living, this is a significant investment that will result in millions of people across England saving on

travel costs. This investment also makes clear our continued commitment to delivering on the bold vision for bus services set out in “Bus Back Better”, the Government’s national bus strategy, and particularly our ambition to make bus services cheaper. The introduction of the £2 bus fare cap is a significant step forward to delivering this and continues the Government’s track record of providing the largest investment in bus services in a generation, in England outside London.

This fare cap will not apply to bus services in London as transport is devolved to the Mayor of London, including fare setting. However, I know that colleagues across Parliament will be pleased that this announcement follows the agreement with Transport for London on a £1.2 billion multi-year settlement to secure the long-term future of London’s transport network, including bus services.

As well as supporting passengers by reducing the cost of bus fares, we have also continued to invest in bus services, in response to the unprecedented impacts caused by the covid-19 pandemic but which would now be threatening the provision of services at a time when the public need bus services more than ever.

With nearly £2 billion provided so far, through the covid-19 bus service support grant, the bus recovery grant and most recently the local transport fund, we have mitigated the impacts of the pandemic on bus networks. This meant that buses were kept running over the course of the pandemic to ensure that those who had to travel for work, education or healthcare were able to access these vital services and help keep this country running.

As I announced to this House in March, this funding was originally due to end in April, but at the time it was clear that the sector was still facing significant financial challenges as it sought to recover from the pandemic. That is why we announced we would provide a further £150 million, and extend recovery funding for the sector until October, to allow bus services the maximum amount of time to recover.

At the time of announcing this funding, we were clear that this would be the last such round of recovery funding. However, with the sector continuing to face significant challenges, and many people facing pressures due to the rising cost of living, we recognise that further Government support is necessary to prevent significant cuts to bus services for the millions of people who use them every day.

That is why on 19 August we announced a six-month extension to the bus recovery grant, worth up to £130 million, to continue supporting bus services in England outside London. This will be in effect for six months starting in October 2022 until the end of the financial year in March 2023. This funding will provide the sector and passengers with certainty in the short term and ensure that these vital services will continue to serve those that rely on them to live, work and travel.

Both of these further investments in England’s bus services demonstrate our commitment to supporting bus services. We will continue to work closely with the sector as we deliver the national bus strategy, and fulfil our ambition for everyone, everywhere to have access to great bus services.

[HCWS274]

Petitions

Monday 5 September 2022

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post box in Hayfield

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the lack of an accessible post box in Hayfield restricts access to postal services for local residents; and further that it requires them to cross the busy A624 to access the nearest post box when the Post Office is closed, potentially endangering the elderly, disabled, and families with small children.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to note the need for an additional post box in Hayfield, recognise the benefits this would bring for local residents, walkers and holidaymakers, and urge Royal Mail to install a new post box.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robert Langan, *Official Report*, 22 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 930.]

[P002741]

Observations from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jane Hunt):

It is important that people and businesses can access postal services and can send and receive letters and parcels regularly. That is why the Government are committed to ensuring the provision of a sustainable, efficient, accessible and affordable universal postal service in the United Kingdom.

Royal Mail is a fully independent private business, and the Government do not have a role in the day-to-day operational matters of the company, including the location of post boxes.

However, Ofcom, as the independent regulator for the postal sector, requires Royal Mail to ensure there is a post box within half a mile of the premises of at least 98% of users of postal services. Royal Mail is also required to report annually to Ofcom the number of customer complaints received about the provision and/or location of post boxes.

Royal Mail has advised the Government that the post box is within 600 metres of the post office, which meets Ofcom's requirements. On the question of accessibility, Royal Mail has informed the Government that customers can also pass correctly stamped letters to the postal worker when they are delivering their mail.

Consequently, after taking into account all the relevant factors, we understand that Royal Mail has taken the operational decision not to install an additional post box in the immediate area of Hayfield.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Conviction of Yasin Malik

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the trial of Yasin Malik contravenes article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights regarding his receiving a fair trial and India's own

constitution; notes that Mr Malik was arrested and taken to Jammu Jail in 2019 shortly after the Indian Government banned the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, then transferred to Tihar Jail on the outskirts of Delhi on 7 May 2019, where he was kept in inhumane conditions; further that he was arrested on a contrived offence by the Indian Government under the Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA); further that the PSA and UAPA have been condemned by the United Nations as contravening human rights law, the Geneva Convention and the Constitution of India 1950; declares that the Indian government is failing to observe 1948 United Nations Resolution 47 which states: "The Government of India should themselves and through the Government of the State declare and make known that all subjects of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, regardless of creed, caste or party, will be safe and free in expressing their views and in voting on the question of the accession of the State and that there will be freedom of the press, speech and assembly and freedom of travel in the State, including freedom of lawful entry and exit"; further that India is still using colonial detention laws from 1860 especially the Law of Sedition under Penal codes 121 & 124, which was abolished in the UK in 1967; and further that there are concerns about the independence of the Special Additional Sessions Court in relation to the National Investigation Agency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to raise Yasin Malik's unfair trial with the Indian Government, call for immediate medical aid for Mr Malik and his removal from solitary confinement, and request that the Indian Government release Mr Malik on bail, pending a new trial.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Debbie Abrahams, *Official Report*, 20 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 1073.]

[P002758]

Observations from the Minister of State for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth (Lord Ahmed of Wimbledon):

We have noted that Yasin Malik was convicted and sentenced in the Indian courts to two consecutive life sentences for a number of charges under Indian law. Mr Malik's arrest and trial fell under Indian jurisdiction and we cannot intervene in the independent judicial process of another country. We understand that Mr Malik ended his hunger strike on 1 August and was provided medical attention. We expect all countries to respect and uphold their international obligations regarding the treatment of detainees and raise cases where necessary.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Corporate Travel Management

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the petitioners believe that the contract awarded by the UK Government to Corporate Travel Management (CTM) to coordinate the hotel quarantine programme avoided due process or competition; further that the UK Government failed in their duty to ensure that CTM had an adequate system in place to deal with customer payments and complaints around the operation

of the quarantine hotel booking services; and notes that this has resulted in many travellers being unable to coordinate travel back to the UK when South Africa was moved onto the UK travel red list.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to commit to reallocate funding to recompense anyone who has lost out financially as a result of CTM's handling of the quarantine hotel booking service when South Africa was moved onto the UK travel red list.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 24 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 263.]

[P002734]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup):

The Crown Commercial Service (CCS), the largest public procurement organisation in the UK, entered into a framework agreement with a number of suppliers, including Corporate Travel Management (CTM), who had been successful in a competitive tender process for the Public Sector Travel and Venue Solutions framework. Frameworks help public and third sector buyers to procure goods and services from a list of pre-approved suppliers, with agreed terms and conditions and legal protections. The agreement sets out the award and ordering procedure for customers to purchase the services listed, by entering into a separate 'call-off contract' with a particular supplier. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) entered into such a contract with CTM using a direct award under the framework.

CTM as DHSC's travel services delivery partner entered into an enabling agreement on 13 November 2020. They are subsequently responsible for identifying and contracting with the individual hotels that support the Managed Quarantine Service (MQS).

This contract was varied on 6 February 2021 in order to incorporate the Government's policy of international services involved in the MQS, pursuant to Regulation 72 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 under which contractual arrangements may be modified without a new procurement procedure.

Prior to implementing the variation, the UK government ensured that CTM administered a booking portal to accommodate payments using debit or credit cards. CTM also provides a call centre for travellers having difficulty, or who need additional assistance in making their booking. DHSC had weekly meetings with CTM's senior leadership where operational performance issues were discussed and escalated as appropriate. Performance against the contract was managed and assessed according to the contractual arrangements. Overall performance, including in relation to complaints, was discussed regularly between DHSC officials and CTM and any areas requiring improvement were addressed.

In addition to the web portal, CTM have a large international call centre which is able to assist guests to make their booking. The call centre is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and has multilingual capability and the capacity to increase to meet demands.

There is no specific policy offering compensation for the cost of quarantine at short notice. If British residents returning to the United Kingdom from a "red list" country (there is currently no red list due to the relevant legislation no longer being in force) believed they suffered

severe financial hardship as a result of paying the full cost of managed quarantine in advance, they may qualify for hardship arrangements. This includes repayment plans, where the fees are repaid in monthly instalments and, in exceptional circumstances, fee reductions and waivers may be granted. All eligibility criteria must be met to qualify for hardship arrangements.

Timeline for Managed Quarantine Service (MQS)

15-02-2021 - MQS was formed, DHSC held responsibility

25-03-2022 - MQS responsibility transferred to UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA)

Prior to the formation of MQS policies around travel to England from another country was owned by the Department for Transport and DHSC jointly

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Council tax discounts for dementia

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there are over 600,000 people with dementia who receive care at home; further that people with dementia are only disregarded for council tax if they have a medical certificate and are in receipt of certain benefits; further that this means that many people with dementia have to wait months or years to qualify for council tax discounts after they have been diagnosed; and further that, if council tax disregards were backdated to the date a person was certified as being severely mentally impaired, people with dementia could receive additional council tax discounts for longer periods and potentially save thousands of pounds.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to require that council tax disregards are backdated to the date a person was certified as being severely mentally impaired, where they then go on to qualify for a relevant benefit.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. P5.]

[P002739]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Paul Scully):

Council tax is an important source of funding that helps councils to deliver crucial services to the local community. The council tax system incorporates a wide range of discounts and exemptions to recognise particular circumstances where it might be considered that a full council tax bill might not be appropriate. In considering whether a council tax discount or exemption might apply, billing authorities are required to satisfy themselves that any relevant criteria for a reduction are met. This is to ensure that, in providing support through the council tax system via discounts and exemptions, that support is targeted at those who most need it.

The Government are committed to providing assistance to those with a severe mental impairment. The council tax system ensures that eligible people with a severe mental impairment are "disregarded" for the purposes of calculating their council tax bill. This means that, where they live on their own, they will not have to pay any council tax at all and, where they live with someone else, the other person will be entitled to a single person discount.

For a person to be eligible for the SMI discount, they must meet two criteria, set out in legislation. First, a medical practitioner must confirm that the individual has a severe mental impairment. Secondly, the person must also be entitled to receive one of a number of qualifying benefits specified in regulations. Entitlement to benefit is determined if and when a valid claim for that benefit has been made and agreed.

The council tax exemption is not an automatic entitlement for those with a severe mental impairment. It reflects also their particular circumstances and recognises that, where they are entitled to one of a range of defined benefits, they should benefit from a reduction in their council tax bill. Legislation requires that entitlement to the exemption is dependent on meeting both tests concurrently. This helps to ensure that support goes to where it is most needed.

The petition seeks to backdate eligibility for the council tax exemption to the date a medical practitioner makes a diagnosis of a severe mental impairment, once entitlement to relevant benefits is provided. This backdating would be irrespective of the date that entitlement to the benefit begins. The council tax system, and the provision of discounts and exemptions, is designed to ensure that support is made available to those most in need. The effect of the proposal contained in the petition would be that, where someone is assessed to be eligible for a relevant benefit on a particular date, and a medical practitioner had confirmed that they had a severe mental impairment from an earlier date, the entitlement to the council tax exemption would be backdated to the date of the medical assessment. The Government do not consider that it is appropriate for such exemptions to be provided where there is no confirmation that the person is also entitled to a relevant benefit at the same time. The rationale for the exemption is that a person is entitled to the exemption where they are both in receipt of a specified benefit and they have been diagnosed with a severe mental impairment. The proposal set out in the petition would break that principle.

However, councils have considerable flexibility, under section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, to provide discretionary council tax discounts or exemptions to anyone in their area where they consider that appropriate. This could include offering support to those individuals with a severe mental impairment, including where they may not have demonstrated entitlement to a qualifying benefit.

Pryzm in Watford

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Pryzm in Watford should not be closed down; further that Pryzm is the only town-based nightclub in Hertfordshire; further that Pryzm is a long-standing part of the culture of Watford; and further that if the planning application to build houses on the site and Pryzm itself is approved, it will have a detrimental effect on the local economy and especially the night-time economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urge the local council to engage with developers and urge them to withdraw their planning application or refuse the application to build on the site of Pryzm in Watford, and should the application be refused, to urge the landlord not to evict Pryzm nightclub as tenants.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Dean Russell, Official Report, 28 June 2022; Vol. 717, c. 268.]

[P002742]

Observations from the Minister for Housing:

Watford Borough Council is responsible for the local planning of its area. The Government policy is not to interfere with the jurisdiction of a local planning authority or comment on specific proposals or schemes due to the quasi-judicial role of the Secretary of State unless it is necessary to do so. In determining a planning application the local planning authority is required to have regard to all material considerations including the development plan, national policies and views expressed by third parties. It is, of course, for local planning authorities to provide whatever justification that may be appropriate to give for their decisions and procedures.

When planning applications are considered, our national planning policy framework is clear that local plans and decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation. It is the role of local plans to promote the long-term vitality and viability of town centres by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, which allows a suitable mix of uses and which reflects their distinctive characters. Our planning practice guidance to local authorities recognises that evening and night-time activities have the potential to increase economic activity within town centres; helping to diversify and develop their unique brand beyond retail.

TRANSPORT

Bus services in Footdee (Fittie)

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Aberdeen North,

Declares that First Bus have abandoned the people of Footdee (Fittie) with changes to bus services 13 and 15; isolated them from the rest of the city; cut off the only bus service to Aberdeen Beach, negatively impacting the population of Aberdeen as a whole.

The Petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to call upon First Bus to reinstate the bus service to Footdee (Fittie), Aberdeen.

And the Petitioners remain etc. —[Presented by Kirsty Blackman, Official Report 20 July 2022; Vol.718, c.7P.]

[P002762]

Observations from Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Baroness Vere of Norbiton.

The Department for Transport has responsibilities for Bus and Active travel in England. As this is a devolved policy area, we would encourage the community to engage with the Scottish Government and Local Councils on this proposal.

Doncaster-Sheffield airport

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Doncaster-Sheffield Airport is incredibly important to the economy and wellbeing of the City of Doncaster, and should not be closed down; further that

the owners, Peel Holdings, have indicated their intention to close the airport on the basis that they say it is not commercially viable; notes that the airport provides employment for some 800 people and brings in valuable trade and business to Doncaster; and further that it would be a real setback to the levelling up of our City for the airport to be closed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take all necessary steps to keep Doncaster-Sheffield airport open and safeguard the employment of all those who work in or around the airport.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Nick Fletcher, *Official Report*, 18 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 814.]

[P002757]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):

I recognise that Doncaster Sheffield Airport's review into the future of the airport will be concerning for passengers and those who work at the airport. The Government are in close contact with the airport to understand its plans.

I met with the Peel Group and the airport on 21 July, and strongly expressed the Government's clear view that, whatever the outcome of the review, it leads to a viable, thriving aviation future for the airport. I urged Peel Group to get around the table with interested parties to find a way to preserve the future of the airfield, and to allow sufficient time for solutions to emerge.

I am pleased that Peel Group and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority are now working closely together to consider options through their working group. I have jointly signed a letter to Peel Group with Mayor Coppard, Ros Jones the Mayor of Doncaster and local MPs calling for the extension of the review period, which has now been extended until 16 September, and for them to outline the options they are willing to explore for the future of the airport.

As set out in our 10-year strategic framework for aviation, *Flightpath to the Future*, the UK Government are committed to working with the aviation sector and local stakeholders. We also recognise the importance of our existing comprehensive aviation infrastructure across the UK. Regional airports are key in serving our local communities, supporting thousands of jobs in the regions and act as a key gateway to international opportunities. That is why during the pandemic we supported them through our £161 million Airports and Ground Operators Support Scheme. We will continue to bring forward our plans to level up and ensure the whole of the UK has the connections people need.

The UK aviation market operates predominately in the private sector. Airports invest in their infrastructure to attract passengers and airlines, while airlines are well placed to deliver services to their customers by responding to demand for different routes.

This will be a commercial decision for the owners of the airport in discussion with local stakeholders, although we hope they conclude that there is a viable aviation future for the airport.

Peel Group has confirmed that it wants to make best use of the site and that it is still open to the continuation of aviation activities on the site.

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP dedicated telephone line for advice services

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that punitive social security cuts as well as the rising use of conditionality means that more and more people are turning to advice services, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, to advocate on their behalf with the Department of Work and Pensions; and further that many advice service staff and volunteers are spending far too much time waiting to speak with DWP staff on general telephone lines.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to set up a Department of Work and Pensions dedicated telephone line for advice services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 19 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 931.]

[P002745]

Observations from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley):

There are several channels that citizens can use to contact the Department dependent on the benefit, including:

- making an online claim
- via telephone using a freephone number
- visiting a Jobcentre
- using a Universal Credit online account

The DWP supports citizens from working age to pension age, those with disabilities and health conditions, alongside those seeking child maintenance support for children and is committed to providing a quality telephony service across this vast range of services.

The Department answers around 3 million calls per month, and all colleagues, across the various phone lines, are trained in specific products and services. The vast majority of customer queries can be completely resolved through the telephone services; however some complex cases require a handover to caseworkers.

As the largest service in the DWP, Universal Credit has a dedicated line to support Citizens Advice colleagues specifically dealing with queries within the Help to Claim service.

The DWP closely monitors the percentage of calls answered and the average speed they are answered on a regular basis to assure services are delivering and that the right levels of resource are deployed.

In addition, the Department regularly engages with key national organisations representing claimants across all benefit areas through our established and trusted Operational Stakeholder Engagement Forum (OSEF). Operational updates are shared at the monthly forum meetings and stakeholders are given the opportunity to raise questions and voice areas of concern. This provides useful insight to help the Department improve products and services.

For these reasons, the DWP has no plans to create a dedicate telephone line for advice services.

Furthermore, the DWP has plans to introduce new technology to improve the callers experience. This will feature enhanced call routing and self-service capabilities, reducing call volumes to colleagues and increasing efficiency

and effectiveness. The Department also plans to build a number of new channels through which citizens can access services and obtain the information they need at a time that suits them.

In response to the pandemic, the Department temporarily suspended the requirement for face-to-face appointments for all claimants. This was a necessary intervention to protect DWP staff and customers. As public health restrictions have relaxed, conditionality has been reintroduced, but sanctions remain at low levels.

The claimant commitment sits at the centre of the Department's approach to conditionality. It is jointly agreed between the claimant and the Department and sets out the reasonable requirements expected of claimants to help them get into work. No claimant is given a sanction unless they fail to fulfil their obligations in the jointly agreed claimant commitment.

Eligibility period for the Cost of Living Payment

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow North East,

Declares that there is currently a low uptake of Pension Credit which has knock-on effects on receiving the Cost of Living Payment; notes that to get the first cost of living payment of £326, you must have been entitled to a payment, or later found to be entitled to a payment of a passport benefit, one of which is Pension Credit for any day in the period April 26 to May 25 2022; and further that if the eligibility period were to be extended, it could encourage people to apply for Pension Credit and receive the Cost of Living Payment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend the eligibility period for recipients of Pension Credit to receive the Cost of Living Payment to the end of the fiscal year.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Anne McLaughlin, *Official Report*, 5 July 2022; Vol. 717, c. 845.]

[P002743]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

In respect of pension credit, the latest estimates show that take-up is at its highest level since 2010, with 66% of eligible pensioners claiming pension credit in the financial year ending 2020. Take-up of guarantee credit, the income top-up element of pension credit, was higher, 73% of those eligible claimed it; and take-up of savings credit, which is only available to those who reached state pension age before April 2016 was 43%.

We have already undertaken a range of actions to raise awareness of pension credit and increase take-up, focusing our efforts on a comprehensive take-up campaign, launched on 3 April. We have been promoting pension credit in a variety of ways, including print advertising and promotion in the national press, across social media, via internet search engines and on screens in post offices and GP surgeries across Great Britain.

All MPs have also been urged to support the campaign at a constituency level as MPs are well placed to promote pension credit locally. DWP's digital toolkit has been updated with information and resources, as well as

leaflets and posters which advice organisations, charities and other stakeholders working across local communities can use to help promote pension credit. Most recently, on 15 June DWP held another pension credit day of action with broadcasters, regional and national newspapers and other partners encouraged to reach out to pensioners, as well their family and friends, through their channels.

The campaign has been highly effective, with over 10,000 claims received across Great Britain during the week of the pension credit day of action alone. This is an increase of 275% compared to the same week in 2021. But our drive to increase take-up continues, with the next phase of social media and paid website advertising and further advertising in national newspapers, radio and on buses and digital street displays starting soon.

The Government understands the pressures people, including pensioners, are facing with the cost of living. That is why we are providing a further £15 billion in targeted support, bringing the total Government cost of living support to over £37 billion. This comprehensive package includes a £650 cost of living payment paid in two lump sums to everyone on an eligible means-tested benefit, including pension credit, with respect to the qualifying dates. Rebates of £400 will be given to those who pay electricity bills, and £150 made to those in council tax bands A to D in England. An additional £300 targeted support will be made to pensioners to help tackle the rise in fuel costs, as well as £150 to disabled people in receipt of an eligible disability benefit on the qualifying day. The targeted support has been directed at groups who have been identified as particularly likely to need extra support to deal with the impacts of higher inflation and to the lowest-income individuals in the UK to support with higher inflation.

The eligibility period for the cost of living payment was designed to target support to those on eligible means-tested benefits. Setting the eligibility period as we have was the quickest way to deliver support to those on the lowest incomes and will allow us to make timely payments to over 8 million people on low incomes.

For pension credit claimants to receive the first cost of living payment, they would need to have been entitled to a pension credit payment for any day in the period of 26 April 2022 to 25 May 2022. Claims for pension credit can be backdated for a maximum of three months, provided the entitlement conditions are met throughout the backdating period.

This means that if someone makes a claim, and payment of their pension credit can be backdated to fall within the first cost of living payment eligibility period, then they will qualify for the first cost of living payment of £326. To guarantee that 25 May will be included in the first pension credit payment for pensioners wishing to backdate a new claim, we advise that claims should be made as soon as possible and no later than 18 August and so long as they remain entitled to pension credit, they will qualify for the second payment of £324 as well. We would urge anybody who thinks that they could be eligible to make a claim as soon as possible. We will provide further guidance about this second payment and the eligibility period in due course.

We are not changing the eligibility dates for the first tranche of the cost of living payment for any of the means-tested benefits.

Universal Credit deductions

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Notes that analysis by CPAG shows that in the constituency of Glasgow East there are approximately 5,000 households claiming Universal Credit who are receiving on average £58 less each month than they are entitled to because of automatic deductions; declares that these deductions affect an estimated 4,400 children; further that immediate changes to universal credit deductions must be made in order to allow families to access more of their universal credit award, which will in turn ease the pressures of the cost of living crisis on struggling families; further that having to repay a universal credit advance which sustains claimants through the five week wait for the first universal credit payment, is the most common reason for a deduction; further that every month, families across the east end of Glasgow lose a total of £153,000 from their UC payments to service advance debts to the DWP; further that a further £31,238 is paid by UC claimants to HMRC for historic tax credit overpayments; further that the British Government should reduce the maximum deduction rate for government debts to 5 per cent of the UC standard allowance, in line with other creditors; further that the British Government should also reduce the cumulative level of deductions taken from peoples' benefits from the current 25 per cent down to 15 per cent, and further that this cost-neutral intervention would provide up to £53 more a month for a couple and up to £33 more a month for a single person or lone parent.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reduce Universal Credit deductions and allow families to access more of their Universal Credit award.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 21 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 817.]

[P002738]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

The Government recognise the importance of supporting claimants to manage their liabilities. Under universal credit, there is a co-ordinated approach to deductions from benefit, which supports claimants to manage their financial obligations.

The primary aim of deductions in universal credit is to protect vulnerable claimants by providing a last resort repayment method for arrears of essential services. The policy also enables social obligations to be enforced when other repayment methods fail, or are not cost-effective, and ensures benefit debt is recovered for the taxpayer in a cost-effective manner.

Regulations provide an overall level of protection that ensures claimants do not see excessive deductions. The overall cap on deductions is set at 25% of standard allowance, this is only ever exceeded to address priority rent and fuel debts. The threshold of 25% provides a balance to ensure priority debts and liabilities are addressed whilst allowing claimants to retain most of their award to meet day-to-day needs.

The Government have reduced the cap twice in recent years. The standard cap was reduced from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance in October 2019, and down again to 25% in April 2021. These two reductions have helped hundreds of thousands of UC claimants to retain more of their award.

Within the standard cap on deductions, there is even more discretion available to support claimants. If claimants find themselves still struggling with the repayment of benefit overpayments, claimants can ask DWP to agree a lower rate of repayment which is affordable for them. Many tens of thousands of claimants have been helped in this way if they contact DWP for support.

Tailored, individual support is the right way to support claimants. Reducing the standard cap in its entirety below 25% of the standard allowance would not be possible without potentially significant negative outcomes.

Firstly, it would reduce the range of debts a claimant could address. It is possible that deductions for vital obligations such as child maintenance or council tax arrears would not be made at all. In November 2021, we supported 29,000 families through making child maintenance payments in this way, many of these would no longer be possible.

Secondly, reducing the standard cap could limit the support claimants can access as an advance. Advances are a claimant's benefit award paid early in order to support them in times of financial need. A claimant can only request one budgeting advance at a time, meaning that a budgeting advance must be recovered in full before a claimant can request further support for unexpected, emergency costs. Reducing the standard cap, inevitably increasing the recovery period of such advances, would leave some claimants unable to access financial support for unexpected, emergency costs they may face.

Furthermore, there is already a significant amount of support available for claimants who are repaying overpayments. As noted, anyone repaying benefit overpayments who is experiencing financial hardship is actively encouraged to contact the Department's debt management team. DWP agents will always look to negotiate an affordable and sustainable repayment plan with anyone who contacts us. In many cases, the rate of repayment which can be agreed can even be below 5% of the standard allowance.

There are no plans to reduce the rate for recovering benefit overpayments to 5% of the standard allowance. The Government believe it is important to support claimants out of debt so as to ensure that debt does not act as a disincentive to moving into work. It is right we ensure benefit debt is recovered in a cost-effective manner as it is also our duty to protect public funds. However, we are continually reviewing the deduction policy and will include assessment of this recommendation in our review.

The Government understands the continued pressures that people are facing with the cost of living. These are global challenges to which no country is immune. In considering how best to support claimants, the Government have opted to prioritise non-repayable financial support, deliverable and targeted, to support and help families. This support is worth over £37 billion in 2022-23.

The Government are helping all domestic electricity customers in Great Britain to cope with the impact of higher energy bills, with £400 off their bills from October through the expansion of the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS). This is a doubling of the £200 of support announced in February, and there will no longer be any repayments.

The Government have also considered the specific issues those on means-tested benefits may be experiencing. This includes supporting over 8 million households

across the UK in receipt of eligible means-tested benefits with a one-off cost of living payment of £650, paid in two instalments. The Government are going further, giving additional UK-wide support to help disabled people with the extra costs they will face, with 6 million people who receive eligible non-means tested disability benefits receiving a one-off disability cost of living payment of £150.

In total, millions of low-income households will receive at least £1,200 of one-off support in total this year to help with the cost of living. This is in addition to reductions in the taper rate, helping those families who are in work and claiming universal credit to boost their income and ensuring work pays. The extensive measures noted underlines this Government's commitment to supporting families across the UK, including those in receipt of universal credit.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 5 September 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Extreme Heat Preparedness

The following is an extract from the urgent question on 18 July 2022.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I do not feel that the House is any better informed about the Government's response to this heatwave following the answer to the urgent question than we were when we first walked in. The Government's approach seems to be that this is merely an unfortunate 36 hours of very hot weather and we will just have to soldier on through it and stand in the shade, but what we need from them is a long-term plan. What are our vulnerable and elderly constituents to do? Who should they contact in this situation? Where is the advice from the Government? There does not seem to be any urgency. Will the Minister go away and then come back and do a better job?

Kit Malthouse: There has been enormous urgency. As I said in my response to the urgent question—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening—I have just come from the third Cobra meeting, in which we discussed our preparations.

[Official Report, 18 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 709.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse).

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford).

The correct response should have been:

Kit Malthouse: There has been enormous urgency. As I said in my response to the urgent question—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening—I have just come from the third **ministerial** Cobra meeting, in which we discussed our preparations.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Women's Health Strategy for England

The following is an extract from the statement on 20 July 2022.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and its recognition of the need to have specific strategies to make sure that women have equal access to services. However, it is silent on the biggest healthcare injustice that women face in our country—that abortion is still treated under Victorian criminal law, with the most draconian laws in the world. Seventeen women in the past eight years have been subject to criminal investigation, including simply because they suffered the appalling issue of stillbirth. This strategy should stop that by expanding the Government's own change in the law in Northern Ireland to ensure that abortion is an issue between women and their doctors, and that every woman is protected from criminal investigation at a time when what they need from us is care and compassion.

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right that there is a need for care and compassion, and she highlights an extremely important point. She will be aware that the sexual health review is currently being conducted. That will report later this year and will look into the issue that she raises.

[Official Report, 20 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 981.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay).

An error has been identified in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller).

The correct response should have been:

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right that there is a need for care and compassion, and she highlights an extremely important point. She will be aware that the sexual **and reproductive** health **action plan** is currently being conducted. That will report later this year and will **include ensuring women have equitable access to abortion within the current legal framework.**

TRANSPORT

Industrial Action on the Railway

The following is an extract from the statement on 20 June 2022.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): My mum is one of the RMT members who will be taking industrial action this week, along with many of my constituents, the majority of whom are cleaning workers, catering and gateline staff, and other ancillary roles who are not even on a real living wage and at the sharp end of this Government's cost of living crisis. My mum and the other key workers in transport are not striking because they want to; it is a last resort because they feel they have been left no choice. A real-terms cut to their pay or the threat of losing their job altogether is far more than the wages they will lose in striking to defend themselves. Will the Transport Secretary therefore tell the House what steps he has taken to enable train operating companies to make an offer on a deal so that this crisis can be fairly resolved and the strikes averted?

Grant Shapps: It is important to recognise that a responsible Government have to make the judgment between railway workers, nurses, teachers, care workers and many others. In that regard, she should know that in the past 10 years there has been a 39% increase in railway workers' salaries compared with just 16% for nurses. We do need to make sure that the fair settlement is fair for everybody.

[Official Report, 20 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 578.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols).

The correct response should have been:

Grant Shapps: It is important to recognise that a responsible Government have to make the judgment between railway workers, nurses, teachers, care workers and many others. In that regard, she should know that

in the past 10 years there has been a **39% increase in tram and train drivers' salaries** compared with just 16% for nurses. We do need to make sure that the fair settlement is fair for everybody.

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**not later than
Monday 12 September 2022**

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