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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 20 October 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 20 October 2022*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** I wish to say something about the reports of behaviour in the Division Lobbies last night. I have asked the Serjeant at Arms and other senior officials to investigate the incident and report back to me. I will then update the House.

I remind Members that the behaviour code applies to them as well as to other members of our parliamentary community. This gives me another opportunity to talk about the kind of House that I want to see, and that I believe the vast majority of MPs also want to see. I want this to be a House in which—while we might have very strong political disagreements—we treat each other courteously and with respect, and we should show the same courtesy and respect to those who work with and for us. To that end, I will be meeting senior party representatives to seek an agreed position that behaviour such as that described last night is unacceptable in all circumstances.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Hate Speech Online

1. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle hate speech online. [901737]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** We will lead the world in this area, and we will bring back the Online Safety Bill imminently, ensuring that social media platforms finally prioritise protecting children, remove abhorrent illegal content quickly—including hate crimes—and keep their promises to their own users.

**Afzal Khan:** Online hate speech affects all and aims to sow division, yet the Government are making painfully slow progress in making online spaces less toxic. Home Office figures reveal a sharp increase in far-right activity, with Muslim and Jewish communities facing the largest number of hate crimes in the UK year after year. Along with other parliamentary colleagues, I suffer online abuse on a regular basis. What steps will the Minister take to tackle Islamophobia and antisemitism online?

**Michelle Donelan:** Crimes such as those that the hon. Member has mentioned, including hate crimes, are not acceptable on any platform. As I have said, we will bring back the Online Safety Bill imminently. I cannot announce House business here today, but I can assure all Members that the Bill will be coming back very shortly. I share his concerns, as I am sure do all Members.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Julian Knight.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): Let me first welcome the Secretary of State to her place, and welcome, too, the refreshing degree of engagement with the Select Committee that is now under way. I also welcome her assurance that she will be strengthening the Online Safety Bill's protections for children, but there has been speculation, following previous comments, that she will be reviewing the duties of care for adults relating to so-called "legal but harmful content". Can she clarify what changes she is minded to make in relation to such content?

**Michelle Donelan:** We will be coming back to the House with this in due course, and the Bill will be coming back imminently. This is my key priority—I cannot stress that enough. Protecting children should be the fundamental responsibility of this House, and we will strengthen the provisions for children. I have given that assurance directly to Ian Russell, and I give it again now in the House. We are, however, rebalancing elements for adults' freedom of speech, while also holding social media companies to account so that they cannot treat different races and religions differently, contrary to their own terms and conditions. Fundamentally, the Bill must be about ensuring that we are protecting children, and we will be bringing it back to the House as soon as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister, Alex Davies-Jones.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): Last weekend there was yet another case of vile online racist abuse being hurled at a professional footballer, on this occasion the Brentford striker Ivan Toney. Ironically, tomorrow we will all come together to recognise Show Racism the Red Card day. If the Government are at all serious about keeping people safe online, it is vital for those at the top of these multimillion-pound social media companies to be held personally accountable. The Online Safety Bill is our opportunity to do better. Can the Minister therefore tell us exactly why the Government have failed to introduce personal criminal liability measures for senior leaders who have fallen short on their statutory duty to protect us online?

**Michelle Donelan:** I think it is about time the Opposition remembered that it is this Government who are introducing the Online Safety Bill. It is this Government who committed themselves to it in our manifesto. As I have already told Opposition Members, we will bring it back imminently. I am sure you agree, Mr Speaker, that it would not be proper for me to announce House business here today, but I can assure the hon. Member that this is my top priority. We will be coming back with the Bill shortly. I mean what I say, and I will do what I say.

**Mr Speaker:** I now call the Scottish National party spokesperson, John Nicolson.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I welcome the right hon. Lady—my fifth Culture Secretary—to her place. I agree with my friend the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) that there is a more constructive atmosphere on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, on which I sit.

Last night, I was honoured to be present at the *PinkNews* awards, where I spoke up for trans rights with colleagues across party, including Conservatives. There has been an explosion of hate speech online. Women are targeted disproportionately and trans women are targeted especially. Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre had to lock its door after barrages of violent online threats, and these are dangerous times. An atmosphere of hate has been fanned by too many newspapers and, sadly, politicians.

Does the Secretary of State agree that the now Prime Minister was wrong to weaponise anti-trans rhetoric during the Tory leadership campaign, as she did in attacking the now Leader of the House?

**Michelle Donelan:** I do not think that anybody disputes the fact that hate speech and hate crime should have no place in our society, but freedom of speech, of course, is the bedrock from which all freedoms stem. I personally believe that every member of this House has a duty to protect free speech as well as protecting our citizens from illegal harms.

#### Gaelic Broadcasting

2. **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with representatives of MG Alba on the future of Gaelic broadcasting. [901739]

**The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** The UK Government have a strong record of demonstrating our commitment to minority language broadcasting, to make sure that our broadcasters serve all audiences of the UK nations and regions. My hon. Friend will recall that during his previous role at the Scotland Office we both met MG Alba's CEO earlier this year. I am grateful to the chief executive for raising the issues of the sustainability of Gaelic language broadcasting and for providing detailed proposals for change. My officials have since been in regular contact with the organisation and I am continuing to talk to counterparts at the Scotland Office. I will have further discussions with MG Alba in due course.

**Iain Stewart:** I am grateful for that answer. Gaelic broadcasting is not just vital culturally and socially, but delivers a positive economic impact. Its future strength, however, requires public sector broadcast status in legislation, akin to that enjoyed by Welsh language broadcasters. I suggest to my right hon. Friend that the forthcoming Media Bill will be an ideal opportunity to provide that.

**Julia Lopez:** I entirely appreciate that certainty of future funding and particularly a strong partnership with the BBC are important for MG Alba to deliver for Gaelic speakers. It has legitimate concerns, and I have been examining its proposals in detail. Together with my officials, I am trying to decide whether the forthcoming Media Bill is the best mechanism to address those concerns, or whether the issues are better addressed

through the future funding review of the BBC and the subsequent BBC charter review. I assure my hon. Friend that I am very engaged in these issues and want to get to a good solution.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): There was a time when Gaelic was spoken in much of my far-flung constituency; that is not the case today. I regard Gaelic as not just a Scottish but a United Kingdom treasure. I respectfully suggest to the Minister that she might benefit from coming to the Gàidhealtachd, where Gaelic is spoken in the Western Isles, perhaps in parts of my constituency, to see what needs to be done to help it.

**Julia Lopez:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind invitation, and for highlighting the importance of Gaelic not just as a language but as a cultural asset for our country that we should be proud of. I hope that he feels assured that I have been listening to the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) about MG Alba and wish to ensure that it has a sustainable future.

#### Channel 4 Privatisation

3. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Whether it remains the Government's policy to privatise Channel 4. [901742]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** Channel 4 is a great UK success story, and in a rapidly changing media landscape the Government of course want it to thrive in the long term, while maintaining its distinctiveness. I am currently looking at the business case for the sale of Channel 4 and will set out further details to the House in due course.

**Mr Sharma:** I just want to clarify in my own mind that the right hon. Lady has no plans at present to carry on the previous policy of privatising Channel 4.

Film4 films have collectively won 37 academy awards and 84 BAFTAs—a record that any Hollywood studio would be proud of. Its films include important examples of the British Asian experience, such as “Bhaji on the Beach”. Does the Minister recognise that the privatisation of Channel 4 would jeopardise the only major private investment stream in British film?

**Michelle Donelan:** As I said in answer to the hon. Gentleman's first question, I am thoroughly reviewing the business case, which is the right thing to do—I am an evidence-based politician. We have a fantastic, growing creative industry in this country, which relies on platforms such as Channel 4. That is, of course, part of the decision-making process.

**Mr Speaker:** It is very good at covering rugby league at the moment.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Privatising Channel 4 could result in over 1,000 jobs being lost from the supply chain in our nations and regions. Ministers cannot claim to support levelling up while letting this loss go ahead. When will they finally confirm that they know privatising Channel 4 is the wrong decision for our economy, regions and culture?

**Michelle Donelan:** As I have said, I am reviewing this business case and can assure all Members that I am doing it thoroughly. I am basing my decision on evidence. I am listening to representatives of the sector, all Members of the House and the public, and I will come back shortly with our decision.

### Grassroots Sport: Funding

4. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of funding for grassroots sports. [901743]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** I share hon. Members' passion for grassroots sport, which brings communities together. I have seen that in my own community, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman has in his. It makes people happier and healthier. Since 2019 we have worked with Sport England to invest over £1.16 million in Bradford East. Last year, Sport England received almost £350 million from taxpayers and the national lottery, which we will continue to support.

**Imran Hussain:** The Secretary of State is absolutely right; Bradford's grassroots football, cricket and boxing clubs are a vital support network for many of Bradford's young people. Yet, despite the outstanding work of the volunteers who run them, many have been forced to close their doors because of Government cuts, underfunding and, frankly, lack of support. I hear her saying that over £1 million has been put into my constituency, but I have not seen the effects in our grassroots boxing, football and cricket clubs. Will she commit to ensuring that grassroots clubs get the support they need in the forthcoming sports strategy? I invite her to come to my constituency to see for herself the fantastic work done by grassroots clubs.

**Michelle Donelan:** Either the Sports Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), or I would be delighted to come to Bradford East. I think that £1.16 million is a substantial amount for one constituency, and I will remain committed to ensuring that we invest in grassroots sports because they are vital in bringing communities together.

### Child Protection Online

5. **Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect children online. [901744]

11. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect people online. [901750]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** The inquest into Molly Russell's tragic death further highlights that the No. 1 priority of the Online Safety Bill has to be protecting children and young people. I commit to strengthening that aspect and getting it back to this House imminently.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** I welcome what my right hon. Friend says about the imminent return of the Online Safety Bill. She knows that children and their families

have already waited far too long for the Bill to progress. Will she apply a similar sense of urgency to what will happen once the Bill has passed? As she knows, a series of actions are required of Ofcom and the Government to bring this regime fully into force. Will she undertake to ensure that the Government's part in that happens swiftly?

**Michelle Donelan:** My right hon. and learned Friend has been a huge advocate of this Bill, on which he has worked personally. He is absolutely right that it is not just about getting the Bill through this place and the other place; it is also about ensuring the Bill works on the ground and makes a tangible difference in protecting children and young people, day in and day out. I will commit to looking at this and ensuring that we go as fast as possible.

**Elliot Colburn:** I recently had the privilege of meeting a group of Carshalton and Wallington mums who brought to me the very sad case of their children who had accessed illegal drugs through social media companies such as Instagram and Snapchat, which sadly resulted in their taking an overdose and dying. These mums are inspirational in sharing their story. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Online Safety Bill will provide the protections they need to ensure that no other children go through the same thing?

**Michelle Donelan:** I completely concur with my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic advocate for his constituents. Selling illegal drugs is a priority illegal offence in the Online Safety Bill. Platforms will need not only to take content down, but to take proactive steps to prevent drug dealers from abusing their services. If platforms do not remove this content quickly, they will face tough enforcement measures, including huge fines, and the same goes for any other illegal content.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): One thing the coroner highlighted was the effect of harmful algorithms that directed harmful content towards Molly Russell. Will the Minister undertake specifically to look into that issue and deal with that sort of harmful content, because the owners of Meta describe those as not being specifically harmful. It is worrying when the people who run these platforms do not see this as a problem.

**Michelle Donelan:** My Ministers and I have been looking at this area. One fundamental problem relates to the accountability of these companies and who is ultimately responsible for these algorithms. We have been looking at that and I look forward to updating the House as soon as we bring the Bill back.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Are we not playing a wonderful game at the moment, guessing who the Ministers are, Mr Speaker? I shall miss it when everything is stabilised. I chaired the Education Committee and looked at this area. The fact is that sophisticated, mendacious and quite evil people are involved in this; they are clever—they move. Minister, please do not underestimate what you are taking on.

**Michelle Donelan:** I do not think anybody is underestimating the scale of the challenge. We will be the first country in the world to really tackle this head

on to the extent that we will be doing. I have committed in the House to bringing this Bill back imminently, and that it will be one that will deliver, especially for children and young people, which is vital.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will have seen the research last week from Ofcom on children's online ages, which showed that because children routinely sign up for social media before the supposed minimum age of 13, using a false date of birth, they then continue to get older in how they appear online, as well as getting older in their actual age. That means that by the time they reach 14 or 15 huge swathes of teenagers appear to the social media platforms to be over 18. So how can we ensure that protections that are meant to protect children online do in fact protect them?

**Michelle Donelan:** I know that my right hon. Friend is passionate about this Bill and has played a leading role in helping to shape it to this point. I agree that unless social media platforms manage to assess the age of their users, they will fall foul of the Bill. Let us face it: for too long social media companies have got away scot-free. That will end with this Bill, because we will put in place protections for children that will be even stronger.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her determination to change things for the better, which is what we all want. In four out of five cases of online grooming the victims are girls. Recent studies have shown that to be factual. So what discussions has she had with the Department for Education about online awareness in schools? It is very important that this starts there, because if we start it there, we can stop these things later on.

**Michelle Donelan:** My ministerial team and I, as well as the Department, work closely with the Department for Education. Media literacy is of course essential, and the Online Safety Bill will strengthen Ofcom's media literacy functions. I look forward to further discussions about this with that Department.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State, Lucy Powell.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her post. She and I have worked together before and I look forward to working with her again in future.

Molly Russell's death was an avoidable tragedy and serves as a further call to action to regulate social media. We owe it to her family and countless others to do this without delay—this is beyond party politics. The coroner found that much of the self-harm and suicide material that Molly saw was not content she sought, but was pushed to her by engagement algorithms. That goes to the heart of what the Online Safety Bill was seeking to address. Although it was not perfect, the Bill had almost completed its passage here before the summer, and it was already long overdue. Does the Secretary of State accept that these delays are costing lives? Will she take up the offer that I have made to her in private to work together to do whatever it takes to get this Bill on the statute book as soon as possible?

**Michelle Donelan:** I would be delighted to meet the hon. Member. I have worked with her extensively over the years and I have a great deal of respect for her. I absolutely share her commitment to protecting children. That is why the Online Safety Bill really is my No. 1 priority. As I said, I cannot announce the business of the House today, but I can assure the House that the Bill will be brought back very soon—a commitment I also gave to Ian Russell. We must protect children from being allowed to be subjected by social media companies to the type of content that Molly Russell was subjected to, and the horrendous tragedy that followed. For too long, social media platforms have shirked their responsibilities for protecting children. It is time that we all worked together to put an end to that.

**Lucy Powell:** I very much welcome the Secretary of State's commitment and look forward to working together. To be fair to the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), she committed to the very difficult task of getting the Bill through, with all the vested interests and internal differences. The current Secretary of State says she is rewriting it, but I fear that will lead to further delay and disagreement. She is never going to satisfy those who dogmatically view this only through the lens of free speech. They do not understand that the issue is not the views expressed, but the power of the platforms to cause harm, which Ian Russell described as "monetising misery". Does she agree that sticking to the important principles of duty of care and regulating business models, algorithms and their impact is the best way of squaring this circle?

**Michelle Donelan:** I want to be absolutely clear: my intention is not to appease everybody; my intention is to ensure that we bring the Bill back as soon as we possibly can and that we prioritise protecting children and young people. The hon. Member will see that happen very shortly.

## Rural Broadband

6. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to expand broadband coverage to rural areas. [901745]

**The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** We are investing £5 billion in Project Gigabit so that hard-to-reach areas can get ultra-reliable gigabit speeds. We have already upgraded over 740,000 premises. National gigabit coverage has therefore rocketed to 71%, up from just 6% in January 2019. We have already launched procurements with a value of over £700 million to deliver gigabit connections to hard-to-reach homes and businesses across the UK. We recently signed our first contracts in north Dorset and Teesdale, with more coming soon.

**Helen Whately:** My constituents in Throwley and Wichling were incredibly disappointed to find that their bids for gigabit vouchers were unsuccessful, especially after they worked so hard to gather community support. While most people are able to use their broadband to do video calls, work from home, and stream movies and matches, those constituents cannot. Can my hon. Friend assure me that they will be getting fast broadband soon?

**Julia Lopez:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this case and for all the work that she and her team did to help those villages. I asked officials to look into this case, and they told me that the broadband supplier responsible for the projects in those villages did not put them forward for consideration as a voucher priority area, on the basis that they were not expected to deliver a gigabit-capable connection faster than our own Project Gigabit procurement in Kent. In good news, I can assure my hon. Friend that we are making very good progress on that procurement and we hope to be able to launch it in the coming weeks.

### Technology Platforms: Transparency and Accountability

7. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the transparency and accountability of technology platforms. [901746]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Damian Collins):** The Government are driving forward a digital regulatory approach that unlocks growth and boosts trust. As part of that, we are taking steps to improve transparency and accountability, including through the Online Safety Bill; data protection legislation that maintains rules for responsible usage; and digital markets legislation, which will promote competition in digital markets.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the recent behaviour of PayPal in arbitrarily removing certain accounts of campaigning and journalistic organisations without any warning or explanation? Will he consider how the Online Safety Bill can give greater protection for free speech by increasing the accountability of PayPal, Facebook and the other giant tech platforms?

**Damian Collins:** Absolutely. I agree with my right hon. Friend: it is really important that big tech platforms are transparent and accountable to their users in their terms of service for how they trade. That is important in the principle of how the Online Safety Bill works, both in protecting freedom of speech and in ensuring that companies enforce their platform policies correctly. In terms of digital markets, it is also important that customers know what fair access they have to markets and that they will be treated fairly by platforms, and that the platforms make clear what their terms of service are.

### Personal Data

8. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to give people in the UK more control over their data. [901747]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** We will create a new bespoke British data protection system that will give people around the world world-class data rights and control over their data, and greater ability to benefit from its responsible use, as well as maintaining data advocacy. For example, our Bill will create a better complaints system and provide the framework for the delivery of smart data schemes that will empower individual consumers

and business customers to access and share their data simply and securely with trusted third parties, enabling innovative services.

**Chi Onwurah:** On 1 October, the Government announced that they would be collecting, processing and storing all British smart meter data. This is despite assurances given over many years that that data was under the control of households and that only they could decide who accessed it, and that, without express permission, it would be used only for billing purposes. Indeed, in 2016, the then Home Secretary told me that smart meter data is protected and not under the Government's control. Will the Secretary of State set out to me how households in this country can control their smart meter data in the face of this chaotic and dysfunctional Government?

**Michelle Donelan:** I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member and discuss this further and also take this away to discuss with hon. and right hon. Members across Government.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901729] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**Mr Speaker:** He is not here. The Secretary of State can continue with business.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):** I want to start by paying tribute to my Department for its role in Her late Majesty's funeral and the Lying in State. At the same time, we have also been getting on with delivering the Government's priorities. In the coming weeks, we will, among other things, be announcing a new package of measures to assist broadband roll-out, bringing back the Online Safety Bill, providing an update on Channel 4 after reviewing the business case and updating the Gambling Act 2005 and the fan-led reviews.

T2. [901730] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): The Chiltern Open-Air Museum in my constituency is a much-loved part of the local community's culture and history and frequently used as a filming location. Sadly, a dispute with the developer, who owns the freehold to the museum's land, has forced it to cancel the Halloween spectacular and give up several other opportunities to raise vital funds on which the museum relies. Does the Minister agree that museums such as these are essential in preserving local and national history, and will he join me in supporting local efforts to allow the museum to thrive?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of museums. Our Department is aware of the situation that she has raised and the Arts Council has been in direct contact, but I will keep a close eye on this and will keep her updated on any progress.

T3. [901731] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Having a good internet connection these days is as important as being connected to the electricity grid,

and yet there are still parts of West Worcestershire where my constituents struggle to put together consortia of vouchers to enable the roll-out. Can the Minister look urgently at the whole process and see whether she can find a quicker and easier way to get this essential service to every rural part of the country?

**The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting her particular concerns in West Worcestershire. We obviously share her desire to get great connections to everybody as quickly as possible. We are reviewing the voucher scheme and checking that it is working correctly at the moment and seeing whether it can be enhanced. I see from the figures that her West Worcestershire constituency is lower than average on gigabit connections, but we have an active procurement review under way and hope to be able to give her more details on that soon because we will be mopping up all the hard-to-reach areas of her patch.

T4. [901732] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Under the BBC's Digital First plans, the current "Look East" service based in Cambridge will be axed, meaning that news about my Luton South constituency will be covered by journalists in Norwich, some two-and-a-half hours away by car. Will the Secretary of State ask Ofcom to consider whether this would constitute a breach of the BBC's charter obligations, which require it to ensure that all audiences are able to fully engage with major local issues?

**Michelle Donelan:** I am happy to take the matter away and come back to the hon. Member.

T8. [901736] **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): Community clubs such as Accrington Stanley are at the heart of constituencies such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. The fan-led review is crucial in protecting community clubs and providing sustainability and fairness in the game. Can the Minister please update me on the Government's position on the fan-led review?

**Stuart Andrew:** I understand the importance of and the attachment that many fans have for the fan-led review and recognise that this is a very important sport nationally. Obviously, as a new Minister, I want to take the time to look at it in detail, which is what I am doing at the moment. I am pleased to say that my first meeting was actually with the fans' groups to hear their views first.

T5. [901733] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): With the men's competition kicking off last Saturday and the women's and wheelchair teams due to get going next week, the rugby league world cup is getting into its stride. To secure the legacy of this great event and Bradford's being city of culture 2025, I am backing an ambitious levelling-up bid to transform Odsal stadium, the iconic home of the Bradford Bulls, which is in my constituency. With the recent economic uncertainty, I am concerned that the bid could fall by the wayside. Will the Minister show Bradford that the Government are serious about levelling up and visit Odsal stadium with me?

**Stuart Andrew:** It seems, following the earlier question from the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), that I am going to have a day trip to Bradford, which I am more than happy to do, considering that it is right

next door to my constituency. I was pleased to be at the launch of the men's tournament; it is fantastic that we are hosting the rugby league world cup, and the hon. Lady rightly highlights Bradford's ambitious plans, particularly given its city of culture status. I would be more than happy to come and see her.

**Mr Speaker:** I will be there on Saturday to watch England.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): We need more full-fibre and gigabit-capable broadband in the Kettering constituency. Can we have it sooner rather than later?

**Julia Lopez:** I welcome my hon. Friend constantly holding my feet to the fire on Kettering's gigabit capability. He is actually above the national average, with 88% of premises in his seat having gigabit-capable broadband, but I am glad to say that we are doing more. We will be awarding a procurement next year to try to tackle all those bits we have not yet reached.

T6. [901734] **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): Despite Scottish Tory rhetoric, broadband and telecoms are entirely reserved to Westminster, but because of the slow pace of Westminster's roll-out the Scottish Government have had to invest £600 million in speeding up broadband roll-out, which the UK is now using as a springboard for its own roll-out. Can the Minister now promise that the Scottish Government will receive a proportionate share of the UK Government's £5 billion funding—money that the Scottish Government were forced to spend and should not have had to spend if the UK Government had had their act together?

**Julia Lopez:** My understanding is that some of the main challenges come from the Scottish Government's R100 programme, which is making the roll-out rather challenging. His colleagues in Scotland have asked for Scotland to have more than the per premises cap, basically asking us to give more money to Scotland than we are giving to other parts of the country. I do not think that is fair, and I do not think we should be paying for the mistakes of the regime.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): A year ago, I and a number of colleagues from across the House had to intervene when, due to poor governance, Derby County football club went into administration and came within a few days of going out of business before being rescued by local supporter David Clowes. Can the Minister assure the House and all football fans that the recommendations of the fan-led review will be implemented in full, so that we can get better governance in this important industry?

**Stuart Andrew:** Sadly, my hon. Friend's example demonstrates the need for reform within football. I can tell him that I am taking this matter incredibly seriously, which is why I want to take the time to review and ensure that we are getting this right. We want to give confidence to all the fans who enjoy this great sport.

T7. [901735] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Association of Photographers is extremely concerned about the Government's plans for copyright exemption for commercial text and data mining, which allows artificial intelligence companies to freely scan



the images created by photographers such as my constituent to generate new ones. Getty Images, the largest such platform in the world, has banned the upload and sale of such AI-created art. How will the Government protect the photography sector as that technology evolves?

**Julia Lopez:** I confess that, as the Minister for the creative industries, I share some of the hon. Lady's concerns. I will be meeting my ministerial counterpart who has the Intellectual Property Office in his portfolio to look at this matter, because I appreciate some of the issues the hon. Lady raises.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that UK radio listeners are able to find British broadcasters, including the BBC and commercial radio, in a world where access through smart speakers is controlled by global tech companies?

**Michelle Donelan:** The media Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech in May 2022 and the Government will introduce it when parliamentary time allows. We have been looking at including radio.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Charities in my constituency face the double whammy of more people needing urgent help and fewer people able to donate, given this Government's calamitous handling of the cost of living crisis. Just last month, Slough food bank reported a 66% increase in annual usage, with a staggering 888 food parcels handed out each month. As we approach the winter months and the situation inevitably worsens, what steps will the Government take to ensure that such organisations can operate throughout the winter?

**Michelle Donelan:** As the hon. Member will know, we introduced the energy price guarantee to help organisations with the cost of living, and are working with all sectors through the current challenging time. I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the matter further.

**Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Mr Speaker, I apologise to you and my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench for my discourtesy in not being here at the beginning of topical questions. Earlier this week, I met representatives from the creative industry. They would warmly welcome the media Bill if the Channel 4 provisions were dropped. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meet me to discuss this issue?

**Michelle Donelan:** I would be more than delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I want to push the Minister a little bit further, as he might appreciate. There is widespread support for the fan-led review. Okay, have the discussions about how it is going to be done, but can we have a commitment from the Front-Bench team that they are going to implement the principles of the review—an independent regulator, fairer distribution of funding, and an end to parachute payments?

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Gentleman is very good at pushing me on points, but I am sure he would accept that it is only right that I check all the details before making commitments. I assure him, though, that we will be publishing the White Paper very soon.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Is the Minister able to update the House on any discussions he has held with the premier league and the English Football League to encourage a fairer distribution of money throughout the Football League pyramid?

**Stuart Andrew:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met both organisations; as I say, my first engagement was with the Football Supporters' Association. It is right to listen to all those views, and we are aware of discussions that are happening across the various groups, but I recognise that reform is needed. That is the firmest commitment I can give at this stage.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State will, I hope, have been made aware that in the early hours of this morning, the main telecommunications cable to Shetland was cut. As a consequence, this morning, my constituents in Shetland have very limited access to telephone or broadband services, with all the implications that has for the emergency services, let alone local families and businesses. First, can the Secretary of State give me an assurance that we will get a full statement on what is happening? I am told at the moment that it could be two days before services are replaced. Secondly, in the longer term, can we have a proper look at the resilience of that service? It is just not acceptable for a community the size of Shetland to be left without telecommunications for this long.

**Michelle Donelan:** We can commit to get the right hon. Member an update before the end of play today. Of course, our roll-out is important, but resilience is equally important.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*

### Disclosure of Evidence

1. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure of evidence. [901755]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** It is an honour to serve as Attorney General for the second time, and to lead a legal profession that is the envy of the world and a Government Legal Department whose integrity is an example to multiple jurisdictions. I am very proud to hold that position. I also welcome the Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), to his place.

In May, this Government published the review of disclosure and amended the disclosure guidelines to deliver improvements for police, prosecutors and the victims of crime. The new guidelines feature an annex on data protection that will ease the burden on police, leaving them with more time on the beat and to investigate crime.

**Ian Levy:** Within Northumberland, there has been a review that highlights multiple failings in multi-agency communication, and states that lessons have been learned. However, I have been contacted by constituents, and it appears that similar failings are still happening. Will my

right hon. and learned Friend please reassure me and the people of Blyth Valley that steps are being taken to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend is quite right: disclosure is a very important issue, whether in Northumberland or any other part of this jurisdiction. Updated principles on accessing third-party material have strengthened privacy protections for victims, and mandate that officers must have clear written reasons in place before accessing any material such as, for example, therapy notes. My hon. Friend has made an important point about communication between the criminal justice agencies, and we are ensuring that that continues to improve apace.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that this is a very important matter in terms of miscarriages of justice. The Chairman of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), and I chair the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. Will he look at other countries' good practice on this, especially the United States?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are always looking and willing to look at how other jurisdictions practise in this sphere. Of course, it is a problem across western jurisdictions, because people now carry on their person so much more data capacity than ever before, which opens up a wide array of questions as to disclosure. The amended disclosure guidelines unequivocally state that indiscriminate access to personal records should never occur, and it is worth noting that the volume of suspects charged has continued to increase quarter on quarter, with a rise from 526 to 550 in quarter 3. That is an increase of 4.6%, so we are moving in the right direction on charges.

### Ukraine: Potential Russian War Crimes

2. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the investigation of potential Russian war crimes in Ukraine. [901758]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** The Government stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine as it defends itself from Russia's invasion. I am personally dedicated to supporting Ukraine's search for accountability and justice. I recently spoke to the Ukrainian prosecutor general, Andriy Kostin, and heard his important ongoing efforts to investigate and prosecute domestically Russia's actions on his country's territory, which are appalling. We discussed, among other things, UK support through the UK-US-EU Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group initiative, which will provide direct practical and advisory support to his office in Kyiv. The UK will continue to play a leading role to ensure accountability for Russia's actions in Ukraine.

**Giles Watling:** I thank the Attorney General for his answer. This abhorrent invasion is no longer focused on by the media as it should be, and there are atrocities going on every day. Does he agree that every crime committed by Russian soldiers must be taken into consideration and people must be held to account, as must their leader, Mr Putin?

**The Attorney General:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and he is right. The Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group was launched on 25 May by the EU, the US and the UK to ensure efficient co-ordination of respective efforts. It is a very complicated area, but we want to support accountability efforts on the ground. My colleague in the other place, Lord Ahmad, has already announced £2.5 million of UK support for that initiative and for elements of that organisation, including the deployment of mobile justice teams, and training for judges is already under way.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is obviously important that all the evidence the Ukrainians are gathering to seek out those who have carried out crimes is collated quickly. Is there any help that our Government can give the Ukrainians to do that? It is so important that those people are held accountable before the courts sooner rather than later. What can be done to expedite the process?

**The Attorney General:** Justice delayed is justice denied, and that is as accurate today as it ever was. We have to move at pace, while getting it right, and collating the evidence is important. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are doing everything we can to support the Ukrainians in every conceivable way, including in this area.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson, Angela Crawley.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the Attorney General back to his place; he is providing much needed continuity amidst the chaos. Bombings of civilians, conducting executions, torturing war prisoners and sexual violence—independent investigators have concluded that Russia has committed all those crimes. I have heard what the Government intend to do, but what specific steps will they take now and in the future to ensure that perpetrators face the consequences of their actions in an international court?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that. Of course, this is a cross-party issue. We want to see these horrific crimes brought to justice. We will do everything we can to support the Ukrainians in that effort, and we are working across the international community to do that. We have put money into mobile justice teams and training judges for the Ukrainians. We are doing everything we can and will continue to do more.

### Prosecution Rates for Rape and Sexual Assault: South-west England

3. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve prosecution rates of rape and sexual assault cases in the south-west. [901759]

6. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the rate of prosecution for rape cases. [901762]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** His Majesty's Government are committed to improving rape prosecutions and are investing across the justice system. Through Operation Soteria, prosecutors across the south-west

have helped to lead the way with a focus on joint working with the police and on early advice, and an enhanced service to victims.

**Luke Pollard:** Last week, Devon and Cornwall police were placed into special measures because of their failure to record crime and manage sexual offenders. Fewer than 20 people were convicted of rape in Devon and Cornwall out of 1,500 recorded offences last year. People are losing faith in the CPS and the police. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to extend the sexual offences backlog pilot from London and the north to include the south-west, with a clear focus on reducing the 1,000-day wait for rape victims to get justice in court?

**The Solicitor General:** Not least because I am a south-west MP, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. Work is already under way: I mentioned Operation Soteria in the south-west. Specifically in his Plymouth constituency, I know that work is going on with the violence against women and girls commission; I have seen that work and I commend the commissioners for it. There is also a conference happening in the next few weeks and I ask him to keep me updated.

More broadly, on the hon. Gentleman's substantive question, referrals from the police to the CPS are up for offences of rape, charges are up and prosecutions are up. I am determined that that positive work and positive trend must continue.

**Selaine Saxby:** In North Devon, I am repeatedly told by police that the CPS requires too much information before it can decide whether to prosecute, that there are many outstanding rape cases and that the delays that victims endure result in some feeling unable to wait the months or even years for cases to progress. Can I meet my hon. Friend to see what can be done to unblock the situation?

**The Solicitor General:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. She is right that the workload on our police and the CPS is high. Close working between the police and the CPS is vital. Hot off the press is the refreshed joint national action plan, which was published today and shows that the CPS has seen a 58% increase in charges. I know that she takes the issue incredibly seriously. I would be delighted to meet her, whether here or in her beautiful constituency of North Devon.

#### Prosecution Rates for Blocking Public Rights of Way

4. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in prosecuting protesters who block public rights of way. [901760]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** The Government continue to ensure that the police and prosecutors have the necessary tools to tackle the dangerous and highly disruptive tactics used by a small minority of protesters to wreak havoc on people going about their lawful daily lives. In relation to the Insulate Britain protesters, for example, the CPS has so far secured no fewer than 364 convictions in the magistrates court. It continues to take those cases to trial, which shows its resolute determination to bring those criminals to justice.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** On Tuesday, the House decided to criminalise grandmothers who hold prayer cards outside abortion agencies. At the same time, quite rightly, we brought in ever more new powers to deal with Just Stop Oil protesters. The difference is that the grandmothers will go away quietly, but the other protesters will keep turning up. There is no point having more and more legislation—we have so much legislation in this area—if the police do not enforce it and the CPS and the courts do not throw the book at these people and give them long custodial sentences.

**The Attorney General:** Of course, the sentencing of such individuals is a matter for our independent criminal justice system, but we have an offence of nuisance on the statute books, as well as offences such as obstructing the public highway, the powers of which have been increased to 12 months' imprisonment. The Public Order Bill is going through Parliament, which I was rather surprised that the Opposition did not support. As I have said, we are determined that those who seek to disrupt the normal lives of citizens meet the full force of the law. That is what should happen and that is what is happening. The Crown Prosecution Service and the police, as the operationally independent authorities, are working extremely hard in close partnership to bring those people to justice and see that they receive the punishment that they richly deserve.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I welcome the latest team of Law Officers to their places? I think I missed a stray Solicitor General in the summer recess, between the incumbent and the hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), but it is very hard to keep up these days.

We all know there are well-trusted laws to criminalise this type of behaviour, but is the Conservative party now opposed to all public protest and free speech? Reading its 2019 manifesto, I would have expected to see the Solicitor General and the Attorney General on the picket line opposing fracking, but last night they voted to allow fracking to go ahead, including, I presume, in their constituencies. If the Law Officers are prepared to break a clear promise in such a blatant and cynical way, what example does that set to others in upholding the rule of law?

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Gentleman's question is not of course on point to the question asked, but the reality of the matter is that the Labour party is embarrassed by the fact that it is on the side of the protesters, rather than those people who wish to go about their lawful duties, and that is why it did not support the Public Order Bill. The offence of public nuisance is available, it has a wide array of penalties available to it and we know the courts will use those powers. I think the Labour party ought to focus on supporting the British public, who wish to go about catching trains, driving along roads and going about their lawful business.

#### Crown Prosecution Service: Performance in Wales

5. **Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the Crown Prosecution Service in Wales. [901761]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** The CPS inspectorate recently inspected CPS Wales and commended the area for its strong performance—for example, in disclosure and its good handling of victims and witness care. The CPS maintains excellent relationships with its criminal justice partners and is driving improvements throughout Wales.

**Craig Williams:** The CPS and magistrates courts in Wales have done a terrific job. In fact, they were the first to recover from the pre-pandemic backlog. I recently met Jenny Hopkins, the excellent director of the CPS, and I would encourage and ask the Minister to come to Wales, especially a rural setting such as Montgomeryshire, and have a roundtable to discuss access to justice.

**The Solicitor General:** I heard about my hon. Friend's very productive meeting with the Chief Crown Prosecutor for Wales, and he rightly raises the excellent work that is being done by CPS Wales to address the magistrates court backlog. He is absolutely right that it is the first area to recover from the impact of covid, and I would be absolutely delighted to join him on a visit to Wales.

#### **Crown Prosecution Service: Effectiveness in Ensuring Access to Justice**

7. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in ensuring access to justice for the victims of crime. [901763]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** The CPS is committed to ensuring that victims of crime are properly able to access justice. Last year, the CPS commissioned independent research to better understand what victims want and need, and to identify areas for improvement. On 27 June, the CPS published its response to the research findings, setting out key areas of action to improve how it engages with victims, and this includes delivering a universal service offer for all victims of crime.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I thank the Attorney General for that response, but this Government's inability to prioritise victims is well documented. Today, the final report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse will be published. For these victims, their abuse is not historical; they live with it every single day, and they need justice. Will he commit to implement all the recommendations in full?

**The Attorney General:** This Government have repeatedly shown, and rightly so, our support for victims and prioritising the rights of victims. The CPS publishes yearly data—for example, on the victims' right to review scheme. Nearly 78,000 decisions were made that were eligible for the scheme, under 2,000 decisions were challenged and 270 were found to be wrong—that is 0.35%—but I want to apologise for any decisions that were wrong. Even in that tiny number, it is human lives that are involved. We have focused greatly on the rights of victims, and we will continue to do so.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Can I warmly welcome the reappointment of the Attorney General, and indeed the appointment of the excellent Solicitor General?

It is fantastic news that the number of rape prosecutions is now 30% higher than it was in the last quarter pre covid. Does the Attorney General agree that, if we are going to continue that progress, we need to widen the pipeline of referrals from the police? In that endeavour, we need to ensure that the redaction burden is reduced so that it is proportionate, so that those cases are passed to the CPS and victims get the justice they deserve.

**The Attorney General:** I commend my hon. and learned Friend for his time as Solicitor General. I reiterate, as he has done, that since the last time I was a Law Officer a year-plus ago, the number has increased by 30%, as he rightly says, which is extremely impressive. The CPS has set out its priority areas under the victim transformation programme and we are going to work to those.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I congratulate the Attorney General on what is, this time, his permanent appointment to the role—as much as anything can be considered permanent under this Government. I genuinely hope that he will succeed in restoring to the role of Attorney General some dignity, stability and—dare I say it?—sanity. Will he start by giving me a straight answer to this crucial question: will it be possible to impose real-term spending cuts on the Crown Prosecution Service without making charge rates, court backlogs, and victim support even worse than they are now?

**The Attorney General:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her question. As she knows, this Government have prioritised crime and the victims of crime, and we are, and always have been, the party of law and order. Whatever measures we have to take, including those we had to take when we first came in in 2010 after the appalling disaster of the previous Labour Government, we are focused on dealing with crime and the victims of crime—hence thousands more police officers now being appointed.

#### **Rwanda Relocation Policy**

8. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Government's policy to relocate people to Rwanda and other countries with (a) domestic law, (b) international law and (c) the 1951 Refugee Convention. [901765]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** By convention, whether the Law Officers have been asked to provide advice, and the contents of any such advice, is not disclosed outside Government.

**Chris Stephens:** Will the Attorney General confirm whether he shares similar views to those of his predecessor, the now former Home Secretary, who recently said that she wanted to see a front page of *The Telegraph* with a flight to Rwanda, and that that was her dream? Surely it is time to dream another dream, and scrap the cruel, inhumane Rwanda scheme in its entirety.

**The Attorney General:** I cannot speak to other people's dreams. I know the Scottish nationalists have their own dreams, which I do not think will ever be realised, because the Union of this country is what the vast

majority of the people of the United Kingdom want to maintain. The convention that I mentioned is important, and I intend to respect it. It protects the ability of Law Officers, as chief legal advisers to the Government, to give full and frank legal advice.

**Crown Prosecution Service:  
Performance in North-west England**

9. **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the Crown Prosecution Service in the north-west. [901766]

**The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson):** My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the Crown Prosecution Service north-west has consistently achieved a conviction rate that is higher than the national average. The area conviction rate was 84.4%, which is two percentage points higher than the national rate.

**Sara Britcliffe:** It is encouraging that since the CPS published its strategy on rape and serious sexual offences in 2020, the number of rape prosecutions has risen dramatically, with a 62.9% increase recorded. I know, however, that several of my constituents in Hyndburn and Haslingden are keen to see the specialist trauma training for all court staff, police and prosecutors that is being trialled. With such great interest in that scheme, will the Minister please update me on its findings?

**The Solicitor General:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of this issue, and more broadly for her support for victims not only in her area, but across the north-west and the country. She should look out for two further specific measures: first, Operation Soteria and its continued roll-out across the country; and secondly the victims Bill. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on both.

## Departure of Previous Home Secretary

10.33 am

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the departure of his predecessor.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Brendan Clarke-Smith)**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) resigned yesterday, following a contravention of the ministerial code relating to a breach of Cabinet confidentiality and the rules relating to the security of Government business. The Prime Minister has made clear the importance of maintaining high standards in public life, and her expectation that Ministers should uphold those standards, as set out in the ministerial code. All Ministers are personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct themselves in the light of the code, and for justifying their actions and conduct to Parliament and the public. However, Ministers remain in office only so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. She is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister, and the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards. My right hon. and learned Friend has explained her decision to resign, and to be clear, the information that was circulated was subject to Cabinet confidentiality and under live discussion within the Government. In the light of that, it would not be appropriate to discuss the specifics of the matter further in the House, but the Prime Minister is clear that the security of Government business is paramount, as is Cabinet responsibility.

The Prime Minister paid tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend's service as Home Secretary, noting that her time in office was marked by a

"steadfast commitment to keeping the British people safe"

and overseeing the

"largest ever ceremonial policing operation, when thousands of officers were deployed from forces across the United Kingdom to ensure the safety of the royal family and all those who gathered in mourning for Her Late Majesty The Queen."

The Prime Minister, having accepted my right hon. and learned Friend's resignation, acted decisively to appoint my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) as Home Secretary yesterday afternoon. I hold the new Home Secretary in the highest regard and note that he is already getting on with the job, keeping the people of the country safe.

**Yvette Cooper**: I notice that the Home Secretary is not in his place this morning, unless the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith), has been appointed Home Secretary in the last few hours. To be honest, nothing would surprise us at the moment, because this is total chaos. We have a third Home Secretary in seven weeks. The Cabinet was appointed only six weeks ago, but the Home Secretary was sacked, the Chancellor was sacked and the Chief Whip was sacked and then unsacked. We then had the unedifying scenes last night of Conservative MPs fighting like rats in a sack. This is a disgrace.

The former Home Secretary circulated a letter, and that seems to contradict what the Minister said. She said that the document was

"a draft Written Ministerial Statement...due for publication imminently"

that had already been briefed to MPs. Is that not true? Will he explain the answer to that? At what time did the former Home Secretary inform the Cabinet Secretary of the breach? Has a check been made of whether she sent other documents through personal emails, putting security at risk? Was there a 90-minute row about policy between the Prime Minister and the former Home Secretary? Given the huge disagreements we have seen in the last few weeks between the Prime Minister and the former Home Secretary on drugs policy, Rwanda, the India trade deal, seasonal agriculture, small boats—and with a bit of tofu thrown in over the lettuce for good measure—is anything about home affairs agreed on in the Cabinet?

What we know is that the former Home Secretary has been running her ongoing leadership campaign while the current one is too busy to come to the House because he is doing his spreadsheets on the numbers for whoever he is backing to come next. But who is taking decisions on our national security? It is not the Prime Minister, nor the past or current Home Secretaries. Borders, security and policing are too important for that instability, just as people's livelihoods are too important for the economic instability that the Conservative party has created. It is not fair on people. To quote the former Home Secretary, this is indeed a total "coalition of chaos". Why should the country have to put up with this for a single extra day?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith**: I am sure that the right hon. Member is aware that breaches of the ministerial code are a matter for the Cabinet Office, not the Home Office, and that is why I, not the Home Secretary, am here to answer the urgent question. The Prime Minister took advice from the Cabinet Secretary, as we saw from her letter, and she is clear that it is important that the ministerial code is upheld and Cabinet responsibility is respected. The Prime Minister expects Ministers to uphold the highest standards. We have seen her act consistently in that regard.

These were breaches of the code. The Prime Minister expects her Ministers to uphold the ministerial code, as the public also rightly expect, and she took the requisite advice from the Cabinet Secretary before taking the decision.

I am mindful that it is not usual policy to comment in detail on such matters, but, if some background would be helpful—I appreciate that much of this is already in the public domain—the documents in question contained draft Government policy, which remained subject to Cabinet Committee agreement. Having such documents on a personal email account and sharing them outside of Government constituted clear breaches of the code—under sections 2.14 and 2.3, if that is helpful to look at. The Prime Minister is clear that the security of Government business is paramount, as is Cabinet responsibility, and Ministers must be held to the highest standards.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Can the Minister assure us that the resignation was entirely due to a technical breach of the rules and that there was no policy disagreement between the Prime Minister and

the Home Secretary? Many of us had great confidence in the former Home Secretary's determination to ensure that we meet our manifesto commitments and that we should not replace mass migration from Europe with mass migration from the rest of the world. Can the Minister assure us that the policy remains exactly the same as it was under the previous Home Secretary and that we will stop mass migration? *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We cannot have conversations between Back Benchers and officials in the Box. *[Interruption.]* I know but, please, it is very distracting. Can we just make sure that it does not happen?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I can reassure him that this Government stand firm in tackling illegal immigration. Again, this is not my policy area, but I am sure the new Home Secretary will highlight that. I also reassure my right hon. Friend that he will have seen the resignation letter from the former Home Secretary where she outlines her reasons and that this was for a breach of the ministerial code, which is why she took the decision to resign.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson, Anne McLaughlin.

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Let us be clear: the idea that this Conservative Government are suddenly avid followers of the ministerial code is for the birds. What was the real reason for the Home Secretary's abrupt departure? Was it the case that she refused to implement immigration policies that were aimed at hitting high growth targets due to her dogmatic views? Speaking of dogmatic views, she and her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), both supported the dangerous and immoral Rwanda policy, flying in the face of their own officials' advice about the human rights implications. Will the Minister confirm that the old Home Secretary's departure marks the end of that abhorrent policy? Will it be consigned to the scrap heap where it belongs? I will just end by quoting Colin Yeo, a prominent immigration lawyer noted for his comprehensive analysis of home affairs matters. Today, he posted an assessment called "Braverman's legacy as Home Secretary". It simply says:

"Suella Braverman was Home Secretary for 43 days."

Does the Minister have anything to add to that?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I will not pre-empt Government policy. Work on looking at immigration as part of the growth plan is ongoing, but it would not be right for me to speculate on private discussions. That is a matter for decision by the Cabinet. We are here to discuss breaches of the ministerial code and the reasons for the Home Secretary's resignation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Home Affairs Committee member, Lee Anderson.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), makes a really good point: my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) would make an excellent Home Secretary. *[Laughter.]* But that is another conversation. I am sad to see the previous Home Secretary

leave. We had a conversation last week about small boats, the European Court of Human Rights and the excellent Rwanda scheme. But I am not convinced, so please convince me Minister, that the Cabinet, the Government and No. 10 were totally behind the previous Home Secretary.

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is ever the champion of secure borders and will no doubt continue to push that case. The Government have shown that we are committed to tackling illegal immigration and the criminal acts going on in the channel. Again, while I would not want to pre-empt the policies of the new Home Secretary, I am sure that when he next comes to the House, he will be able to give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): No Home Secretary, no Chief Whip, no Deputy Chief Whip—this truly is a hokey-cokey Cabinet, isn't it? In and out! What I want to ask the Minister directly is this: there is a world of difference between security and embarrassment for the Government, so can he tell us the security classification of the documents he is referring to? And can he tell us whether any other Ministers are using personal email accounts to conduct Government business?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** That is not information I am privy to and nor should it necessarily be in the public domain. It has been made very clear, from the statement at the start, that we are dealing with sensitive Government matters. It is important that sensitive Government documents are kept sensitive, and that is the reason the Home Secretary tendered her resignation. She recognises that the ministerial code was breached and that is why, as outlined in her letter, she resigned.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, will the Minister outline the Government's current policy on immigration, and will he tell the House whether it is under review at the moment?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I refer him to the previous answers given. Again, it is not for me to discuss policy today as much as it is to discuss the reasons for the resignation of the Home Secretary. However, I am sure that the new Home Secretary will come to the House at a future date to discuss that in line with the growth plan and our commitments to tackle immigration.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The fact that someone who defended Dominic Cummings and expressed her intent to break international law ever became our Home Secretary shows how broken the Government are under the Tories, but having a new Home Secretary does not solve the problem. This Government are gridlocked, endlessly U-turning and completely failing the public. Is it not clear that it is only through a general election that we can again bring stability and security to our country?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Again, I remind the hon. Lady that we do not live in a presidential system and, of course, that it is up to the Government to command the confidence of the House, which is the case. It has been

[*Brendan Clarke-Smith*]

made very clear that we will not be having a general election, but that is not the business for the House this morning. We are here to discuss the resignation of the Home Secretary, and I think we should stick to that, Mr Speaker, rather than trying to diverge into other areas.

**Mr Speaker:** I think I will decide that, though.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): My constituents were informed yesterday that 200 economic migrants will be accommodated in a hotel in Ipswich town centre, at great cost to the taxpayer, putting pressure on local public services and also putting local jobs at risk. Will the Minister confirm to me that the new Home Secretary will prioritise the unsustainable practice of accommodating illegal immigrants in hotels and throw support behind things like the Rwanda scheme, which the Labour party opposes? That is potentially the only way that we can nip this problem in the bud.

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. In terms of reassurance, we have seen the Prime Minister acting swiftly to get a new Home Secretary in place yesterday afternoon. That is because the Government are committed to pushing ahead with our agenda and important issues that need attention, such as those that my hon. Friend highlighted. That is why it is so important that we have that stability and why the Prime Minister took the action that she did.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is surely obvious that the Home Secretary resigned because it is now understood in Government that their immigration policy is a major block to economic growth. If that is the case, I welcome the change and the new Home Secretary, as we will if he ever graces the Chamber with his presence. When the Minister reports back to the Home Office, will he remind the Home Secretary that, when looking at immigration policy in relation to economic growth, we need urgent change in the law on visas for non-European economic area nationals seeking to work in our fishing industry?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Once again, I think it has been made clear that we should not respond to speculation. Private discussions are exactly that and we have come here today to deal with the facts. The facts are that the Home Secretary tendered her resignation for a breach of the ministerial code and that policy issues are something for another time.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): I was very disappointed to see the previous Home Secretary leave her role. She is a tremendous loss to those of us who hope that one day—just one day—this Government might finally get a grip on the small boats crisis. It would be a huge mistake if, upon her departure, the Government were to soften their tough line on preventing illegal immigrants entering this country. Will the Minister confirm that the Government's policy remains unchanged?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Although I may have already said that I cannot speak on behalf of other Ministers, I think my hon. Friend will have seen the Prime Minister's letter to the Home Secretary in which she was thanked

for her work. As well as the huge policing operation for Her late Majesty, there is the other work that she has been doing, such as clamping down on illegal immigration and keeping the British people safe, and I am sure that that work will continue.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): It has been widely reported that a member of the Cabinet was involved in a fracas during the vote last night. Was there a breach of the ministerial code? Will it be investigated?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** If the hon. Gentleman believes that such a breach has occurred, there is a set process for referring it, but I do not think that we should be commenting on speculation. As we saw in the press this morning, there are many stories about the Lobby last night. I was in the Lobby and certainly did not see what I believe other people have been saying they saw. Rather than commenting on speculation, I think we should stick to facts—and the facts are why we are here today.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): There seem to be as many theories about the real reason for the departure of the former Home Secretary as there are stories about what on earth went on—we all saw it—in the fiasco over which the Government presided last night. Can we have a bit more clarity about what has really gone on and what exactly is happening?

I have noticed that the Minister is being somewhat selective in whose questions about immigration he answers. I think it is quite important that he gives us some clarity, here and now, on whether he is seriously defending the abhorrent policies of the former Home Secretary.

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but—once again—we are not here today to discuss specific policies, we are not here to discuss gossip, we are not here to discuss rumours and we are not here to discuss what people think did or did not go on yesterday.

This is a completely different issue: we are here to discuss the resignation of the Home Secretary for a breach of the ministerial code. The Prime Minister has been very clear that she expects the highest standards in the Government and that all Ministers are expected to adhere to the ministerial code. When they have not done so—when they have breached it—they are expected to resign. That is what the former Home Secretary has done, as she outlined in her letter.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have heard right hon. and hon. Members talking about the former Home Secretary's comments about seeing refugees fly away. For a Member to talk in that way about people who are seeking refuge and fleeing war and persecution is deeply beneath this House. It is beneath the standards that we should have. The current Chancellor, who as we all know is probably the Prime Minister, has said that he wants to see a more compassionate conservatism. Will the new Home Secretary be outlining that compassion in dealing with and talking about people seeking asylum and refuge in our country?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Although I cannot discuss policy, I will say that this Government have shown compassion. I point not just to the aid that we give abroad, but to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and to what we did before



that with Syria and with Afghanistan. This country has a proud history of welcoming refugees. That will continue. The Government have been committed to it and will continue to be committed to it. I am certainly committed to it.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Appointing a Home Secretary who lasted for 43 days and a Chancellor who lasted for 38 is unprecedented and farcical. What does it say about the Prime Minister's judgment and fitness for office? She no longer has any support anywhere in this House. Should she not follow her former colleagues to the Back Benches, pausing only to ask for a Dissolution of Parliament?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that appointments are a matter for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has outlined what she expects from the conduct of Ministers, and when she has changed her appointments she has done so swiftly. She has been very clear that she expects us to work together towards our growth plan to deliver for the people of this country. That is why she has taken the actions she has taken.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): The former Home Secretary got her jotters because she was on manoeuvres. The Cabinet at large is on manoeuvres to find out who will replace the Prime Minister, but the de facto Prime Minister—the Chancellor—did not want anybody else's manoeuvres competing with his own. Is that not the truth? It is nothing to do with a breach of the code.

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** The proof is in the resignation letter of the former Home Secretary. She herself outlined the reasons why she resigned from her position. She has been very clear about the ministerial code and about which areas of it she has breached. As we have said, other matters are to be treated separately. Once again, we are here today to discuss why the former Home Secretary resigned; we are not here to discuss other matters that involve internal party politics.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister may not want to discuss immigration policy today, but I hope he will share my deep concern at the written answer that I received from the Home Office on Tuesday, which revealed that nearly 900 asylum-seeking children under 16 had been accommodated in hotels. According to a report published this week by the chief inspector of borders and immigration, some of the hotel staff do not even have Disclosure and Barring Service clearance. Will the Minister go back to the Home Office immediately after this session and urge it to take action to get those children out of those hotels and into a place of safety?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I am happy to pass that question on to those at the Home Office so that they can provide the hon. Lady with the information she seeks. Of course, we remain committed to safeguarding children, whether they are in this country or those that this country has received.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Minister has referred to the former Home Secretary's letter of resignation. In that letter, she said:

"the document was a draft Written Ministerial Statement...due for publication imminently. Much of it had already been briefed to MPs."

Can the Minister confirm that that is the case? I suspect that it is the case, and if so, we all know full well what the real reason for her resignation was, do we not?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I think I covered this earlier, but I am happy to repeat what I said for the hon. Gentleman's benefit. Having this information in a personal email account and then sharing it outside Government does constitute a clear breach of the code. Members may wish to look at sections 2.14 and 2.3 if that would be helpful, but the Prime Minister has been clear that the security of Government business is paramount. That is why we hold Ministers to the highest standards, and that is why the Home Secretary tendered her resignation.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): This is a mess. I appreciate that the Minister is having a really bad time having to defend it, but may I ask whether he has asked other Cabinet Members whether they have shared sensitive documents in their personal emails? Have they been asked that question? Has this been extended to other platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram or Signal? Will there be a full check of the former Home Secretary's phone to ensure that not just personal email but other social networks and communication apps may have been used?

At the moment, the Minister is not reassuring the House or the public that the safety of our sensitive national security is being properly looked at by the Government. Can he give us that reassurance, and if he does not know the facts, will he come back to the House with a full disclosure of what apps were used, what documents were shared, and whether every single member of the Government has been checked?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important for documents to be kept secure. That is why such material is kept separate from personal emails and so on. This is something that Ministers—including me, as a new Minister—are always reminded of: we are given a big thick rulebook that we have to read.

We have made it clear that when there are breaches, there is a method for reporting them. We will of course take advice from the Cabinet Secretary regarding that, and I am sure that if there are further breaches, Members will be made aware of them in future.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The dogs in the street can see the chaos at the heart of this Government, and the departure of the former Home Secretary—the full truth of which we still do not know, even after what has been said today—is not even the latest example of that chaos. As we face huge economic challenges and a "cost of Tory" crisis, we have probably not needed stronger and more decisive leadership this much since world war two. Does the Minister think that the UK has the strong and decisive leadership that it needs?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I absolutely do have that strong and decisive leadership, and it was strong and decisive leadership that received the resignation of the former Home Secretary and then appointed another Home Secretary on the same afternoon.

[Brendan Clarke-Smith]

As the Prime Minister has made very clear, she wants to move forward. She wants to move quickly to deliver for the people of this country. That is why appointments have been made, and given the breadth of the talent on the Back Benches that we currently have, there is a wide pool of talent from which to choose. I am glad that we are in that position, rather than having to send our Front Benchers on training courses as the Opposition have had to do recently.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): Increased immigration would tackle labour shortages and increase the tax take and ending the hostile environment would vastly improve Government efficiency. Given that growing the economy and cutting Government spending are supposed to be Government priorities, when will we hear from the new Home Secretary about how Home Office policy is going to align with the Prime Minister's stated aims?

**Brendan Clarke-Smith:** If increased immigration is the SNP's policy, that is for them. In our policies, we have been clear that we want to attract the brightest and best talent to this country while making sure that we have a firm but fair immigration system. Today is not a day for policy, but I am pleased that we have replaced the Home Secretary swiftly and that we are able to continue the good work that we are currently doing in these areas.

## Chinese Consul General: Manchester Protest

11 am

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to make a statement on the role of the Chinese consul general, who it now appears took part in the assault of Bob Chan.

**The Minister for the Americas and the Overseas Territories (Jesse Norman):** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question and deeply aware of the strength of feeling in this House and the other place about the scenes of violence at the consulate of the People's Republic of China in Manchester on Sunday afternoon. I am happy to provide an update on our response. You have been kind enough, Mr Speaker, to indicate that you will allow me to speak for a couple more minutes to set out the position.

As the House will know, on Sunday afternoon officials were in touch with Greater Manchester police regarding the incident. On Monday, officials spoke to the Chinese embassy to express our very serious concerns at the reports and demand an explanation. FCDO officials were clear that all diplomats and consular staff based in the UK must respect UK laws and regulations. On Tuesday, I announced in this House that the Foreign Secretary had issued a summons to express His Majesty's Government's deep concern at the incident and demand an explanation for the apparent actions of the staff at the consulate general.

Following my statement, the Chinese chargé d'affaires attended a summons at the FCDO in his capacity as acting ambassador. For the avoidance of any doubt, I should say that the Chinese ambassador is currently out of the UK and it is standard practice in such circumstances to summon the chargé d'affaires. I should also be clear that receiving an official summons from the Foreign Secretary is not, as has been described, a light rap on the knuckles but the delivery of a stern message, well understood within the context of diplomatic protocol. It is customary for senior officials to deliver such messages. These summons are not an invitation for an ambassador to have an audience with the Foreign Secretary or Ministers; in any case, given that the chargé d'affaires was involved, it was doubly appropriate that they should be delivered by a senior official.

In the summons the official set out that peaceful protest is a fundamental part of British society and that everyone in the United Kingdom has the right to express their views peacefully and without fear of violence. He reiterated our clear expectation that diplomatic and consular staff should conduct themselves in accordance with UK law. We have made it absolutely clear to the Chinese embassy that the apparent behaviour of consulate general officials during the incident, as it appears from the footage—more of which is coming out, even as we discuss this—is completely unacceptable.

The independent police investigation is now under way. Greater Manchester police have been clear that there are many strands to what is a complex and sensitive inquiry and that it may take some time. As the Foreign Secretary has said, we await the details of the investigation, but in the meantime I have instructed our ambassador

to deliver a clear message directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing about the depth of concern at the apparent actions by consulate general staff. Let me be clear that if the police determine that there are grounds to charge any officials, we would expect the Chinese consulate to waive immunity for those officials. If it does not, diplomatic consequences will follow.

Finally, allow me to reiterate to the House the value that we place on the Hong Kong community in the UK. When the national security law was imposed on Hong Kong in 2020, this Government acted immediately in announcing the scheme for British national overseas status holders and their dependants. Since then, more than 100,000 people and their families have made the decision to move to the UK to live, work and make it their new home. I want to put on the record, here, now, again and officially, a reaffirmation of our unwavering support for them and our commitment to their safety. They are most welcome here. Recognising the interest that this issue has across the House, the Government will seek to update the House on this matter next week.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for granting this urgent question, which follows Tuesday's urgent question secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns).

It is worth reminding the House of what happened in the Chinese consulate's grounds on Sunday, where there was an appalling attack on a peaceful protester. We saw appalling videos of Bob Chan being dragged into the consulate's grounds and seriously abused, and it now appears that the consul general played a part in that physical attack.

Mr Chan is a Hong Kong refugee whom we have welcomed over here. I and others on both sides of the House are working together to help people get out of Hong Kong, and that community now feels very frightened by what the Chinese Government's representatives are doing in the UK. Mr Chan gave a statement to the media for the first time yesterday. His wife and child were in the room, and it was a very moving statement. He spoke of how badly bruised and damaged he is, and how frightened he is. I thought it was very brave of him, because he now fears being targeted by the Chinese Communist party here in the United Kingdom.

Overnight, we discovered that the consul general has admitted that not only did he take part in the attack but that he was responsible for, in his own words, pulling Mr Chan's hair and tearing his scalp. That is the consul general, let alone the others who were there.

I have worked with the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China and others in this House to help Hong Kong refugees, and I credit the Government for their work to get those with British national overseas passports over here. I now urge the Government to be much clearer than just using diplomatic language; I urge them to make it clear, in the light of this new evidence, that it is not just unacceptable that any consular individual should have taken part in anything like this, but that any consular individual who is proved to have been a perpetrator of this outrageous and violent attack on Mr Chan will immediately be made *persona non grata* and sent back to China. The Government have the diplomatic power to dismiss them. Whether or not there are criminal proceedings, the fact is we do not want them here in the UK and they must go.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to come to the Dispatch Box and show the resolution that is necessary to send that message to China. He should ignore what other people and officials might say about being careful of tit for tat, get to the Dispatch Box and simply say, "They will leave the United Kingdom. Anyone involved in that attack is not welcome, and the ambassador will be informed of that forthwith."

**Jesse Norman:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his further remarks. We should be absolutely clear that participating in an assault, if that is what is determined to have happened, is completely outside the expectations of our rule of law. If such a thing had taken place in front of the British consulate in Shanghai—that question was raised in the House only two days ago—we would, of course, refer the matter to the local policing authorities, as we would have expected in this case. I take his point, which he makes very strongly.

My right hon. Friend is also right to insist, as he insisted during Tuesday's urgent question, that the diplomatic channel and the legal channel are distinct. I have seen the footage he describes, and I think it looks very black and very damning, but we are going through a process and we need to make a factual determination. Once that is done, and if the situation is found to be as we fear—that is to say there has been a criminal offence of some kind—diplomatic consequences will follow.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the shadow Minister, Catherine West.

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this urgent question, for yesterday's interview with Mr Chan and for his work on this matter.

This is yet another complete failure by the Government. Instead of making a statement to this House, which would be the normal way of carrying on, Members have had to secure a second urgent question. What is more concerning is the outrageous admission of the Chinese consul general that he did, in fact, assault Hong Kong democracy protesters in Manchester, which he described as his duty.

The Government's handling of this issue has been a complete mess. The Minister will know that Labour called for the Chinese ambassador to be summoned so that an explanation could be demanded, but a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office statement confirmed that, in a stunning abdication of the Government's duties, a civil servant held the meeting with Minister Yang, rather than the Foreign Secretary or a responsible Minister. Although I have the upmost confidence in the abilities of FCDO officials to fulfil their responsibilities, there are moments in foreign policy when only an elected Minister will do. Sadly, it appears that what this chaotic Government have unleashed upon the country through their failed economic agenda is now hampering Ministers' ability to stand up for the most basic rights we hold dear.

The Minister has the chance to send a clear message not only to the Chinese Government, but to the Government in Myanmar and any other country that might have a repressive regime and where refugees fear for their safety in this country. He will know that on

[Catherine West]

12 May, from this Dispatch Box, we challenged the Government to come forward with a comprehensive safety plan for Hong Kong nationals and others, so I have two questions. Will he meet those from the embassy without any delay to communicate the strong message from MPs about the importance of peaceful protest in this country? Is it the case that Greater Manchester police have not yet received the CCTV footage because the consul general is refusing to hand it over?

What will the Minister do to tackle this problem? Is it possible for him to expel the individual and then for that individual to apply to return? If it were that way round, we would at least know that the Government had taken the strongest action possible.

**Jesse Norman:** I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. She is right to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his interview with Mr Chan. It was an important moment and my right hon. Friend deserves congratulation from across this House on that. As for what the hon. Lady said, I do not think she can have listened to what I said, which is a pity. The ambassador is not in the UK and has not been since before the beginning of this week, so he is not available for any kind of diplomatic interaction. In any case, the chargé d'affaires is the appropriate person for this kind of exchange. The last time an ambassador was summonsed to a meeting with a Minister—indeed, the Foreign Minister—was following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That gives a sense of the way in which the diplomatic niceties work out.

On CCTV and the Greater Manchester police, I cannot comment on that as it is a matter outside the purview of the Government. However, if the Chinese consulate is not giving up any CCTV that it has, I would certainly encourage it to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Alicia Kearns.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome this urgent question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. It is clear that the House is unhappy with the course that the Government have taken and I must challenge the Minister on some of the comments he has made this morning. It is not “apparent” involvement; there are no ifs or buts here. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has said, the consul general has not only admitted that he is responsible, but praised his own role in these actions and said that he would do it again. It is a political decision to expel, not a policing one. Will the Minister therefore confirm that, as he suggested from the Dispatch Box just now, his preference is to prosecute these individuals and see them in British prisons? Secondly, what are the diplomatic consequences that he references? Are they expulsion? We need plain speaking at this time. The House is clearly united in its position and I urge the Government to listen to it.

**Jesse Norman:** I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for that. She has made clear her view that a crime was committed, and that is the view that many others have taken, but it is not a determination of fact

at the level we would need. She may have missed the portion of what I said earlier to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green about the fact that we recognise that the diplomatic channel and the legal are separate, but they are not separate as regards a determination of fact. Those are the proper grounds for us to make a determination as a Government. As regards the political desire, we will be looking at the fact situation as it is brought forward and at the options. She may have missed this too, but I said that I would expect there to be an update to the House next week, as further events play themselves out. We will make a judgment in due course on that basis.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): This is a serious diplomatic incident. As others have said, the violent clash between pro-democracy protesters and officials at the Chinese consulate is disturbing and goes directly against the tenets of diplomacy, freedom of speech and protest. Bob Chan, who fled Hong Kong for his life, was pulled through the gates into the consulate and beaten by staff. He was left with cuts and bruises to his face, and video footage shows his hair being pulled by the Chinese consul general, who has already asserted that that was his “duty”.

The SNP condemns in the strongest terms this violence against peaceful protesters and calls for an urgent investigation. If the individuals responsible for such violence cannot be criminally prosecuted due to diplomatic immunity, they must be formally expelled from the UK. What action will the Minister commit to taking to hold the consul general to account, in both domestic law and international law?

**Jesse Norman:** I have set out the actions that we are proposing to take at the moment. Of course, as I have said in terms, we recognise the seriousness of this matter. We also recognise the seriousness with which the House takes the matter. As to the consul general’s remarks about it being his “duty”, I think they are sufficiently absurd not to require comment from the Dispatch Box.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the steadfast support that you have continued to show those of us sanctioned by China.

The consul general seems to have forgotten that he was in Manchester, where we allow free speech, rather than Lhasa, Hong Kong or Xinjiang, where peaceful demonstration is routinely met by violence from the authorities. This does not require “clear” messages “in due course” as the Minister has just said; it requires strong action now. That involves chucking out some of these people and posting additional police outside every Chinese Government establishment in this country to make sure that no more peaceful demonstrators are attacked in this way. Many Uyghur and Tibetan families already feel intimidated; now they can be dragged into Chinese premises and beaten up, or worse.

**Jesse Norman:** My hon. Friend is right to raise the contrast between our own rule of law and the deplorable, despicable experience that has been meted out to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. He will know that only last week the UN Human Rights Council debated this matter on

the back of an extraordinarily damning report by former President Bachelet of Chile, and that is now in the public domain.

As regards police support, I think it is a fact that the demonstration was notified to Greater Manchester police and it was on hand at the time, so it is not absolutely clear that police support, as such, is what is required. There clearly has been some kind of failure in this case, and we need to work out—if there was—what it was.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Yesterday, I joined Bob Chan in a press conference in which he bravely detailed his awful ordeal in my constituency. In an interview with Sky News reporter Inzy Rashid, the Chinese consul general in Manchester confirmed that the footage did show him destroying banners and assaulting a protester, which he argued was his “duty”. The hubris and above-the-law attitude of the consul general is sickening. Will the Government stop dragging their feet and take immediate action by declaring the consul general *persona non grata*?

**Jesse Norman:** Of course, the hon. Gentleman too has engaged very closely with Mr Chan, and very welcome that is too. I am sure that everyone around the House would congratulate him and thank him for his support on that. He revisits questions that I have already answered at some length. I have announced that we have put in place a series of measures, which we are going through now. In due course, we will expect to update the House on progress in this developing situation.

**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your continued efforts in helping us to hold the Chinese to account in this House.

There is another protest this weekend in Manchester. Has the Minister contacted Greater Manchester police to ensure that those protesters will have their protection, which they clearly have not had to date?

**Jesse Norman:** I personally was not aware of any further demonstrations, but the House has now been made aware of them. I will ensure that officials make some notification of that. This is a Home Office matter, so it will go through the Home Office. Even within the Home Office network of relationships, our police are independent of Government, and rightly so for the best rule-of-law reasons, so we will respect that. I am not sure yet that what happened here necessarily was a failure of policing. In this case, it certainly appears that way, and we expect the Greater Manchester police to be able to do whatever they can the next time round.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Frankly, this is now just ridiculous. I hope the Minister can see the force of the will of the House and that it helps him in what he needs to do next. Article 41 of the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations states that diplomats need to

“respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State.”

Article 9 states that the receiving state has the right to declare that person “*persona non grata*” at any time with no explanation. The Crown Prosecution Service then says that that is done when the police have sufficient evidence to justify court proceedings. Given the video and the admission, the lack of action by the Government

is frankly laughable at this point. This is now a political decision. Can the Minister explain why he is not making them *persona non grata* now?

**Jesse Norman:** The hon. Lady quotes the convention, and it is very interesting, but she skated over the key phrase, which is when police have “sufficient” evidence, and we are not in that position yet. When we are, as I have assured the House, there will be consequences if that evidence proves to be dispositive.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I understand that my right hon. Friend is a diplomat, but does he not understand that if this assault took place on the streets of this country, the individuals responsible would be in prison cells and before magistrates? The situation is therefore very simple: every single day that those responsible remain on these shores is a disgrace and a stain on our society. Can we not take the decision now to encourage my right hon. Friend and his colleagues to expel the people responsible today?

**Jesse Norman:** I fully recognise that the House has a very strong view of this, but if this apparent offence had taken place elsewhere on the streets of the United Kingdom, it would be subject to the same kind of police investigation and determination and, potentially, a prosecution as a result.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his post, because I know him to be a decent, intelligent and honourable man. He talks of diplomatic niceties, but the time for diplomatic niceties is long, long past. Does he think that the Chinese Government care about diplomatic niceties? Of course, what the Minister should be doing is saying to the ambassador, “Get yourself back to Britain, so that you can meet with the Minister. If you don’t get back, it will be a Minister who will be meeting with the *chargé d’affaires* on Monday morning, or preferably tomorrow, and, for that matter, we will be expelling the consul general tomorrow because he has clearly been engaged in something that would have got him arrested if it had happened on the streets of the United Kingdom.”

**Jesse Norman:** The fact of the matter is that we have already laid out an approach to this. As I said, the last time an ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Secretary was in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are diplomatic channels through which these things occur, and we need to respect them. As regards the question of arrest, an individual might have been arrested, or they might not have been; that is at the discretion of the police. That remains the case whether they are outside the embassy or on any other parts of our streets.

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): Can the Minister outline what tangible steps have been taken to protect the Hong Kong community, Tibetans and Uyghurs from intimidation, threats and actual use of violence from the Chinese state on UK soil—tangible steps?

**Jesse Norman:** The hon. Gentleman knows that we have opened the British national overseas channel. We have offered support from the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and those

[*Jesse Norman*]

individuals remain under the rule of law and therefore the purview of the police, as would any other residents in this country.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The right to protest is a British value that stems from 1819 and the Peterloo massacre in our great city, which is why this Government's inaction is gnawing at our moral core. Powerlessness corrupts, and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely; the Government are being sclerotic in this case, if that is not part of the wider malaise. However, I too know the Minister to be an honourable man, so in that spirit can he tell us what discussions he has had with either the Mayor of Greater Manchester, the leader of Manchester City Council or Greater Manchester police to reassure the people in our great city that action will be taken?

**Jesse Norman:** The hon. Gentleman is a Manchester MP and I respect the force of his passion on this issue. As with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), there is nothing more deadly than when a member of the Opposition is kind about the gentleman at the Dispatch Box, so I am aware of the danger there. I would correct the hon. Gentleman on the issue of the rule of law and due process in this country; it goes back way before Peterloo, and one would think of the codification or formalisation of legal changes in the 17th century, if not earlier. He also brilliantly misquotes Lord Acton. On Greater Manchester police, that is a matter for the Home Office, but I can be absolutely certain, as can he, that they will be following the debate with considerable interest.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): A few moments ago, the Minister characterised the consul general's comment that it was his "duty" to commit an act of violence as absurd. With the greatest of respect to the Minister, whom I like very much, I think it was sinister and menacing. It is not just that this House cares about seeing the consul general and others involved in this incident facing immediate diplomatic consequences, as he calls them. Hong Kong nationals now obtaining refuge in my constituency also need reassurance that the Government take their security seriously. As long as those people remain in Manchester and in this country, they do not have that reassurance.

**Jesse Norman:** If I may say so, I do not think the hon. Lady is right about the position I have taken. We have been perfectly clear about the concern felt across interested bodies, parties and groups in the UK, particularly Hong Kong residents here and people who have come from Hong Kong. That is why I ended my statement with a very specific message of support to them. I have also outlined to the House the measures that we have put in place in the other Departments focused on those people. It is true that they too would expect to live under the rule of law and our police, and in general Greater Manchester police do a sterling job, as I am sure any Manchester MP would say, of protecting the wellbeing of the people of Manchester. I am sure that they will continue to extend that privilege, courtesy and protection to Hong Kong residents.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): I was not going to intervene until I listened to the Minister's responses. There can be no question here of a failure of the

Manchester police. No one would have expected a bunch of thugs to come running out of an embassy and beat people up on the streets of Britain. Will the Minister think for a minute about how that appears and how his answers make our country look? We look supine and weak. The evidence is absolutely clear, and he should be stating that and making it clear that the Government will act, and act swiftly. I get no urgency from the Minister.

**Jesse Norman:** I am afraid that is hopelessly untrue. We take this matter extremely seriously: we are acting on it, we have had two urgent questions on the matter and we have different Departments engaged and involved. I have also now had it confirmed to me that officials have been in touch with Greater Manchester police and will remain so. Of course I mean no criticism of anyone in that fine, august body of policemen and policewomen; we continue to look to them to maintain the kinds of standards of policing that they always have done in that city.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It strikes me that there is no dubiety in this House about the appalling scenes we have all witnessed. As a signatory to the Sino-British joint declaration, the UK has not only a diplomatic but a moral responsibility to the people of Hong Kong, especially the large numbers who came to the UK under the new visa scheme. Does the Minister not accept that there is a need for clear action to make sure that Hong Kong people, Uyghurs and Tibetans feel safe and valued here?

**Jesse Norman:** Of course I do. The hon. Lady may recall that on Tuesday, I announced that the British national overseas channel had been extended to include adult relatives of those who are already entitled to its benefits. I have also outlined to the House not just our very warm and enthusiastic embrace of the people of Hong Kong through that channel, but the measures and Departments responsible for protecting those people in this country. Again, I send a very strong message to Hongkongers in this country: we massively respect and warmly embrace you, and will of course continue to protect and look to your safety.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It has been quite difficult to listen to these answers—I say that with great respect for the Minister—because we do not really feel that the issue is being dealt with strongly enough. The Minister will be aware that this latest travesty is one in a long list of despicable attacks on innocent people that have arguably taken place at the hands of those in power in China. Will he commit to meet the ambassador and highlight the fact that taking someone from British soil into the Chinese consulate to physically and violently abuse them is disgraceful and will not be tolerated, and that those involved—including the ambassador—will be sent home immediately?

**Jesse Norman:** I am an enormous fan and admirer of the hon. Gentleman, but we have covered that question quite closely on several occasions during this urgent question. We will take the measures I have outlined, which are a clear extension of the work we are already doing, both in this country and in Beijing. We will await the factual determination on the evidence, and will then take action, if that is required.

## East Kent Maternity Services: Independent Investigation

11.31 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Caroline Johnson):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the review into East Kent maternity services.

Few things could be as tragic as the death of a child, yet knowing that that death was “wholly avoidable” comes with its own unimaginable pain. It is thanks to the tireless efforts, courage and determination of families in east Kent that we have been able to shine a light on maternity failings in East Kent Hospitals University Trust. Dr Bill Kirkup’s report, published yesterday, contains some stark and upsetting findings. From examining over 200 births in that trust between 2009 and 2020, he found that, had care been given at nationally recognised standards, 45 babies might not have lost their lives, and many more families might not have experienced such distress at what should have been their time of joy. He also found a toxic culture within the trust, with a “disturbing lack of kindness and compassion”

and victims’ families even blamed for their devastating losses. Before I say more, Mr Speaker, I want to say this: I am profoundly sorry to all the families affected. This should never have happened, and we will work tirelessly to put it right.

With the report having been published just yesterday, I am sure hon. Members will understand our need to carefully consider all of its details. I will be reviewing all the recommendations, and will issue a full response once I have had time to consider them. However, given the gravity of what the report reveals, I felt it was important to come to the House today and update colleagues on the steps we are already taking to improve maternity services in east Kent and across the country.

The report itself is a litany of failure that makes for very difficult reading. It details failures of team working, failures of professionalism, failures of compassion, failures to listen, failures after safety incidents, and ultimately a failure of leadership. The review heard about women and family members feeling patronised, ignored or told off, with one woman hearing from a doctor:

“Some parents just aren’t supposed to have children.”

Some people felt they were unimportant, or too much trouble. One woman was reportedly told by a staff member that they were sorry for her loss, but that her baby was dead, and that there were other babies who were still living who needed attending to. These kinds of failures showed up at every level of patient care, with no discernible improvement over the whole timeframe of the review. The trust failed to read the signals and missed every opportunity to put things right.

These are difficult things to hear, and especially hard because I know that so many of us have experienced for ourselves the brilliant care that NHS maternity services can offer. We must take nothing away from the hundreds of thousands of incredible people working day and night in maternity services across the country, yet we cannot pretend that the story of East Kent is a one-off. Reviews from Morecambe Bay and Shrewsbury and Telford paint a more disturbing picture. While they may be some of the most extreme examples—and we must

hope that they are—they are certainly not isolated incidents. Colleagues will know that, just last month, Donna Ockenden began her independent review into maternity services at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust.

We entrust the NHS with our care when we are at our most vulnerable. Everyone has the right to expect the same high-quality care, no matter who they are or where they live. We are already taking a number of steps to improve the quality of maternity care in East Kent and across the country. An intensive programme of maternity support was put in place at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust in September 2019, overseen by NHS England, the Kent and Medway integrated care system and the trust’s board. The trust has been allocated a maternity improvement adviser and an obstetric improvement adviser. We will also continue to ensure the highest standards at national level.

I am grateful to Dr Kirkup for the extensive recommendations in his report, but it is vital that they are not viewed in isolation. As Dr Kirkup said, since his Morecambe bay investigation in 2015,

“maternity services have been the subject of more significant policy initiatives than any other service”,

so his recommendations must be considered alongside existing work to improve maternity outcomes.

First, there is our independent working group. The group is one of the key immediate and essential actions from the Ockenden review and has begun its important work. The group, chaired by the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, is advising the maternity transformation programme in England on how it can take forward the findings of both the Ockenden and the Kirkup reports. Next, our new maternity quality surveillance framework is a vital tool for proactively identifying problems in trusts, so that they can get support before serious issues arise. In March 2022, NHS England announced a £127 million funding boost for maternity services across England, to help ensure safer and more personalised care for women and their babies. Even with that essential work, we recognise that there is still a long way to go and much more work to be done to put things right.

In closing, I want to thank Dr Kirkup and his team. His experience has been invaluable, and I know that his approach of putting families first has been welcomed. I also know that hearing the accounts of families has been a harrowing experience at times, yet, as he said, it is difficult to imagine just how much harder it was for the families as they relived some of their darkest days. I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to those families, whose tireless determination to find the truth and tell their stories has brought us to this important point. Nothing we do can bring back the children they have lost or fill the tragic void of a life never lived, but now we know their stories, we will listen, learn and act, so that no other family should ever experience such pain. I commend this statement to the House.

11.38 am

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I thank Dr Bill Kirkup and his team for the report. Today marks another milestone for another group of families in their fight for justice. The heartbreak they must feel is unimaginable, and my thoughts remain with them during what must be an incredibly difficult time.

[Feryal Clark]

Sadly, this is another example of women's voices not just being ignored but being silenced. When women in East Kent were told that they were to blame for their babies' deaths, they were being told that their voices just did not matter. At a time when women are at their most vulnerable, they were let down by the very people they were relying on to keep them safe.

After responding to the Ockenden review of Shrewsbury and Telford, I find myself having to repeat something that I never thought I would need to say again at this Dispatch Box: no woman should ever face going into hospital to give birth not knowing whether she and her baby will come out alive—no one. It is not a case of a few bad apples. What happened at East Kent, as with what happened at Shrewsbury and Telford and at Morecambe Bay, was years of systemic negligence that cost lives. As we have heard, up to 45 babies could have survived had they received better care. That is 45 lives that were cut needlessly short and 45 families made to suffer the most devastating heartache.

Although I am heartbroken for the families that the review had to take place, it is vital that it did. Nobody who allowed this culture of neglect to set in should escape accountability. Such a review has been necessary again because, for too long, people turned a blind eye and tolerated the intolerable. That is why it cannot be allowed to sit on the Department's shelf and gather dust. We must see action if we are to give women the care that they need and deserve.

There is a pattern of avoidable harm in maternity units across the country. There were nearly 2,000 reported cases of avoidable harm at Shrewsbury and Telford. Half of maternity units in England are failing to meet safety standards. Pregnant women were turned away from maternity wards more than 400 times last year. One in four women is unable to get the help they need when in labour. That is why it is important that the Government fully accept all the recommendations in Dr Kirkup's review without delay.

This is a collective failure and we must all learn lessons from it. In the wake of the Ockenden review, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) announced an extra £127 million of funding for maternity services to help to deliver the reform that is clearly needed. Where is that money? Where has it been spent, what has it been spent on and how will its impact be measured?

Underpinning the issues in maternity care, and across the NHS, is the workforce. More midwives are leaving the profession than are joining, and there is now a shortage of more than 2,000 midwives in England. We just do not have the staff needed to provide good and safe care. Even the Chancellor agrees: last week, he signed a report as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss that describes maternity and neonatal services as

“understaffed, overstretched and letting down women, families and maternity staff”.

He went on to call for safe levels of staffing. Will the Minister deliver on the Chancellor's promise?

The Government must provide the staff that maternity services desperately need to provide safe care across our NHS, as Labour has a plan to. All women are asking for is to have the confidence that they will be safe—that really is not much. It is high time that the Government delivered it.

**Dr Johnson:** I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. The report paints a tragic and harrowing picture of poor maternity care at East Kent Hospitals. She talks about accountability. She will be aware that the chief executive and chairman of that trust board have changed, and that those new in their posts are working hard to ensure that things are turned around and improve.

The hon. Lady talked about funding and workforce. I understand why she did that, but if she reads Dr Kirkup's report, it is clear that they were not causative factors in this case. This was about culture and workplace practice, not money and staffing levels. She also asked how that money has been spent. It has been spent on staffing, workforce and training. She also asked about culture change and how that will be measured. It is being looked at in several ways, particularly in terms of the outcomes, such as healthy babies and the mother's experience of their care.

**Sir Roger Gale** (North Thanet) (Con): Mr Speaker, first, thank you so much for facilitating this statement. You know that as not just the constituency Member of Parliament, but a father and a grandfather, this is a matter of profound importance to me personally. Can I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box for the first time and thank her for the tone of her remarks?

Nothing is going to bring back the children who were lost in the Margate unit. Nothing is going to erase the pain felt and continuing to be felt by the parents. I would like to commend them for the quiet dignity with which they have fought their cause under horrific circumstances for so long. I would also like, if I may, craving your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to thank Bill Kirkup and his team for the sensitivity with which they have handled this and listened to the harrowing stories from so many people—stories that should never have had to be told.

What we can do is to try to put this right, so that this never ever happens to another family again. It will come at a cost and, with a Treasury Minister on the Front Bench, I have to say that £33 million-worth of investment is now needed immediately in the maternity unit at Margate. What I would like to do at this stage is to ask my hon. Friend to tell me from the Dispatch Box that she is willing to bring her medical expertise, which is considerable, to Margate, and to come herself to see the unit, meet the staff and meet the new chief executive and the new chairman, who are determined to do their utmost to make amends and to do so as swiftly as possible.

**Dr Johnson:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. I note that he has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, and I know how much it matters to him personally, as well as as a Member of Parliament. I would of course be happy to come to Margate to meet the staff he describes.

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, Dr Kirkup and his team, and the families and staff who took part in the inquiry. It is clear that there has been an utterly toxic and dysfunctional culture within maternity services at the East Kent hospitals trust. It is shocking and disturbing, and made so much worse by the revelation that the trust tried to cover up these cases. Mothers were treated appallingly and babies died. I cannot comprehend what they have had to



endure, and I am so angry on their behalf. How can the Minister assure my constituents that action leading to immediate change will not involve any of the staff and managers involved directly in these cases? And given that former staff and a governor have said publicly that they cannot recommend the service, how can MPs in East Kent tell our constituents that our maternity services are now safe?

**Dr Johnson:** I know that this is a matter on which the hon. Lady has been campaigning furiously on behalf of her constituents. I share her anger, and her shock when I read the report, at some of the cases and some of the ways in which patients have been spoken to during their time at their hospital. It is truly unforgivable.

On the question of safety, that was my first question when I read the report: are we sure that patients going in today to have their babies are safe to do so? So I met Anne Eden, the regional director of NHSE, yesterday to talk to her about safety, and I have been reassured about both quality and outcomes. On outcomes, I have been reassured that, looking at crude data, which I appreciate has not been published yet, the numbers of stillbirths and neonatal deaths over the last year or so have fallen substantially. On quality, it is doing a review, so each woman is contacted six weeks after her delivery to ask about her experiences, and where experiences have not been as they should be—although they are in almost all cases—that has been further investigated in each case.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): This report is a terrible read, particularly, obviously, for bereaved parents, who have gone through untold anguish, including some at the William Harvey Hospital in my constituency. What makes me particularly angry is that this was going on for more than a decade under several different management regimes at the trust. Can the Minister give some reassurance to women in Ashford who are about to have a baby at the William Harvey that they will be treated safely and respectfully, and can she assure the House, looking further afield, that the terrible repeated examples of similar tragedies and scandals around the NHS are now at an end?

**Dr Johnson:** I know that my right hon. Friend shares the House's desire to ensure that such events do not reoccur, and that his constituents are safe. He asked about failures over time. In fact, there were signs as early as 2010 that problems were being raised with the trust. The failure was not so much to find those problems, but that they were not properly dealt with when they were found. Yesterday, I received assurances from the regional director of NHS England, as I described a few moments ago, and I will meet her regularly to receive updates to ensure that the process is not just put in place but followed through.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The stories of the families are harrowing to read. I hear what the Minister says: that staff shortages cannot be used to excuse the poor practice that has taken place. None the less, it is disturbing that NHS England has abandoned its safety targets under the midwifery continuity of care model. When more midwives are leaving the profession than coming into it, as a matter of urgency to avoid such occurrences in other places, what are the Government going to do to turn around that loss of midwives?

**Dr Johnson:** NHS England has announced that it is investing an additional £127 million into the maternity system in the next year. That money will go towards the maternity workforce and improving neonatal care. In addition, £95 million was invested last year to support the establishment of more than 1,200 more midwifery posts and 100 more consultant obstetric posts. Work is already under way as part of the biggest nursing, midwifery and allied health care professional recruitment drive in decades. That will help us to increase the number of midwives in East Kent but also elsewhere.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, and particularly for the tone in which she made it. Dr Kirkup's report is harrowing reading, but nothing compared with the harrowing experiences of the parents whose babies were severely injured at birth, stillborn, or lost in the days after they were born, particularly when so many of those incidents were avoidable. It is a shocking litany of clinical and management mistakes, missed opportunities, failures to take responsibility and an incomprehensible normalisation of baby death, despite all the efforts to improve safety since the Mid Staffs scandal. I ask my hon. Friend to put herself in the shoes of an expectant mum—I know that as a mum she will be able to do that, as well as from her experience as a clinician—and categorically assure me and all the parents to be who are soon to have babies in the East Kent trust, that the maternity units in those hospitals are safe for them to give birth?

While there are worthwhile sections on actions in the report—I commend Dr Kirkup for his report—it does not get to the bottom of the problem, which is truly one of accountability. Can my hon. Friend assure me that never again will a trust find reasons to excuse catastrophic outcomes, that never again can critical reports be dismissed as a “load of rubbish”, and that never again can staff blame patients for a hospital's failings? How will she assure herself as a Minister—I know this is a difficult role—that every maternity unit in every hospital across the country is safe for mothers to give birth?

**Dr Johnson:** I know my hon. Friend has campaigned hard as both a Minister and a Back-Bench MP for safety in the national health service. On safety at the East Kent trust, we have already talked about the regional team there. There is also a maternity safety support team in the trust working actively on the ground to ensure that lessons are learned and services improved. I have been given some figures that demonstrate that the outcomes are improving. As I said earlier, steps are in place to ensure the quality of service and to feed back the quality of service to ensure that no woman is spoken to in the way described in the report.

From a wider perspective, we are looking at both the workforce as described but also at how we ensure that problems are not just picked up, but developed and followed through. We are also looking at the Kark report that looked at how managers are held responsible. We will talk more about that in due course.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Many of my constituents have raised the point that black women in the UK are four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth. Can the Minister explain what action is being taken to end that scandal?

**Dr Johnson:** From a wider perspective, the Government have a target of reducing stillbirths and neonatal deaths across the country and that, obviously, includes women of colour.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What was particularly shocking about the report, coming hard on the heels of Shrewsbury and Morecambe Bay, was the culture of cover-up that it revealed, the lack of empathy—extraordinarily—among staff and the fact that it took parents and grandparents such as Derek Richford to campaign to get the exposé. Does the Minister agree that, given that liveborn children were described as being stillborn so coroners could not investigate, it underlines yet again the need for my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, which was passed by the House three and a half years ago and gives powers to coroners to investigate stillbirths, to come into force at last? Will she go and speak to the Justice Secretary and liaise between the Departments to get that measure enacted straightaway to give some confidence to those parents who have been through these terrible experiences?

**Dr Johnson:** I understand my hon. Friend's passion in this area. I am happy to meet him to discuss it further.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): We have seen several tragedies in health and social care services across the country. Both the Ockenden review earlier this year and this recent upsetting report by Dr Kirkup highlight serious multiple failings. It should go without saying that health outcomes should never be determined by location. We must tackle the inequalities that exist between rural and urban maternity services to ensure that people living in rural and coastal areas can access the same range of birthing methods and support. Will the Minister support the Maternity Services (Rural Areas) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) to end maternity service inequalities for people living in rural and coastal areas?

**Dr Johnson:** As a rural Member of Parliament, I understand the need for rural services to be just as good as those in more urban areas and to ensure that they are improved where they are not adequate. A medical education reform programme that is co-sponsored by NHS England and Health Education England is expected to direct investment for specialty training more towards area population need—to smaller and rural hospitals. The programme entered its implementation phase in August. Morecambe Bay, East Kent, James Paget and Shrewsbury and Telford are included in our current smaller hospitals list. I am not certain about the hospital in the hon. Member's constituency, but I can find that information and write to him about it.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): This is clearly a shocking and disturbing report. I found myself agreeing with the shadow Minister when she said that this represents a serious collective failure across our maternity services, because I know that it is not an isolated incident. Does the Minister agree that there is a role to be played by the Healthcare Safety Investigation

Branch, which has set up a stream of work on maternity services? Could she redouble her efforts in conjunction with that body to ensure that we learn the lessons of the cultural failures in this case and that that learning is spread throughout the system? That is the only way we have an opportunity to ensure that these things do not happen again.

**Dr Johnson:** My hon. Friend will be aware that within HSIB the Government are establishing a new special health authority specifically for maternity investigations, with specialist expertise. This independent body will continue the work of HSIB from 2023. In the meantime, maternity investigations will continue without interruption until it is fully operational.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. We are very pleased to have her expertise and knowledge in that role as Minister. This House will benefit from it. I would also like to express, on behalf of myself and my party, my sincere sympathies to all those who have lost loved ones. I think it is fair to say that we all have those families in our thoughts and prayers. Will the Minister outline what discussions have taken place with devolved health trusts in the devolved nations to share information and ensure UK-wide reform? It is clear that the pressures that led to this terrible scenario in Kent are ready to be replicated through the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as midwives battle with understaffed, unsupported and exhausted wards that are on the brink of life-and-death disasters. Through no fault of individuals, midwives will carry that all to their graves. I know the Minister is committed to making it better. How can we do that for all of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Dr Johnson:** It is, of course, important that information is shared across our great country, so that people in all areas of our nation get the best-quality care. Health is a devolved issue, but I will continue to work with Ministers from the devolved nations to ensure we share the lessons and learn from each other.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): My constituent Helen Gittos, whose healthy full-term daughter Harriet died in 2014, said:

“Too often during pregnancy, in labour and afterwards, rather than being listened to, we were treated dismissively, contemptuously and without a desire for understanding. It is hard enough to come to terms with the death of a child; it is even harder when you are implicitly blamed for what happened.”

Will the Minister commit to ensuring the implementation of all five recommendations, to beginning the process of doing so by recess, and to making an oral statement to the House detailing what progress has been made, again by recess?

**Dr Johnson:** I know my hon. Friend shares my horror at the report and my horror at the way women and their families were treated at East Kent maternity hospitals. The report was published only yesterday. I will be considering it very, very carefully and will further update the House in due course.

## Ukraine Update

12.2 pm

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

We are now 239 days into the operation that President Putin planned to conclude within a month. Active Ukrainian offensive operations continue in the north-east, near Svatove and the Kherson region in the south. If Ukraine successfully advances on Svatove, a key road and rail junction, it will constitute another severe blow to the logistical viability of the northern sector of Russia's Donbas front. Yesterday, the new Russian commander in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovikin, offered an unusually candid public statement of the difficulty of the Russian position in Kherson, on the right bank of the Dnipro River. Pro-Russian occupation forces have now started to withdraw some categories of civilians east of the river. They claim 7,000 people have already departed, and aim to move another 10,000 a day, although we cannot yet verify those figures. Russia's limited hold on the bank of the Dnipro looks shaky. It is likely more seriously considering a draw-down of its forces in the area.

Russia's ground campaign is being reversed. It is running out of modern long-range missiles and its military hierarchy is floundering. It is struggling to find junior officers to lead the rank and file. Meanwhile, its latest overall commander, Surovikin, has a 30-year record of thuggery marked even by the standards of the Russian army. What will worry President Putin is that the open criticism is inching closer and closer to the political leadership of his country. Russia has strong-armed Belarus into facilitating its disastrous war, but the newly announced Russian-Belarusian "Group of Forces", supposedly to be deployed in Belarus, is unlikely to be a credible offensive force. It is far more likely that Russia is attempting to divert Ukrainian forces from their successful counter-offensives.

As Russia's forces are pushed back, they are resorting to directly striking Ukraine's critical national infrastructure, especially the power grid. It should be noted that these facilities have no direct military role, but the impact is multiplying the misery of ordinary Ukrainian citizens. Notably, these strikes are partially being conducted by loitering munitions—so-called "kamikaze drones". Despite Tehran's denials, these weapons are being provided by Iran. This, in itself, is another sign of the strategic degradation of Russia's military.

In the wake of these ongoing and indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure, the UK will continue—and is continuing—to gift air defence missiles to Ukraine. We are proud to be the second largest donor of military equipment, and last week I announced that the UK will provide additional air defence missiles to Ukraine to defend against Russian missile strikes. These include AMRAAMs—advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles—which, used in conjunction with NASAMS—national advanced surface-to-air missile system—air defence, pledged by the United States, are capable of shooting down cruise missiles. We continue to provide sophisticated electronic warfare equipment that gives additional protection against long-range drones and missiles.

Supporting Ukraine remains the Ministry of Defence's main effort. We are helping Ukraine to replenish its stocks to keep us fighting. As winter approaches, we are

developing a package to support Ukrainians through the winter, including 25,000 sets of winter clothing, so that they are more effective on the battlefield than their poorly trained, badly prepared and ill-equipped Russian counterparts, many of whom have been mobilised at short notice with little training, equipment or preparation.

As part of Operation Interflex, we are also continuing to train Ukrainian recruits in the United Kingdom alongside our Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Lithuanian, New Zealand, Norwegian and Swedish partners. We have so far trained over 7,000 soldiers and are currently on track to train 10,000 by the end of the year, with up to 20,000 to follow in 2023.

Furthermore, we have worked with allies and partners to establish an international fund, which will ensure the continued supply of essential lethal and non-lethal military support to Ukraine, as well as manufacturing capacity. To date, we have received pledges totalling approximately £600 million and continue to work with international partners to secure further funding. Today, we will launch the first urgent bidding round to identify and procure critical capabilities that can be rapidly deployed to Ukraine.

I would also like to share with the House details of a recent incident that occurred in international airspace over the Black sea. On 29 September, an unarmed RAF RC-135W Rivet Joint, a civilian ISTAR—intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance—aircraft on routine patrol over the Black sea was interacted with by two Russian armed Su-27 fighter aircraft.<sup>1</sup> It is not unusual for aircraft to be shadowed and this day was no different. During that interaction, however, it transpired that one of the Su-27 aircraft released a missile in the vicinity of the RAF Rivet Joint aircraft beyond visual range. The total time of the interaction between the Russian aircraft and the Rivet Joint was approximately 90 minutes.

The patrol completed and the aircraft returned to its base. In the light of this potentially dangerous engagement, I have communicated my concerns directly to my Russian counterpart, Defence Minister Shoigu, and my colleague, the Chief of the Defence Staff, has also communicated his concerns. In my letter, I made it clear that the aircraft was unarmed, in international airspace, and following a pre-notified flight path. I felt that it was prudent to suspend these patrols until a response was received by the Russian state.

The reply by the Russian Ministry of Defence on 10 October stated that it has conducted an investigation into the circumstances of the incident and that it was a technical malfunction of the Su-27 fighter. It also acknowledged that the incident took place in international airspace. The UK Ministry of Defence has shared this information with allies and, after consultation, I have restarted routine patrols, but this time escorted by fighter aircraft.

Everything that we do is considered and calibrated with regard to ongoing conflict in the region and in accordance with international law. We welcome Russia's acknowledgment that the incident was in international airspace. The UK has conducted regular sorties of the RAF Rivet Joint in international airspace over the Black sea since 2019, and we will continue to do so. For security reasons, I will not provide further commentary on the detail of these operations, but I want to assure

1. [Official Report, 25 October 2022, Vol. 721, c. 2MC.]

[Mr Ben Wallace]

the House that the incident will not prevent the United Kingdom's support for Ukraine and resistance to Russia's illegal invasion.

The UK Government's position remains unchanged, with—I am pleased to say—consistent support across the House. We will continue to support the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland. The rules-based system has protected all nations from such naked and unprovoked aggression over the past 75 years; it has also been shaped by Russia in that time. This Government will always defend the rules-based system, because it is fundamental to who we are. It provides peace and security for this country and for our partners and allies. I commend this statement to the House.

12.10 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. At a time of much Government chaos, I also thank him for his calmness and professionalism in the job.

The incident with the RAF Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft that the Defence Secretary described is serious. He outlines that the correct steps have been taken, the malfunction has been confirmed and the incident has now been resolved. It is welcome that RAF flights have restarted and that there has been a clear recognition from Russia that the aircraft was flying in international airspace. The RAF has this House's full support; we are grateful to it, to other UK forces and to our NATO allies for their work protecting the alliance and protecting freedom. The incident is a serious reminder of the importance of avoiding escalation and miscalculation while continuing with the UK's united support for Ukraine.

Almost eight months on from Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine, I pay tribute to the remarkable and continuing Ukrainian resolve in the face of Russian aggression. Putin has made a huge strategic miscalculation in invading Ukraine, which has resulted in Russian forces suffering heavy losses: the MOD estimates 25,000 Russian dead, tens of thousands injured, tens of thousands who have deserted and more than 4,000 armoured and protected vehicles destroyed.

At a time when Ukrainians have shown incredible resilience in defending their homeland, Britain must honour their bravery by remaining unwavering in our support for Ukraine. I am grateful that the Defence Secretary has set out the UK's continued support under Operation Interflex for training Ukrainian forces; we thank UK members of the armed forces for their work. I would also be grateful if he confirmed when the promised action plan for continuing UK support for Ukraine will be published, outlining the type and quantity of military, economic and diplomatic support that Ukraine will receive. Putin needs to be in no doubt that our resolve will continue; whether the Defence Secretary's party or mine is in charge, that will not change.

I think it is time the Defence Secretary made a statement about the planned drawback of troops from Estonia and about how that decision can be properly scrutinised. I would also be grateful if he set out whether orders have been placed for the replacement next-generation light anti-tank weapon missiles and when our stockpiles will be replenished.

There has been a concerning increase in Iranian drone activity. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State set out what additional support can be provided by the UK and our allies to ensure that the Shahed 136 and Mohajer 6 drones from Iran can be properly intercepted and defeated to protect Ukrainian infrastructure.

In his speech last night, the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, threw into doubt the planned rise in defence spending to 3% of GDP, referring to it as a "potential increase". I would be grateful if the Defence Secretary spelled out the Government's position on defence spending and whether the increase is confirmed or—as Admiral Sir Tony Radakin says—only potential.

The Opposition's support for Ukraine is unwavering. The Defence Secretary knows that he has Labour's full support in the provision of military aid to our friends in Ukraine. Putin must fail in his aggression. As we enter an incredibly difficult period of the war, with cold weather drawing in, we must make sure that we support not only our friends fighting in Ukraine, but those civilians who are there fighting on its behalf. I would be grateful if the Defence Secretary set out what support the UK can offer to civilian infrastructure. The protection of energy sources is particularly important, not only for Ukrainian industry but for the Ukrainian people.

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his questions. To assure the House, I did not choose to make my statement when my counterpart on the Opposition Front Bench, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), was not here; I spoke to him at length yesterday. I also assure the House that although there are some things that are of the highest sensitivity and cannot be said in public or in this House, I continue to engage with the party leaders on the most sensitive areas to ensure that they are fully apprised throughout this process.

Calibration is incredibly important to me. We are dealing with a President and with Russian forces who, as we have seen from the Rivet Joint incident, are not beyond making the wrong calculation or deciding that the rules do not apply to them. That is why I ask those constituents who are fearful that this report could lead somewhere to have faith that all of us in this Chamber are working on a detailed response to ensure that we walk what is sometimes a tightrope.

On Rivet Joint, as I said, we have made sure that the flight path is pre-declared, so that it is no surprise to the Russians and is logged in the normal manner. Indeed, I informed the Russians that they would be escorted, so there were no surprises.

The shadow Minister asked about the action plan; I think he was referring to the broader Government action plan, including foreign aid and support. I concur that the foreign aid package and helping Ukraine's economy to survive, stand on its feet and go from strength to strength are as important as an effective military response. I will press my colleagues in other Departments to ensure that we get the shadow Minister details of the time and date, but it is a fundamental plank for Ukraine. Some of what I discussed when I was in the United States was in that area.

On the second battlegroup deployed in Estonia, hon. Members will remember that after the invasion a number of countries deployed what we called enhanced forward

presence groups in Bulgaria, in Romania and around Europe. There was some talk about deployment in Hungary, but that did not materialise. Germany stepped up in Lithuania, and so did we in Estonia. The second battlegroup was always going to come back; our fixed position in Estonia is effectively a battlegroup that we vary in size and capability. To recognise the changed threat, we will keep our guided multiple launch rocket system, our longer-range deep fires and indeed our air defence capabilities, which are not always an accompaniment to that battlegroup. We have effectively beefed up the existing battlegroup, but we need to bring back the next battlegroup, which has been extended for another six months. I thank the men and women of the armed forces whose time out there has been extended. That battlegroup will come back.

We should not forget that we also have a squadron of tanks in Poland, more forces, a company—a sort of small battlegroup—in Bulgaria, part of a US strike brigade, and we are now exploring having more Royal Engineers in Poland to assist with training Ukrainians and with things like combat engineers. That is why the battlegroup came back. I engage with my Estonian counterparts, whom I met only last week; indeed, I met them the week before in Poland to talk them through this, and they were given prior notification. We are very keen to continue to work strongly with them.

We have given an extra commitment on Estonia to have a brigade headquarters and a brigadier. In the same way, the German plan in Lithuania is to allocate a brigade for fast response to deploy, and that is one of the ways we seek to go. We are also helping Estonia to develop its own divisional headquarters, hand in hand, but we always keep things under review. We are all waiting for the NATO regional plans that will set out in detail how our forces should be deployed across Europe as part of a bigger comprehensive plan. It is really important for us all to be guided by that.

The Ukrainians are having success in shooting down a number of the Iranian drones, but it is a question of sheer scale. Members will not have missed the similarity with V1 rockets. I urge the Iranian Government to understand that supplying Russia so that it can indiscriminately kill civilians, including women, children and babies in prams, is surely not an activity with which Iran wants to be associated. I urge them to desist as soon as possible. We are not at all convinced by the Iranian Government's denials that they are not supplying the drones.

We will use some of the funding that I have mentioned to invest in other novel capabilities that we can find to deploy. In the meantime, we are continuing, and will step up, our supply of low-velocity missiles to Ukraine to work with the Stormer system and ensure that we can help with detection or electronic warfare schemes. Obviously the Ukrainian conflict has flushed out counter-drone technologies that we all need. Members will recall the Gatwick airport scenario. Everyone came up with magic solutions, but, if memory serves, when we tested them almost none of them did what it said on the tin. However, we are helping rapidly, and the best of innovation is being used to help the Ukrainians.

When I was in Washington, it was made very clear from No. 10 that the commitment on 3% of GDP by 2030 would stand. I should be interested to know whether the Labour party will match that important commitment. If Labour Members are getting ready for

government, as they seem to think they are, these are the questions that they will need to answer for the British public and the British armed forces as they lay out their timetable and their plan. They will have at least two years in which to do it, so I am not too worried—*[Interruption.]* It is when I am guessing the election will be, but that is definitely above my pay grade.

As for how we can get the Ukrainians through the winter, we are all working internationally to see what we can do. The European Union has announced a fund, and we will ensure that we do what we can to help Ukraine with critical infrastructure and energy.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns.

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** I thank my right hon. Friend for his calmness, and for the consistency of his support for our friends in Ukraine. Our leadership on defence spending matters, and it is important that we meet the target of 2.5% of GDP by 2026, because between now and 2050 it is spending on, and investing in, artificial intelligence, quantum and other new technologies that will allow us best to protect ourselves from hostile states. However, I am concerned about the escalation over the Black sea. I know that my right hon. Friend has a close relationship with his Turkish counterpart. Can he please give us an insight into how he is working with our allies in Turkey and Romania to protect air policing?

**Mr Wallace:** One of the allies with which I discussed this incident was Turkey, at the time when it happened. I have a good and close relationship with the Turkish Government, and I will be visiting Turkey next week. The Turkish Government are aware of the position, and, as ever, offered as much assistance with this process as we wished.

We do not consider this incident to constitute a deliberate escalation on the part of the Russians, and our analysis concurs that it was due to a malfunction, but it is nevertheless a reminder of quite how dangerous things can be when you choose to use your fighters in the manner in which the Russians have used them. While this obviously involved the release of a weapon, we have seen very close flying next to United States, United Kingdom and NATO assets over the last few years. In one case, a Russian fighter went within 15 feet of a NATO aircraft. Such action is reckless and unnecessary, and puts many people's lives at risk.

I am not naive. We are incredibly lucky that what we saw over the Black sea did not become worse. I am not trying to trivialise it, but we do not consider it to have been a deliberate escalation on the part of the Russian state.

**Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) appreciates the collegiate way in which both he and his staff have acted throughout this crisis.

Understandably, much of the attention arising from the statement will be focused on the incident involving the RAF surveillance aircraft and the Russian Su-27 fighter which took place in international airspace during a pre-notified flight over the Black sea last week. I commend

[*Brendan O'Hara*]

the Secretary of State and the Ministry of Defence for their calm and measured response to a situation that could easily and very quickly have escalated into something far more serious.

Of course, the situation in Ukraine is serious enough, with Putin having now declared martial law in the four newly annexed territories. That gives him a level of control over industries that could possibly be repurposed to support his illegal war effort. As the Secretary of State said, in recent days we have seen more Russian war crimes. Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure have been targeted with missiles, rockets and Iranian-made drones—which, I believe, makes Iran directly complicit in these war crimes. When will the Government follow the example of our US allies and EU partners in actively pursuing and sanctioning Iranian companies which have been involved in making those drones, as well as the individuals behind the companies? What, if anything, is being done to try to cut off the international supply of components to Iran?

Let me end by echoing what was said by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). As winter approaches and we continue to provide military support, what thought has been given to protecting the civilian population? Is there scope for us to send more generators and specialist electricity equipment to help Ukraine to keep the lights and the heating on this winter?

**Mr Wallace:** That last point is extremely important. The Department of Health and Social Care has already done significant work in securing medical supplies during the conflict, but the hon. Gentleman prompts me to see what we can do in a more international, co-ordinated manner. I will, perhaps, write to him giving the details of that. He is right to say that this is going to be a tough winter, and we need to make sure that the Ukrainians can cope.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the calmness of the RAF. Incredibly professional men and women are doing an incredible job, and not only here. Some of those same aircraft, and the P-8s from Lossiemouth, go out to protect us in the very high north from aggression and Russian activity. It is often in Scotland that Russia enters our airspace with its long-range bombers and the patrols that it did not give up after the cold war. The difference that should be noted is that we were in international airspace. However, we try to retain a professional manner with Russia. It is important that we maintain that professional link with the Russian Ministry of Defence, and recognise that we can still have those important engagements at times like this.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Given the extraordinary success of the Ukrainian armed forces in pushing back Russian troops, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a danger that Putin may consider escalating the conflict? While attention has focused on the potential use of battlefield nuclear weapons, does he agree that any use of chemical or biological weapons equally represents a red line which Putin must not cross?

**Mr Wallace:** When it comes to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the chemical weapons convention which all of us, including what are

viewed as some of the key anchor countries, have signed up to—when chemical weapons were used in Syria, for instance, military action was taken by countries including ourselves and France—it is extremely important to uphold that convention. Breaking the taboo, or allowing it to be successfully broken, would have severe consequences for all of us. Similarly, the messaging is that the use of nuclear or chemical weapons would lead to severe consequences for the Russian state, and we urge that none of those be resorted to.

As for President Putin's position, he has obviously made a number of speeches, and he has annexed illegally parts of countries that are still full of Ukrainian forces. His ambitions do not seem to match the realities on the ground. The key message to him is that we are interested in helping Ukraine to succeed in defeating Russia's illegal invasion. If he understands what that is about, he should be able to calibrate his response so as to leave Ukraine in an orderly manner, and we can start the process of trying to rebuild that amazing country and ensuring that Russia is held accountable for its crimes.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement and his leadership during this difficult time. I also thank the members of our armed forces who are supporting our efforts in Ukraine and in eastern Europe, and, indeed, the civil servants behind the right hon. Gentleman in his Department.

In his statement, the Defence Secretary mentioned the Russians targeting drone attacks on civilians. Over the last few weeks, as the Ukrainians have gained ground, it has become clear that war crimes have been perpetrated against civilians and members of the armed forces in Ukraine. What expertise and support are we providing to enable the Ukrainians to log evidence and enable the individuals concerned to be brought to account?

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said. When the war crimes in Bucha and not far outside Kyiv were exposed, a group of us—including the United Kingdom, alongside the Canadians—began the process of gathering evidence for the International Criminal Court. My colleague the now former Home Secretary, who was then the Attorney General, visited Ukrainian herself, and worked with the then prosecutor. The Red Cross is also engaged in gathering such information. Its biggest challenge is the sheer scale of the amount of evidence that we are now uncovering.

The fact that Russia does not invade and occupy a country with any civility towards or regard for its people adds to the anxiousness of our friends in the Baltic states; Russia seems to destroy everything in its path. The worry of a small Baltic state is that it does not have time for the rest of us to get there. That is why we are committed to a battleground in Estonia. If we give Russia time, there will not be much left when we arrive. That is why we have to send a message that this course is unacceptable.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his calm yet robust response to the Rivet Joint Sukhoi incident, which is of course of great concern. I also pay tribute to the calmness and professionalism of the RAF crews during the incident.

Will the Secretary of State commit to continuing to keep under review the adequacy of the fighter forces we

have available, bearing in mind the escort duties that he has now referred to as well as the ongoing combat air policing duties on NATO's eastern front in any event?

**Mr Wallace:** Yes; making sure we have more aircraft fighter capability in this country has been one of my priorities. On almost my first day in the job, I sent a letter to the Chief of the Air Staff stating that his No. 1 priority was to improve the fighter pilot pipeline; there is no point in buying planes if there is no one to fly them. It is incredibly important that we get those pilots.

Of course one of the challenges with the new F-35 is growing instructors. It is a Catch-22: there have to be enough pilots in the planes to grow the instructor body, but if there are not enough pilots in the first place, how do we do that? We are getting there, and the situation is improving. The Typhoon is proving its worth every single week. I went to the ceremony to hand over to Qatar the next iteration of the Typhoon. It is a formidable aircraft, which I hope will be bought by many other countries around the world.

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): The Secretary of State touched on the help that we are providing. Will he elaborate on that? He talked about equipment. What are we doing to provide small diesel generators to ensure that key services such as hospitals or water cleaning plants keep going, given Russia's attack on civilian infrastructure?

**Mr Wallace:** Non-lethal military aid is collected and corralled in the same place as military aid: through the international donor cell based in Germany—a multinational cell staffed predominantly by military and civil servants who collect the ask from Ukraine, which they try to match with donors. That is predominantly for military and non-lethal military aid, which includes generators, field hospitals and medical stuff. Predominantly, that is related to the war effort.

I will make sure that we write to the hon. Lady with the broader detail of what other assistance is happening. I visited Ukraine about three or four weeks ago. People there were in a pretty good mindset about their ability to see through the winter, but the use of Iranian mass drones will have an effect if it continues and we must make sure that that does not catch up.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I forgot to answer the question about sanctions put by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara). My understanding is that the Foreign Secretary will make a statement about that in the near future.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State on his statement and his ongoing handling of the UK response to the illegal invasion of Ukraine by President Putin.

I have long been of the view that spending on our armed forces should be viewed as an insurance policy to protect not only our security but our national interests. As with any insurance policy, when the risk profile increases so must the premiums. My right hon. Friend has already reconfirmed that the Government have committed to raising defence spending to 3% of GDP by 2030. Given the acute security situation in which we find ourselves at the moment, will he also commit to keeping that 2030 date under review?

**Mr Wallace:** My hon. Friend is right; I have often stood at the Dispatch Box and said that as the threat changes so must our investment and funding. That has been all too forgotten when it has come to defence during the last three decades, to be honest. It was interesting that we always understandably responded to pressures in the NHS or the financial markets, but that did not seem necessary when it came to threats. That is how we have ended up with a need to go up to 3% by 2030.

As long as I am Defence Secretary, I will keep the view that as the threat changes we should always review the issues. That is fair and consistent for the men and women of the armed forces. It also sends a strong message to people such as President Putin: that we mean what we say.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): In answer to the challenge from the Secretary of State, I can say that Labour Front Benchers are very ready for government—and by the way, his lot seem to be actively working to be ready for opposition.

The statement was helpful, but ignored the gorilla in the room. Earlier this week, the Secretary of State urgently flew to Washington DC for talks about the situation in Ukraine. There has been quite a bit of briefing in the media on what that may have been about. I fully understand the sensitivities, but surely it is owed to the House and indeed the nation for there to be some indication of how we and our allies see the conflict evolving.

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He and I went to Washington ourselves in calmer times; it now seems decades ago. I was in opposition and he was in government, although he is well qualified to know what opposition is—sadly for him, he has probably spent more time in opposition than government.

There has been a lot of what I would describe as speculation rather than briefing about why I went to Washington; I noticed that yesterday two mainstream media publications gave different reasons for why I went. Fundamentally, President Putin makes his speeches, things change and we need to be absolutely prepared to discuss that with our closest allies. Sometimes it is important to do so in person. I thought it was important after the appointment of the new general, after President Putin's speech about annexation and during the issues around Ukraine's success on the battlefield and what that could mean for President Putin, his actions and what happens next.

It is important that we have such discussions in person. I went to the Pentagon and the State Department. I met the National Security Adviser and had other meetings to make sure that we all understand our planning processes about what we would do in the event of a whole range of things.

People should not be alarmed, but I hope they take comfort from the fact that my priority is, if necessary, getting on a plane to go and do that, not dealing with what is currently going on in our mainstream media.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Following the Defence Secretary's recent visit to Washington and other travels, will he provide for the House a short assessment of the continuing resolve within NATO for supporting Ukraine, so that we can see this through?

**Mr Wallace:** My hon. Friend will have noticed two things in the last few weeks. First, we had our NATO Defence Ministers meeting last week. The resolve is absolutely rock solid. When it comes to the nuclear issue, the line is consistent that there would be severe consequences for Russia if it uses tactical nuclear weapons. Our commitment to responding to such issues and the threat they pose to the world order in breaking the nuclear taboo is determined and united.

My hon. Friend will also have noticed that the European Union has started to use much more hawkish phrases about this issue. That is because its member states are clearly resolved. They want this issue to be concluded successfully. They recognise that constituents in all our countries face higher food and energy prices because of what is going on in Ukraine. The quicker and more permanently we can solve that, the better for all of us. We can then get on and deal with the inflationary pressures and all the other stuff.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement; his transparency is welcome and serves to prevent misreporting of the Rivet Joint incident and inadvertent escalation. We in the Liberal Democrats would like to add that we also pay tribute to the professionalism, values and standards of the Royal Air Force and all our armed forces.

I particularly appreciate the Secretary of State's recognition that communication is crucial to ensure that we avoid miscalculation. He said that he has communicated his concern directly to his Russian counterpart, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, and that the Chief of the Defence Staff has done the same using his channels. On 7 March this year, the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, said lines of communication were "not as strong as we would want them to be".

Can the Secretary of State comment on whether top-level lines of communication with Russian counterparts have deteriorated further or improved since then?

**Mr Wallace:** It is possible for us to communicate with the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defence and the leadership of the Russian Government when we need to, and there is a constant capability to do that. That is not particularly easy across the international community at the moment, because General Gerasimov and Minister Shoigu are clearly engaged in the activity that has led us all to the House today, and they are busy doing that. Communication is possible, and I assure the House that, if it became impossible, I would seek other ways of making sure. I also have close allies and partners who can make calls, if necessary, and we utilise them where needed.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Given all that is happening in Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere in the world, does the Defence Secretary agree it is right that the Prime Minister has brought forward a commitment to reach defence expenditure of 2.5% of GDP by 2026? We cannot wait until 2030 to deal with the great threats we face now.

**Mr Wallace:** First and foremost, 2030 is the key point, because we have to pass through 2.5% to get to 3%. The reality is that we need to make sure that the rise to 3% is done sustainably. I cannot be given a blob of money in 2029 and be expected to buy a warship in five

weeks. There has to be a proper, graduated response. I will make sure the response includes 2.5% en route to 3% of GDP.

It is also important to remind the House that being part of NATO helps us to achieve global mass, or certainly mass within the north Atlantic, and enables us to deploy very large numbers of troops, if necessary. On paper, NATO still far outnumbers Russian forces. Since Russia has significantly degraded nearly all of its land armed forces, the ratio is even more imbalanced in the favour of NATO.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It gives me great confidence that we have heard a competent and trusted Secretary of State and a competent and trusted shadow Secretary of State having an intelligent conversation about this issue, followed by a question and answer session. That is what our constituents expect to happen in Parliament, as opposed to recent events.

May I push the Defence Secretary a little? The credibility of our armed forces relies on how many men and women they have and, as he knows, many years ago I campaigned for a 100,000 minimum. I still have no answer on whether the 72,000 aim in the most recent Conservative party policy is still working. I support the 3% target for expenditure; and please can we have more aid going to the civilian population of the places that the Russian air force is bombarding?

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If, at the end of this, we do not help Ukraine rebuild itself, it will all have been for nothing. It is important that, alongside the military response, we help Ukraine's economy get on its feet. Ukraine has the means—it has agricultural produce, et cetera. As the hon. Gentleman says, Ukraine's military and other values are different from Russia's, but the economy, the poverty and all the other issues are also important.

On the credibility of our armed forces, we have to make sure that, whatever their size, our armed forces are properly protected, perfectly formed at the forefront of capabilities and able to interoperate and integrate with our biggest allies. That is as important as the size of our armed forces. Russia went for size, and its armed forces cannot talk to each other or defend themselves. For all Russia's boasts about how many BMPs and T-72s it has, they all ended up dead or broken on the road to Kyiv.

There is an important balance to strike but, like the hon. Gentleman, I believe we also need to invest to deliver armed forces of scale so that we are able to be present around the world to deter our enemies, and so we can make choices about being in the Baltics and in Poland and in the Pacific and in Africa, where violent extremism is getting bigger and threatens the stability of Africa.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am having a meeting with the Treasury this afternoon. If he would like to come with me, I would be delighted to take him. We have been in the House together for many years, and he is formidable at delivering what he wishes to achieve. I also remember him being formidable to his own Front Bench at certain times when they needed to hear the right messages. He would be very welcome. If I could squeeze him into the Treasury meeting, I would.



**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I echo the comments of the whole House, including those of my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I praise my right hon. Friend for his leadership on the issues we have been facing in Ukraine and over the last few years.

Obviously, in addition to the supply of lethal and non-lethal weaponry and supplies, one of the big things the UK has been doing is helping to train Ukrainian forces. Can my right hon. Friend confirm how many Ukrainian troops have been trained so far by the UK's training programmes and how many we plan to train in the coming year?

**Mr Wallace:** We have trained 7,000 so far. We are on target to complete 10,000, and then another 20,000-plus next year. It often depends on whether the Ukrainians are able to give us the training pipeline. Some of these people will be coming off the frontlines. It is always a challenge, but we are in the right position. We are well supported by the international community, and it is making a difference. We are now looking at what we can do with larger units, by helping Ukraine to train at company and battalion level. That would probably happen within Europe.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): In describing Russia's increased targeting of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, which we learned this morning has led to restrictions on power supply, the Secretary of State referred to the sheer quantity of cruise missiles and drones that are being used in those attacks. Is it now a question of increasing the equipment and capability he has announced to the House today to enable Ukraine better to resist those attacks, or are there other capabilities—he referred to some—that could be supplied or that Ukraine has requested?

**Mr Wallace:** From the international community, for example, Ukraine has consistently requested some of Israel's electronic warfare capability. It is regrettable that, at the moment, Israel has not chosen to do that. I will be seeing the Israeli ambassador in the next few weeks to try to press the case.

One of the challenges I have talked about is the proliferation of precision weapons into the hands of basically low-level troops. We have highly sophisticated, complex weapons that take months to make and were originally designed to shoot down fighter aircraft. When they are used against fairly cheap, mass drones, Ukraine will run out of them quicker than they can be replaced. That is one of the lessons, and it is why electronic warfare to jam, divert or take over these things plays an important part. That is why we will all be looking at our capabilities and thinking about future challenges. It is as much about how we are going to do that as about how we can help the Ukrainians. Right now, we are helping the Ukrainians, and what we have learned is coming back into our system for ourselves.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): I had the great privilege of attending a delegation to the Tapa British Army base in Estonia last week. We met His Majesty's ambassador to Estonia, who is doing a fantastic job. There is obviously huge affection between the peoples of Estonia and Ukraine, as we saw when we had the great privilege of attending the Ukrainian ballet.

I also met my constituent, Laurence, at the Tapa army base. He is in 19 Tank Transporter Squadron, and I asked him, "How can I help you? What message can I take back to the Secretary of State for Defence?" His whole thought was about the vehicles and how they are looked after, protected and maintained; it was not about himself. Will the Secretary of State join me in respecting the dedication of Laurence, everyone in 19 Tank Transporter Squadron and every one of those proud British armed services personnel working at the Tapa army base to keep us and the people of Estonia safe?

**Mr Wallace:** Yes. My hon. Friend was brave asking that question of a soldier—I have often had answers people did not expect. He espouses the real professionalism of our men and women. We were always taught, and I have never forgotten this, that it was, "My men, my kit, myself." I hope Members will forgive the gender issue there. That shows the difference between us and the Russians: they do not seem to care about their men and their women, and seem to care only about themselves. That is why we see their army doing what they are doing. It is incredibly important that we have ready, capable equipment—that is the point I make to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman): it is not just about mass and it has to be about things being properly serviced and maintained. The job that my hon. Friend's constituent was doing is one of the key things—he is an enabler. In the past, it was the enablers they hollowed out, as long as they could talk about having a "frontline regiment" or "frontline tank regiment". However, if you do not have the transporters, there is no point in having lots of tanks, because you will not go anywhere.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is encouraging for all of us in this House to know that we have a Secretary of State who is very much committed, in every sense, to ensuring that Ukraine has everything it needs. Is there any further support that he can and will make available to ensure that the damage left by the drone attacks that were designed to disrupt power and water supplies is repaired urgently? This might not necessarily be a Ministry of Defence thing, but this is about repairing the damage and ensuring that these supplies are not attacked again. Can he make that happen with any manpower, expertise and supplies, in order to thwart Putin's determination to leave Ukrainians in the dark and with no water?

**Mr Wallace:** The positive side is that the Ukrainians are incredibly skilled at being able to fix, repair and build their equipment. In many cases they have managed to turn around the shortages of electricity in a matter of days and Putin has not been successful. On wider skills, I offered at one stage to send Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, not into Ukraine but into neighbouring countries to assist with the refurbishment of tanks and such things. Those are some of the skills we can provide. In my experience, this is about "Mechanics, mechanics, mechanics", as they will fix a Challenger tank as quickly as they will fix a T-72. They are always on offer; if the Ukrainians ask, we will be happy to help.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I agree with Members from across the Chamber in praising the right hon. Gentleman and his handling of the Ukraine-Russia situation. After the NATO

[Margaret Ferrier]

Secretary-General said that NATO allies will act if Sweden or Finland comes under pressure from Russia or another adversary before they become full members of the alliance, how does the Defence Secretary predict that that might antagonise Putin and what risk does he assess there to be for the UK?

**Mr Wallace:** If Putin attacks Sweden and Finland, the Russians will antagonise Sweden and Finland; I do not think they will antagonise themselves. If Russia chooses to lash out at Sweden and Finland, not only would NATO meet and discuss what it can do to protect some of its closest allies, who are choosing to join, but the UK has a number of security arrangements we have made recently with both Sweden and Finland, and we would ensure, even bilaterally, that we would step up to the plate. However, what we can see is that because of Russia's poor and failing invasion of Ukraine, the conventional military forces it would have previously had near those countries are hollowed out or have been destroyed, so Russia has much less to threaten them with. However, we are alert for things around critical national infrastructure, pipelines and electricity cables, which is why I recently deployed two ships to the area—I believe one was HMS Enterprise and the other a Type-23 frigate—to make sure we help to protect Norway's pipelines and our infrastructure.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for updating the House on events relating to the war in Ukraine.

## Business of the House

12.54 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** With permission, I should like to make a statement about the forthcoming business. The business for the week commencing 24 October will include:

**MONDAY 24 OCTOBER**—Consideration of out-of-turn supplementary estimates relating to His Majesty's Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, followed by proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Adjustments) Bill, followed by the consideration of a resolution relating to Stamp Duty Land Tax (Reduction), followed by the Second Reading of the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Reduction) Bill.

**TUESDAY 25 OCTOBER**—Second reading of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 26 OCTOBER**—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*].

**THURSDAY 27 OCTOBER**—Debate on a motion on the national food strategy and food security, followed by a general debate on guaranteeing the right to maintain contact in care settings. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 28 OCTOBER**—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing on 31 October, which is scheduled to be the day of the Chancellor's statement, includes:

**MONDAY 31 OCTOBER**—Remaining stages of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, followed by the consideration of Lords amendments to the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill.

**TUESDAY 1 NOVEMBER**—Remaining Stages of the Online Safety Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 2 NOVEMBER**—Opposition day (6th allotted day). A debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National Party, with the subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 3 NOVEMBER**—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 4 NOVEMBER**—The House will not be sitting.

12.56 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, but, Mr Deputy Speaker, where on earth do I start? Do we even still have a Prime Minister? This is the afternoon after the morning after the night before, with the Government seemingly falling to pieces before our eyes. As some of their own Back Benchers said yesterday, they ought to be ashamed of themselves. We had a Home Secretary resigning amid discussions of national security, a Government seemingly unable even to organise against our motion to ban fracking and forced clarifications in the early hours of the morning from Downing Street. That is all in a day's work for this absolute disgrace of a Government party, who are simply unfit to govern. They are dragging this country's reputation through the mud and the British people will never forgive them for it. British people are looking to the Government for answers on how they are going to pay their mortgage, rent or bills, which the Government sent sky high when they crashed the economy. Instead, people are getting chaos.

Parliament ought to be a model workplace, so will the Leader of the House confirm that the reports of bad behaviour in the Lobby or outside it last night will be investigated? Will she put on record that in her view there is no place for intimidation and bullying on the parliamentary estate? On the actual votes themselves, it has come to my attention that there was a discrepancy last night between the number of votes recorded in the No Lobby which was read out in the Chamber and the number later published on the voting lists. Is the Leader of the House aware of any of her party's Members who perhaps did not want to vote against our motion but, to avoid controversy with their Whips, marched through the Lobby but did not scan their pass and therefore avoided the publication of their names? Will she also clarify whether yesterday's vote was a confidence vote or not? Downing Street said it was, but then a No. 10 special adviser told the Minister for Climate, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) to say it was not, which he duly did from that Dispatch Box, causing confusion on his own side. At half past one this morning, No. 10 suggested that it in fact was and then the Transport Secretary told Kay Burley a few hours ago that it was not. We know that the Prime Minister is infamous for her U-turns, but this is beyond a joke. If it was a vote of confidence, when will the Prime Minister be removing the Whip from her rebels?

I also notice that the Government have pulled our next Opposition day. I cannot think why, after yesterday, they might do that. Are they punishing us for their chaos and incompetence last night? Is the Leader of the House aware of Standing Order No. 14, which allocates 17 days to the leader of the official Opposition party? The Government are falling behind on this, so will they be giving us an Opposition day on the week commencing 7 November?

I am glad that the Leader of the House actually has some business to announce, given the Government's complete inability to function. As well as chaos, we have a raft of dropped legislation, broken promises and unmet manifesto commitments. She cannot blame the British people for asking, "What's the point of this Government?" She should not just take it from me, as the former Home Secretary mentioned the very thing in her resignation letter, when she raised concerns about the Government breaking key pledges to voters and failing to honour their manifesto commitments. Someone had their Weetabix, or was it tofu, for breakfast yesterday. Perhaps the Leader of the House can provide some clarity on what further broken promises the former Home Secretary was referring to. Can I also ask that the Government send Ministers to answer urgent questions who can actually provide answers? Many important questions on national security went unanswered this morning in the urgent question relating to the sacking—sorry, resignation, was it?—of the Home Secretary.

Out of touch, out of ideas, unable to govern. They are too busy trying to get through the Tory psychodrama, which is worsening hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute—it is happening in front of my very eyes—to focus on the serious issues facing all our constituents: not just mine, but theirs too. They have crashed the economy and left working people to pick up the bill, and now they are falling apart. This is a Tory crisis made in Downing Street. They are letting everyone down. The Prime Minister has clearly lost the confidence of her party,

and her party has lost the confidence of the country. It is time for a general election so that a Labour Government can deliver a fresh start for the British people.

**Penny Mordaunt:** May I start by thanking Mr Speaker for his statement at the start of business? I wholeheartedly endorse it.

We have ways of organising ourselves in a party system in this place, but ultimately we are all individuals making judgments about what is in the best interests of the country and our constituents. Sometimes, votes are about more than the issue that has been debated. Last night's Labour motion was an attempt to seize control of proceedings. We all know that that was done deliberately to enable campaigns today about Members' views on fracking and to spark the usual social media outrage; I know that Twitter has taken down some accounts today. This is standard operating procedure by Labour. Many Conservative Members have worked hard to ensure that fracking is rightly not imposed on their community, and it is by their efforts that fracking is not happening in their community. It is the Government's policy to allow fracking where there is consent.

If we want to take the temperature down in this place, I suggest that we take the temperature down outside of this place too. I am happy to say on the record that I am against bullying both in Parliament and outside it. I hope that is the view of all Members of this House.

The country needs stability and calm. I am glad to say that that is the effect the Chancellor is having—market functioning has improved, borrowing costs have been lowered, and the pound is strengthening—but there is more to do. Despite the very volatile global economic conditions, the economy remains resilient. Unemployment is at its lowest level for nearly 50 years and the UK is forecast to have the fastest growth in the G7 this year.

Elsewhere, good work is going on in Government, in contrast to the picture painted by the shadow Leader of the House. Just this week, the Lord Chancellor opened up the legal aid system to make it easier for victims of domestic abuse to get access to free legal aid and representation; we have had huge wins in the Department for International Trade, with a £100 million trade win for the drinks industry, and huge infrastructure project wins; we have announced nearly £800 million to support research centres with breakthrough new treatments and £180 million to support children's development in their early years, and the Department for Work and Pensions has launched a new service to help businesses support members of their workforce who have a disability or become sick. Earlier this week, we passed the Energy Prices Bill, removing the worry for households and businesses about their energy costs, and we are introducing the Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill to provide protection for the travelling public who rely on rail services to get to work or go about their daily lives. I hope that the Labour party will back us and fed-up commuters, and protect those services.

Opposition Members have been running around all week saying, "In office but not in power." I think that is probably a more accurate description of Labour's relationship with its trade union paymasters. We are getting on with the job, and further business will be announced in the usual way.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Bob Blackman, representing the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is indisposed, so he has asked me to report.

In addition to the business that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has announced, on Tuesday morning there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on baby loss and safe staffing in maternity care, and in Westminster Hall next Thursday there will be debates on Colleges Week and World Menopause Day—all subjects that I think colleagues will wish to debate. On Tuesday 1 November, provided Madam Deputy Speaker agrees, there will be a debate on the importance of religious education in modern Britain.

We have a queue of debates requiring Chamber time, so I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing further dates for the Backbench Business Committee. We are also short of debates for Westminster Hall on Thursdays, so I encourage colleagues to apply for Westminster Hall debates.

On Monday it is Diwali, and Hindus, Sikhs and Jains will be celebrating in the time-honoured fashion. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing everyone Shubh Deepavali, and Nutan Varshabhinandan for Wednesday and the Hindu new year?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in wishing everyone happy Diwali. I thank him for his update on Backbench business and for stressing the importance of those debates. The issues that colleagues have put forward for such debates show how helpful an innovation they are, and I urge colleagues to apply for them.

**Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** I, too, wish everyone a very happy Diwali when it comes.

It is good to see the Leader of the House still in her place, but perhaps this is our last exchange. Who knows who will be asked to close their eyes, think of Britain and become the next Prime Minister? Given that the jacket of the current incumbent is clearly on a shoogly peg, I think the Leader of the House should go for it. The 1922 Committee chair reportedly entered No. 10 just now. If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.

Alternatively, it may be that, after the latest developments in the Government's implosion, including a "resignation" from a great office of state—the former Home Secretary fulfils that dream of making the front page of the *Telegraph*, eh?—the Leader of the House's party is running out of candidates for the job and she will simply assume it. That is assuming she still wants to inherit this Icarus economy so spectacularly burned and crashed by the Government, leading to International Monetary Fund and Bank of England interventions as if the UK were a rudderless economy with no one at the wheel. Come to think of it, that seems to be the course Britain is set on now, with all of us having been treated as economic laboratory mice, trapped within the deluded constructs of libertarian think-tanks. A debate on some sort of compulsory training for Ministers on the basics of economics might be helpful.

Many of us, in this place and outside it, are finding it a bit of a struggle to keep up with events, so can we have a statement, please, on exactly who the members of the Government are just now? I believe the Government are bringing in legislation today mounting further attacks on trade unions and introducing a minimum level of service guarantee for the rail network. Surely it is time we brought in a minimum level of service guarantee for Westminster Governments.

While we are at it, a debate on molestation, reflections and intimidation, as outlined in "Erskine May", might prove useful. As I am sure the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy knows only too well, in the 18th century, insulting or menacing Members, or trying by force to influence them in their conduct in Parliament, was "roundly condemned" and considered a contempt. The time is clearly ripe for refresher courses.

The temptation is always to have a bit of fun with these weekly jousts over the political soap opera, but there is little room for amusement this week. I am all too conscious of the millions of people who are still looking to this place to provide them with some reassurance that those in charge have a clear idea of the problems they face and know what to do to sort them. All four nations are looking on aghast at the shambles this Government have created for themselves but, far more seriously, for all of our citizens. The attractions of an independent Scotland, free of this burach of a place, grow ever greater. General election—now.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am actually quite cheered by what the hon. Lady said, because I had always thought the expression was, "Close your eyes and think of England". Given that she asked us to close our eyes and think of Britain, I think I am starting to make some progress with her.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not mention any of the economic support that we have put through the House this week for the citizens in Scotland. I have to tell her that, as we prepare for a statement on 31 October, there is a policy being touted that would cost every single person in Scotland £2,184. I do not know what her views on that would be—whether she would be for or against a policy that would take £2,184 off every individual in Scotland. She looks confused. Let me help her out. She is for such a policy because that is the price of her divided policies.

**Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con):** One of the finer legacies of the previous Administration and of the 2019 Conservative election manifesto was our commitment to animal welfare. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that commitment is still firmly in place, and will she therefore find time, as swiftly as possible, to bring forward the remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding us of the track record that we have in this area. As an independent nation, we are now able to go further than ever on animal welfare. We have banned the live export of animals for fattening and slaughter. We have legislated for animal sentience and we are building animal welfare into our independent trade policy. Other business will be announced in the usual way, but he has those assurances and he should be confident when he looks at our track record.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to ask about brain injury. Yesterday morning, I hosted a roundtable here with lots of people who have been engaged in the issue of concussion in sport. The Leader of the House may have seen recent stories about rugby players and football players who are suffering from depression, anxiety and a series of different mental health complaints—many have suicidal or dementia problems—resulting from sub-concussive events: so not even when they have been knocked out, but repeated shaking or minor blows to the head. Can we have a debate on what the Government are going to do about this? When will we have proper protocols for all sports so that we protect every single child, especially as their brain is developing?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. I shall certainly raise it with both the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. But he will know how to apply for a debate.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Currently, organisations such as the Government-funded Energy Saving Trust are providing excellent advice to households up and down the country on how to save energy and then save money on their bills. It is time that we provided similar advice to businesses. I am working on the matter with business leaders throughout the two cities, including Kate Nicholls of UK Hospitality and Kate Hart from Central London business improvement districts. Will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging businesses across the country to take steps to be more energy efficient? Does she agree that perhaps we should be looking at the energy consumption of the House of Commons, too?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent question, and I shall make sure that the Secretary of State hears about it. The campaign she describes would be extremely useful to many businesses. Quite often, small differences in behaviour can lead to massive savings in energy but also business costs.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What I witnessed yesterday in the entrance to the voting Lobby was an absolute disgrace: a clearly visibly distressed Tory MP being forced against his will and bullied—manhandled—into the voting chamber. I know that the Government are disintegrating in front of our very eyes, but that is a challenge to democracy. Will the Leader of the House make an urgent statement against this sort of bullying and support the investigation that now clearly needs to take place?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I refer the hon. Lady to what I said at the start of my remarks today. Mr Speaker made a statement. I completely support what he said. Of course, everyone in this Chamber would condemn bullying, both, I hope, outside and inside this Chamber. However, the situation is not helped if people do not make specific allegations. Any Member of this House who has seen bad conduct, or who has been the victim of bad conduct, must be able to come forward and report that and it must be investigated. I am not aware of any such substantiated allegations at all. I say to the hon. Lady that, if she wants to help the situation, she should think about what she could do to assist that situation, and I ask her to check that against her behaviour today.

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time in this Chamber for a debate about modernisation of the Land Registry? Currently, if an identity thief steals a person's identity and uses it to transfer the title of their house, there is a very protracted, long-winded mechanism that ends up in a tribunal, which, at the end of it, may well not see their house returned to them. That has happened to one of my constituents. He has lost a home that he spent many months investing time, cash and his own hard labour renovating only to let it to tenants who stole his identity and then used it to transfer the title. He is struggling to get that property back and it strikes me that the Land Registry procedures, where it is simply impossible to transfer a title back, are outdated and very much in need of updating.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I have heard about the case on which my right hon. Friend has been working on behalf of her constituent. It is appalling. To be robbed of any property is bad enough, but to rob a person of their home, which they have put their heart and soul into and in which they may have brought up a family, is incredibly distressing. I know my right hon. Friend has been doing a huge amount of work to put a rocket up the Land Registry. I want to assist her in doing that and I will write to the Secretary of State. She will also know that there are questions on Tuesday and she should raise that matter there.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I have raised concerns recently with the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence about a 13-year-old girl living in my constituency and separated from her family in Afghanistan, despite assurances they were given when they assisted forces there. Will the Leader of the House advise on how I might go about raising this matter with the Minister directly and on whether we could have some time in the Chamber to debate the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and its progress?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about that case. The hon. Lady will know how she can apply for a debate, and she may wish to work with other colleagues to do that. If she passes the details of that case to my office, I will write on her behalf and ask for a meeting with the Minister.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My right hon. Friend may have heard many of the tributes that were paid to the late Dame Angela Lansbury who sadly passed away last week. Most of those tributes focused on her acting and singing prowess and, of course, her legendary character, Jessica Fletcher, in “Murder She Wrote”, but is my right hon. Friend aware that Angela Lansbury was one of the first champions of the fight against AIDS? In the 1980s, when many celebrities shied away from the issue, she was in the vanguard of fundraising. She famously said that we will “never give up on the fight” until the fight is won. Does my right hon. Friend accept that that fight will not be won unless the United Kingdom and others come forward to replenish the global fund to fight AIDS, because that is the only way in which we will achieve Dame Angela's objective?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend and join him in the tribute that he pays to the late Angela Lansbury. I did know that about her. She was a stalwart

[Penny Mordaunt]

and someone who really changed views towards that particular disease. I can tell him that the Government have restated their commitment to the global fund and we will make an announcement on our pledge in the coming weeks.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The problem with the chaos in the Government is that it delays getting answers to real-world problems our constituents face. My constituents in the Hayes Point apartments in Sully have been struggling to get an answer on when they will get payments from the energy bills support scheme. They come under the alternative fund, which is for those who do not have a direct relationship with an electricity supplier. I have been trying to get answers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on this. Those people have not had their money as others up and down the country have. Can the Leader of the House urgently chase an answer and a statement from the Secretary of State, so that they know when they will get support with their energy bills?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The support is enormous and it is most welcome, but people need to know how the schemes work. I know the hon. Gentleman appreciates that they are complex. I will certainly follow that up with the Department and ensure that Members are given information that is easily understandable for their constituents.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): This weekend, Southend came together to commemorate my predecessor, Sir David Amess. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on the transformative effect of music for those with learning difficulties and disabilities? In Southend we have not only the Love2Sign choir, but the international Music Man Project, which is recording its first ever single today with the Royal Marines band. Will she and the whole House help to make it the Christmas No. 1 for all the organisation does to help those with learning difficulties to overcome barriers and challenges in their lives, to the benefit of us all?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter and paying tribute to our dearly missed late colleague, Sir David Amess. The Music Man Project is an incredible organisation. The Christmas single she mentions is available now to download and its first live performance is tonight at the Painted Hall in Greenwich, accompanied by the Royal Marines band. I was privileged to go to the first rehearsal, and it was one of the most amazing experiences I have had. I have video of the effect of those two organisations coming together; it is an amazing thing and the lasting legacy of our late colleague.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Hear, hear.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know the Leader of the House is new to the role and that she has a great combative style, but I hope she will reflect on what she said to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), because I think she was very unfair in her response. On forthcoming business, the Leader of the House knows that all Members

of Parliament will be very busy, as I am in Huddersfield, working with a whole network of charities, local people and local organisations, because it will be a long, hard winter for many people who will not be able to afford to heat their house or feed their family. Support groups will have to be organised. Can she make sure that we get the right Ministers here—from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities or whichever—to talk about how the Government can help us with the resources to build those networks so that we can provide that food and those warm spaces, and so that MPs can actually roll up their sleeves and help?

**Penny Mordaunt:** On that latter point, I can certainly raise the matter with the key Departments involved. Much of this is about sharing good practice; there will be organisations working across several areas around the country, so picking up and sharing good practice is incredibly important.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): Late-night drama, suspense, whodunnit—no, Mr Deputy Speaker, not here, but in cinemas up and down the country. They represent great entertainment, a key part of our social fabric and, for the Whips, an opportunity for people to be somewhere they can turn their phones off. Will the Leader of the House find time to debate the importance of the exclusivity window for new films in this changing entertainment landscape?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his witty question. I shall certainly raise it with the relevant Department.

**Sir George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that an important principle of our constitutional arrangements is that of the mandate. Given that the Government's mandate, derived from the last general election manifesto, has now been either abandoned or exhausted, is it not time that we had a general election?

**Penny Mordaunt:** When it would have been in this country's interest to have a general election, when this Parliament was in paralysis due to Brexit before the 2019 general election, the hon. Gentleman's party blocked it. I am not going to take any lessons from him on that front. We stood on a manifesto that we are delivering, but that work is not yet done, and we will continue to deliver the manifesto that gave us this sizeable majority.

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): Grassroots clubs and sports are vital to communities such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. I have some fantastic clubs, such as Huncoat United and Accrington Wildcats, but they need support to ensure that they have not only the vital green spaces they need to train, but the funding to exist. Will my right hon. Friend allow a debate in Government time on how we can continue to support grassroots clubs and sports?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I shall certainly flag what she has said with the relevant Department. She will know how to apply for a debate, and I think it will be a well-attended one if she secures it.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Pavement parking is a massive problem in south Manchester and a difficult one to solve. We need the power that London has to introduce a default ban. Last week the Secretary of State for Transport—who, happily, has just joined the Front Bench—said it was a priority for her and she would bring forward the legislation as soon as parliamentary time allowed. I ask the Leader of the House to work with her colleague to make that happen. It would be a relatively simple thing to do and it would be widely welcomed.

**Penny Mordaunt:** To save my civil servants some work and some paper, I shall put on record in *Hansard* that I will ensure that the relevant Secretary of State hears what the hon. Gentleman has raised.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Nicola Sturgeon confirmed this week that she is pushing for a hard border between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The SNP's new economic policies would cost businesses a fortune and recklessly risk people's jobs. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate on the issue so that the SNP can finally tell the people of Scotland the truth about the enormous economic damage that Nicola Sturgeon's plan for a hard border would do to Scotland?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes, I am afraid that is the latest wheeze from the SNP to risk jobs and burn taxpayers' money. Let us not forget that this is the party that, during the pandemic, hired a testing firm at a cost of £10 million that promptly furloughed all its staff. In fairness to them, they did try to guarantee some jobs: they paid a company to the tune of £5 million per job and then failed to secure any of those jobs. Audit Scotland said of the Scottish Government that it had no framework for dealing with the private sector. Most spectacularly, the Scottish Government paid the cost of 24 ferries for just two vessels.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): MPs should be allowed to vote according to their judgment and without being harassed or bullied. Can the Leader of the House clarify what happened in the No Lobby, according to her observations? Does she agree that yesterday's events cast a very bad light on the professionalism of our Parliament?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I agree with the hon. Lady: as I set out in my earlier remarks, we have a way of organising ourselves in this place, but we are elected by our constituents to look after their interests and the interests of this country. I was in the Lobby last night and did not see any of what has been reported, but there are processes for reporting and for looking at such things. I am sure she will have heard Mr Speaker's statement earlier today; I think he is right and that is the right approach.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Nitrous oxide capsules have littered North Devon beaches this summer, as more and more people use them for recreational purposes despite risks such as damage to the lungs, halting breathing and slowing the heart to dangerous levels. Manufacturers have called this week for further restrictions on their purchase. Will the Government consider that recommendation and restrict sales for recreational use?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for shining a spotlight on that important issue, which is clearly of great concern to her constituents. Given the concerns about the use of nitrous oxide, particularly by young people, the former former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), sought advice from the independent Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. When it responds, the Government will consider its advice carefully and inform the House.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): There is a huge problem across my constituency of youths razzing around the streets on motorbikes—sometimes stolen—riding without helmets, pulling stunts, and putting other road users and pedestrians in danger. I was accompanied by Councillor Allison Gwynne to a meeting with Chief Superintendent Davies on Friday. The Denton South councillors Reid, Newton and Naylor had a packed public meeting on Monday about this issue, and Audenshaw councillors Smith and Martin are still picking up the consequences of a 16-year-old boy coming off his bike and, sadly, losing his life. This issue is serious, and requires a very resource-intensive programme to tackle it. Can we have a statement from the new Home Secretary that this Government take it seriously, and will give Greater Manchester Police and other police forces the tools they need to tackle this scourge on our streets?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about that situation, particularly that tragic loss of life. The hon. Gentleman is right: a whole-community approach to this issue is required. I will certainly make sure that what he has said today is flagged with the Home Secretary.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement earlier this week, which set out a realistic approach to dealing with our financial challenges, but as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be aware, that causes concerns about funding for a whole range of schemes. My two local authorities are very concerned about their levelling-up bids. Can the Leader of the House give an assurance that when the Chancellor makes his statement on 31 October, it will be accompanied by clarification regarding existing projects?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter; I am aware of the huge amount of work he has done in his constituency on the levelling-up agenda. I will certainly make sure that the Chancellor hears what he has said today, and will also make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities hears his words.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is estimated that between 2.5% and 4% of people—adults and children—have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Neurodiversity matters, and the more that that is realised and understood, the more we all benefit. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the importance of fostering greater knowledge, awareness and understanding of neurodiverse conditions, and thank the groups working hard to provide support and information, especially during October, which is ADHD Awareness Month?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point, and join her in thanking the large number of organisations that work to ensure that families have the advice and support they need. I will certainly flag the issue with the number of Departments that will be looking at it; I also encourage the hon. Lady to raise it during questions.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I very much welcome the minimum service levels that are going to be outlined in upcoming legislation. Can the Leader of the House please tell me whether as part of that, she would support minimum service levels on lifeline services such as the Solent ferries, where we have both the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and Unite?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I heard approving noises coming from my Front-Bench colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). I also point to this Government's record during the pandemic: we saw those services as needing support, and followed up with action. I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful suggestion, which has gone down well with my colleague.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Sunshine Pre-School, which serves families in my constituency on some of the lowest incomes, is facing closure, and several other constituents have written to me because their children have had their nursery places withdrawn due to staff shortages and funding problems. Clearly, this is a national problem. It is not, as the Government seem to think, a question of ratios of staff to children: it is about the failure of funded early learning rates to keep up with costs. Can we have a debate on the crisis in childcare, to urge Ministers to bring forward proper support for that vital social provision which is so important, not only to parents, but to supporting economic growth?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: those services are incredibly important for children's development and to support families, but also to enable people to remain in work and progress through work. I will raise that matter, which I know is a concern across the House, with the Department for Education. Colleagues involved in the work the Government have been doing on early years, to take a more holistic approach to that whole area and make sure it is doing what parents need it to do, will also want to hear the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in wishing all members of the Hindu community in Warrington South a very happy Diwali. I recently met with many members of that community, who expressed concerns about recent events in the midlands. Can the Leader of the House assure my constituents that the safety of all communities is a priority for this Government, and that they should enjoy the festival of light in their community?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I join in with his remarks, especially regarding all those in his constituency.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): My constituents are really concerned about the cuts to their train services that have been allowed under powers that were introduced

during covid. The Secretary of State for Transport has allowed Southeastern to make major alterations to its timetable using those powers, even though we are now out of covid. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State to explain why those powers have been allowed to be abused in that way, and why my constituents are losing train services?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have heard them, but I will formally follow up with the Department.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I draw the attention of the Leader of the House—indeed, that of the whole House—to early-day motion 480, which was published this morning. [*That this House congratulates the pupils and staff of Dunoon Grammar School in Argyll & Bute on winning the Community Collaboration category for the World's Best Schools Prizes 2022; commends this absolutely remarkable achievement and recognises it as just reward for a school which has under the leadership of Head Teacher David Mitchell and his staff, become a cornerstone of the wider Cowal community; applauds the commitment Dunoon Grammar School has shown to working with and for the benefit of their local community and for striving so hard to produce active, responsible, caring and engaged young citizens; recognises this success as being an historic landmark for the pupils and staff, a tremendous boost for the entire community, a source of great pride for Argyll & Bute, and a real triumph for Scottish education; and sincerely thanks everyone involved in securing this accomplishment for the dedication they have shown in making Dunoon Grammar School an exceptional centre of learning and wishes them all the best in the future.*]

That early-day motion congratulates Dunoon Grammar School, which yesterday was awarded the 2022 World's Best School prize in the community collaboration category. I hope to arrange a visit to this Parliament from that school very soon, but before that, will the Leader join me in sending her congratulations to headteacher David Mitchell, his staff, and all the pupils on that remarkable achievement, which—as Members can imagine—is a source of huge pride for the town and for everyone in Argyll and Bute, and is a real triumph for Scottish education?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am going to enter into the spirit of the hon. Gentleman's question and not comment in depth about the SNP's track record in education. It is a wonderful achievement, and I send my congratulations to David Mitchell and all his staff and pupils. I hope they will celebrate.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): Given the Prime Minister's announcement that she intends to stand down, I wonder how wise it is to proceed with much of the business that the Leader of the House has announced for next week, not least the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. That Bill is of massive constitutional significance; it would enact a huge power grab, both from this place and the devolved Administrations.

Given that the Act that created retained EU law, the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, was subject to eight days of scrutiny in a Committee of



the whole House, can the Leader of the House—if she is able to make any kind of guarantee whatsoever about the future of the Government, given the complete chaos that is now engulfing the Conservative party—say whether that Bill will be subject to scrutiny by a Committee of the whole House, not just a Public Bill Committee?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is an important Bill that will modernise the statute book. With regard to other matters, I say to the hon. Gentleman that I am going to keep calm and carry on, and I would suggest everyone else do the same.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I take this opportunity to wish all of my constituents a very happy Diwali as they get ready to celebrate next week. The Leader of the House may or may not be aware that since 2015, there has been a steep decline in the number of UK students studying Gujarati, Urdu, and other languages prevalent across south Asia at GCSE level. Given the significance of those languages for many British children's educational attainment and, crucially, our ability to maximise our trade and security relationships with India and other countries in south Asia, could we have a debate in Government time to explore the reasons for that decline and how we might reverse it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, and I will certainly ensure that the Department for Education has heard what he said. He will know very well how to secure a debate, and I thank him for raising that.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I wish I could take the Leader of the House's advice to keep calm and carry on, but in my role as SNP spokesperson on disabilities, I meet regularly with organisations representing disabled people. This week in Parliament, Muscular Dystrophy UK had a drop-in, to which my young parliamentary assistant went, and he came back visibly shocked at the amount of electricity that one young person needs to use to stay alive.

Given the U-turn by the Chancellor and the news we have just received that the leader of the Conservative party has stood down, will there be a statement on 31 October? I know that it is not in the gift of the

Leader of the House to tell me, but if there is to be a statement by another Chancellor or the same one—I do not really care which—can we have a guarantee that there will be extra help for people like this? This is life and death for these people and for their carers.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that, because it affords me an opportunity to provide reassurance to people. This was raised last week as well, and I have already written to the Department of Health and Social Care and other Departments on the matter. We want to ensure that people are looked after, taken care of and supported throughout this winter. We are very aware of the additional costs that people with certain health conditions and disabilities face. I know that this issue is being looked at, and I assure her that I understand people want reassurance fast.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Conscious that I am in the slot of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and although I may wish to ask the Leader of the House whether she wants to make any statement of intent on her future candidacy for leader of her party, I will focus on the comments made by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) in relation to the Global Fund replenishment. It was unusual that the Government failed to announce a pledge on 21 September, and we now hear that they have plans to drop official development assistance spending even further. We are really stepping back from our global commitments. Can the Leader of the House tell us when that announcement is likely to be made? Will there be positive news for the Global Fund replenishment, and will time be made for the House to scrutinise it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We did not make a detailed pledge at the pledging conference, but we did put on record our strong commitment. The issue was that a Minister was not available to go, so the pledge was not made—that was, from memory, my understanding—but it is expected shortly. I point the hon. Lady to our world-leading record at this and other replenishment conferences.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Leader of the House for making her statement and responding to many questions.

## Points of Order

1.43 pm

**Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House just called into question my behaviour when I raised the very serious allegations of bullying and manhandling that I witnessed in the voting Lobby last night. That is not appropriate. Can you assure me that there will be a proper and full investigation into this serious matter, and do you agree that that was an inappropriate response?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)**: Mr Speaker has already made an announcement that there is to be an investigation.

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt)**: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Lady for allowing me to confirm my views on this matter. We do ourselves a disservice in this place if we do not report wrongdoing and follow it up in the proper way. I did not see any, but there may well have been, and she may have seen things that I did not. In that case—

**Anna McMorris**: You called into question my behaviour.

**Penny Mordaunt**: This is really important. In that case, we should report these issues, tell people what we have seen and support victims to come forward. We should not go on the airwaves and make unsubstantiated and, in some cases—not the hon. Lady's—factually incorrect allegations. That does not help to raise standards in this place. Mr Speaker has got this absolutely right. I refer the hon. Lady to the statements he has made. If any member of my party has behaved in an improper way, I will condemn that as the Leader of the House, but what we need are facts, and the whole conduct of this House would be helped if people stuck to the facts.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When Members enter this privileged place, we are obliged to abide by the code of conduct that exists for all of us, which I believe to be sacrosanct. Last night, at least one photograph appeared in the national media purporting to show an alleged incident at the entrance to the No Lobby. May I seek your counsel in two areas? First, how might we collectively raise the bar of personal conduct in this place so that photographs are not taken for disingenuous purposes and for political gain? Secondly, how might we best identify those responsible, so that this poor behaviour can be brought to account?

**Mr Deputy Speaker**: Mr Speaker and the entire Deputy Speaker team deprecate any taking of photographs, whether in the voting Lobby, the Chamber or certain other areas. Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear,

but let me emphasise it again: do not take photographs in areas where they are forbidden. The hon. Gentleman has made a good point, and it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to behave better as role models to those outside looking in.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) for telling me that he was going to raise this matter. I want to be absolutely clear that I took a photograph, and I did so knowing that I was breaking the rules of the House—the etiquette of the House, certainly. I did so because I believed that the example being set, when we are trying to change the culture of bullying in Parliament, was such that it was necessary to override the normal course of action. I apologise to the House for doing so. However, it is very important to understand that if 12 Members were to stand around a member of staff in that way, they would probably end up being suspended from the House for a long period for bullying. We have only just started taking bullying seriously in this Parliament.

I am not questioning what you just said, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I gently suggest that there is a good argument that one of the rules we have had for a very long time—that there is no photography and no filming in the Lobby or adjacent areas—is now out of date, and it might actually help us to stop some of the bullying—*[Interruption.]* I am only suggesting it gently, but it might stop some of the behaviour. Some of the behaviour changed in this House when the Chamber began to be filmed.

**Mr Deputy Speaker**: The hon. Member has made two points. One was an apology, which the House has heard. The second was about rule changes. That is not for the Chair; that is for the House, and there is a procedure to do that. The hon. Member has made his views known, and he will know how to progress that. It is then up to the House to decide whether it wishes there to be a rule change.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Irrespective of the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), there were photographers outside Parliament using expensive equipment to take photos of Members of Parliament, which is a breach of the security of this Parliament. I hope that Mr Speaker and colleagues will take action to prevent that from happening in the future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker**: I am not aware of that, but the hon. Member has made it apparent. I will pass him the name of the person he should talk to and give his evidence to. Now let us, on this momentous day in British politics, move on—*[Interruption.]* Another momentous day in British politics!

## Waste Crime

### PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We now come to the Select Committee statement. Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, representing the Committee of Public Accounts, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown to respond to these in turn. I emphasise that questions should be directed to Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and not to the relevant Government Minister. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.49 pm

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** While momentous events are taking place elsewhere, I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the 18th report of this Session of the Public Accounts Committee on “Government actions to combat waste crime”.

The PAC is an incredibly busy Committee that holds two major sessions a week to examine the value for money of Government projects, programmes and delivery. Our inquiries come from the extremely insightful reports created by the National Audit Office. Following our PAC hearings, the Committee produces a report with recommendations to the Government who constitutionally normally have two months to respond.

This week, the PAC published its report on “Government actions to combat waste crime”, which highlights our main concern with the Government’s strategy in combating waste crime, provides recommendations, and urges the approach to be reconsidered so that waste crime is not effectively decriminalised. Despite an increase in the number of incidents of waste crime and a significant increase in the cost of dealing with it, the PAC found that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency are making only “slow and piecemeal” progress in implementing the 2018 resources and waste strategy, and that DEFRA does not have an outline delivery plan for achieving its admirable policy of eliminating waste crime by 2043.

The Government’s 2018 resources and waste strategy set out the admirable goal of eliminating waste crime within 25 years and listed 14 actions to be taken, but only three have been completed: establishing the Joint Unit for Waste Crime, making changes to legislation to give the Environment Agency greater powers, and giving the Environment Agency access to police intelligence systems. DEFRA must increase the speed at which it implements this strategy, and the PAC has requested that it provides the Committee with an outline of its plan to achieve its 2043 goal by the end of this month—quite a tight timetable.

We all know that the thoughtlessness of waste crime has a hugely negative impact on people, their local area and the economy. Waste crime varies tremendously from area to area, but I am certain that all Members will have been contacted by constituents about it at

some point and will have dealt with numerous cases of fly-tipping. It is an antisocial, polluting and costly crime that blights our countryside, cities and properties across England, and costs the economy more than £1 billion a year, although that figure is likely to be an underestimate.

Waste crime includes not just fly-tipping but illegal waste sites, breaches of waste permit conditions, breaches of exemptions to the requirements for waste permits and, above all, the illegal export of waste by the UK to developing countries that are ill-equipped to deal with the environmental and often infinite consequences of that waste. It is not getting the local or national attention it needs to tackle it effectively.

Waste crime is greatly under-reported: only about a quarter of incidents are reported. Government and Environment Agency statistics are not accurately capturing its true scale and impact, with local authorities not providing consistent reports on fly-tipping and relying on the public to report the crime. The PAC asks that DEFRA and the Environment Agency explore the full range of digital solutions, such as satellite and drone technology, to solve the issue of data weaknesses.

The Government’s digital waste tracking system, including new IT systems, has been described as being at the “core” of the Government’s strategy, but it is still in development after four years. DEFRA’s prototype is in the testing stages before it reaches the next stage of development, and is expected to be rolled out in 2024. That will be a big step forward in improving data and the public reporting of incidents, and hopefully in the implementation of a swift and appropriate follow-up.

The project has ambitious aims and DEFRA is confident that it can deliver, having successfully put in place an IT system when we left the EU. The PAC has investigated similar large-scale digital projects by other Government Departments before, however, and has therefore asked DEFRA to write to the Committee when the IT contract is let to confirm that that has happened and to confirm the plan for its implementation.

The landfill tax has been successful in reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill and in encouraging recycling, which has become an increasingly normal way of waste disposal for many households in recent years. However, the PAC reports that this tax has increased the incentive to commit waste crime, with His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs slow to prosecute offenders. Indeed, its recent attempt to prosecute an alleged offender in Operation Nosedive cost a huge £3.5 million yet ended without going to court.

His Majesty’s Treasury and HMRC are currently reviewing the landfill tax and they need to take into account how the design of the current tax incentivises waste crime. The tax gap—the difference between the tax due and the tax collected—of the landfill tax is one of the highest of all taxes as a proportion of its size. Jim Harra, the chief executive and first permanent secretary at HMRC, assured the Committee only this morning that that is because its scope has been widened to include illegal waste sites, which are difficult to track down, but he also assured the Committee that HMRC recognised the social and environmental harm it causes.

The reality is that the current system does little to deter people from committing waste crime. Organised criminals, who are responsible for the majority of incidents, often perceive the fines as a “business expense”. Fines

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

are not high enough to discourage the crime and, in the unlikely case that they end up in court, the penalties are not sufficient. DEFRA, the Environment Agency and HMRC need to work together more closely to develop a plan for making enforcement more effective, speeding up the process and assessing the current sentencing guidelines, which must include not only higher fines but custodial sentences for the most egregious cases.

DEFRA must work more closely with local authorities. While the Department is developing the guidance, local authorities are responsible for cleaning up the waste on the land they control and investigating suspected perpetrators. Evidence from the National Farmers Union said that better reporting and recording of waste crime on private land “is urgently needed” due to a substantial number of unrecorded incidents, with fly-tipping affecting two thirds of farmers. The national framework needs to be cleared by DEFRA so that local authorities have clear guidance on tackling fly-tipping that provides flexibility for responses but overall good practice.

As I mentioned, waste crime includes not just fly-tipping, but the terrible practice of illegally exporting waste abroad. The exact figures are unknown, but the Environmental Services Association estimates that about 400,000 tonnes of waste are exported illegally each year, which costs our economy £42 million. Waste is being exported to countries that are unable efficiently to manage the volume and toxicity of waste safely, which causes substantial and sometimes permanent social, economic and environmental harm. The Environment Agency recently secured a record £1.5 million fine in the case of a waste company that was prevented from exporting 16 25-tonne containers to India and Indonesia, but a further 26 containers had already been illegally exported.

I will go through the PAC’s recommendations. Firstly, DEFRA should increase the impetus with which the resources and waste strategy is taken forward. By the end of October 2022, it should provide the Committee with its outline plan for achieving the elimination of waste crime by 2043, and provide annual updates on progress against this plan. Secondly, DEFRA and the Environment Agency need to explore the full range of potential solutions to data weaknesses, including, for example, satellite technology, and ensure the successful delivery of existing initiatives to improve data.

Thirdly, DEFRA should work with HMT and HMRC to ensure that the current review of landfill tax takes into account the incentives that the tax as currently designed creates to commit waste crime. Fourthly, DEFRA, the Environment Agency and HMRC should work with the relevant bodies in the criminal justice system to develop a plan for making enforcement more effective across the full spectrum of waste crime.

Fifthly, DEFRA should work with local authorities to set a clear national framework for tackling fly-tipping, setting overall expectations and promoting good practice. Sixthly, the Environment Agency should write to us within six weeks setting out what actions would be required to enable it to understand the true scale of illegal waste exports and what further action it could take to prevent them. Seventhly and lastly, DEFRA should write to the Committee when the IT contract is let to confirm that it has happened and what the plan is for full implementation.

Waste crime is a large and costly problem that causes great angst both to those who are directly affected by waste ending up on their land, leaving them to clear it up, and to the public who deserve to be able to enjoy clean and healthy towns and countryside. The PAC has clearly set out its concern about how Government are combating it, and most crucial is the lack of strategy or plan for achieving their hugely ambitious target of eliminating waste crime by 2043. This could be a huge win for the Government and the people of this country, and I urge DEFRA to get on with it.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement and the Committee for an excellent report. I also thank the National Audit Office for its inquiry into Operation Nosedive, which was instigated by me and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). What is depressing about the report is that these are things both of us have been raising for the last 10 years, and no one has been listening.

The actions outlined are ones I support, but this is not a victimless crime. Tax has been avoided, criminals have got away with these crimes and communities have been blighted. Can I urge the hon. Gentleman and his Committee to make sure that they keep their finger on the button on this subject? I and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden have been at this for 10 years, and in our experience the evidence is there about what is going wrong, but the Government have just turned a blind eye—indeed, they have basically decriminalised waste crime. Without such pressure from his Committee, this will just carry on.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I thank the right hon. Member, who is very experienced in this field and has been campaigning on this, quite rightly, for a long time. We have made some fairly stringent recommendations in this report, with some fairly tight timetables for what the Government have to do by when. I can assure him that if we do not see satisfactory progress, we will call DEFRA back to examine why our recommendations have not been properly implemented. As he knows, it is part of the PAC system that we have the ability to call witnesses back and find out why they have not responded to our recommendations. As he also knows, as I said it at the beginning of my statement, it has 42 days in which to respond. If we do not like the responses, we can follow that up in writing or, again, call back witnesses.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown for presenting the Select Committee statement.

## BILL PRESENTED

TRANSPORT STRIKES (MINIMUM SERVICE LEVELS) BILL  
*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Secretary Simon Clarke, Mr Secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg and Secretary Chloe Smith, presented a Bill to make provision about minimum service levels in connection with the taking by trade unions of strike action relating to transport services.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 168) with explanatory notes (Bill 168-EN).*

## Backbench Business

### NHS Dentistry

[*Relevant document: e-petition 564154, Independent review of the NHS dental contract.*]

2.3 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned by the growing crisis in NHS dentistry; notes that nine out of ten dental practices in England do not accept new NHS patients; regrets the number of dentists moving away from NHS practice; welcomes the Government's commitment to levelling up health outcomes and dental health across the country; calls on the Government to take urgent steps to improve retention of NHS dentists and dental accessibility for patients; and further calls on the Government to report to the House on its progress on the steps it has taken to address the NHS dentistry crisis in three months' time.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for her work in helping to secure it. I also highlight e-petition 564154, signed by 11,067 people, calling for an independent review of the NHS dental contract.

Colleagues have been securing debates on the state of NHS dentistry for the past two years. This crisis has been brewing for a long time, and the situation can be likened to that of a house built on shallow and poor foundations that has come crashing down with the earthquake of covid. The King's Fund describes NHS dentistry as being on "life support", while the British Dental Association describes it as undergoing a "slow death". In its monthly report for October, Healthwatch repeats that NHS dental care continues to be one of the main issues it hears about from the public, who across the country are clamouring for NHS dentistry that is both affordable and accessible.

In Suffolk, there are 70 dental practices with NHS contracts, but not one is taking on new patients. Locally, there has been some welcome support in that, in Lowestoft, a local practice was granted additional units of dental activity that allowed it to see emergency patients until the end of September, and in July the Dental Design Studio was awarded a contract to deliver NHS dentistry for up to eight years. However, very quickly both practices were fully booked up and have had to turn away patients. There is a need for root and branch reform, and I shall briefly set out the issues that need to be included in a blueprint plan for NHS dentistry.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Would he agree with me that the fundamental problem with NHS dentistry at the moment is the 2006 contract and the units of dental activity? Does he share my disappointment at the statement made in the summer about how to resolve the situation based on the consultation launched last year, and furthermore, does he hope that UDAs will be expunged from all of this so that dentists can be properly rewarded for the job they do and thus return to the NHS?

**Peter Aldous:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree wholeheartedly with him on that point. I will come on to it as I set out what I believe needs to be done to improve the situation, but I think he and I are very much on the same page on that issue.

First, I will address the issue of funding. There is a need to secure a long-term funding stream. In recent years, the NHS dental budget has not kept up with inflation and population growth. Since 2008, NHS dentistry has faced cuts with no parallel elsewhere in the NHS, and the British Dental Association states that it will take £880 million per annum to restore the service to 2010 levels. I acknowledge the budgetary challenges that the Chancellor faces, but the reform process is doomed from the start without an appropriate level of investment. There is a need for a protected budget, and any funding that is clawed back must be kept in dentistry.

Secondly, a strategic approach should be adopted towards recruitment and retention, with a detailed workforce plan being put in place.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) on securing this debate. There is a crisis in south Manchester and across the country in trying to access NHS dentists. There are highly trained dentists from abroad who can help. I have some constituents who were trained at the dental faculty of the University of Hong Kong, which is among the top three faculties in the world—it has an English curriculum—but they cannot get registered or access the licence exams. I understand that the Government have said they are going to simplify the registration process. Would he join me in urging the Government to act very quickly to make that happen?

**Peter Aldous:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which came at an appropriate time. Indeed, he may well have been reading my speech, because that was the next point I was coming to. In the short term, we need to be stepping up recruitment from abroad. Although the legislation tabled earlier this month to streamline the process of recognising overseas qualifications is welcome, that will not address the problem on its own, and I hope that when he responds to the debate, the Minister will address that issue. In the longer term, we must improve dentistry training ourselves and ensure that it is available throughout the country. In that regard, the proposals being worked up by the Universities of East Anglia and of Suffolk are to be welcomed.

Thirdly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) said, there is a need for a new NHS dental contract. It is welcome that discussions have started on revising the contract, but there is a worry that the Government are looking only at marginal changes, when ultimately a completely new contract is required. At present, the NHS contract is driving dentists away from doing NHS work. Its target-based approach is soul destroying for so many, and it needs to be replaced with an agreement that has prevention at its core.

That leads me to the fourth and penultimate component of a new system of NHS dentistry: the public promotion of the importance of good oral health, and looking after our teeth from the cradle to the grave. Denplan proposes that the Government and NHS should lead a public education campaign to emphasise the importance of oral health. There should be provision in the aforementioned new contract for dentists to go into schools, as well as into care and nursing homes. When economic conditions allow, let us be imaginative and

[Peter Aldous]

exempt children's toothbrushes and toothpaste from VAT. That can embed good oral healthcare at an early stage of life. It is welcome that the Health and Care Act 2022 facilitates the roll-out of water fluoridation projects, and the Government should work proactively with water companies to ensure that is universal.

Finally, there is a need for clear transparency and full local accountability for overseeing and commissioning NHS dentistry services. I acknowledge the hard work and great effort of those working at NHS England, but we need to replace a system that is inaccessible, opaque, and confusing. The Health and Care Act provides us with the means of doing that, and it is welcome that from next April, many integrated care systems will be taking on responsibility for local NHS dentistry. That is the right approach, as good oral healthcare is essential for good general health and wellbeing, and inextricably linked to primary, mental and emergency care. It is vital that those involved in dentistry are represented on integrated care boards.

Across the country there are a multitude of dental deserts. If we do nothing, if we apply the odd sticking plaster here and there, those will turn into one large Sahara. We owe it to those we represent to ensure that does not happen. That means that we need as a matter of urgency a blueprint plan for new NHS dentistry. That will not be delivered in one fell swoop, but we need clearly to lay down the route path and start taking meaningful strides down it. With that in mind, the motion calls on the Government to embark on that journey and report back on their progress in three months' time.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. As colleagues will see, there is substantial interest in this debate. I do not want to put on a time limit, but I suggest that contributions are confined to about 10 minutes.

2.14 pm

**Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab):** May I, too, express my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to debate this important matter today?

On 22 September, during a statement by the Health and Social Care Secretary, I raised these problems on behalf of the people of Knowsley and the Liverpool city region, and described the experiences they are having. I cited BBC research that showed that, to use the Secretary of State's own term, Liverpool city region is a "dental desert", with not one dental practice taking on NHS patients. In response, she said that she had

"set out in the plan today what we are seeking to do with dentists. First of all, it is the role of the local NHS—the ICB—to take responsibility for such provision, and I expect it to do so."—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 839.]

Earlier this week, my office carried out a survey of dental practices in Knowsley to measure what, if any, progress had been made since that exchange. We found that, of the 13 dental practices in Knowsley, it is still the case that none—I repeat, none—is accepting new NHS adult patients, and only two are accepting children under the age of 18. I am therefore bound to conclude that no progress has been made in the ensuing weeks.

Also on 22 September, I urged the Secretary of State to take measures in the short, medium and long term to address this disgraceful situation. Since then, the British Dental Association has pointed out that

"the Government needs to show real ambition to bring NHS dentistry back from the brink."

Although the new Administration—goodness knows there will be another new Administration shortly—has placed dentistry as a top ABCD—ambulances, backlogs, care, doctors and dentists—priority, no new proposals have been made

"to halt the exodus of dentists from the NHS"

to care for patients. Moreover, the British Dental Association points out that the key issues of contract referral, chronic underfunding and growing oral inequalities have yet to be addressed. This is not just a matter of cosmetic treatment, important though that may be in many cases. As the association pointed out, this is also about how to spot oral cancer earlier, which is one of the fastest rising types of cancer and claims more lives than car accidents. That is a particular concern for Knowsley. As the British Dental Association went on to say:

"People in the most deprived communities are significantly more likely to die from it than those in more affluent areas."

Our dentists are in many cases the first medical professionals to detect cases. Access to NHS dental treatment can in such cases be the difference between life and death. Knowsley is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country and it is consequently in a very vulnerable position regarding the early detection of oral cancer.

The motion contains good points that I would happily endorse, but I am concerned that in terms of specific actions it calls for a progress report in three months' time. My concern—I do not make this point to be at all mischievous—is that I do not know, and nobody in the House will be able to tell me, who is likely to be the next Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and whether they will have a different strategy on NHS dental care. So we need something to be done more speedily. The Government have to take responsibility for the current turmoil, but the fact is that there is so much uncertainty and such issues are simply not being dealt with.

The motion does not address what the Government could be doing in the short term to alleviate the problems confronting people in Knowsley and elsewhere. I have two suggestions on short-term action that could and should be taken. First, I urge the Secretary of State to introduce a procedure to enable those in need of urgent NHS dental treatment to be referred to a suitable dental practice, preferably locally. My constituency office recently dealt with the case of an 18-year-old constituent who needed urgent root canal treatment on two front teeth, which she was unable to afford. The problem was exacerbating an existing mental health problem. Since she was in constant pain and probably barely able to eat and drink, I contacted NHS North West. I am grateful that it was able to make arrangements for her to receive the treatment she needed at a local dental practice. I suggest that that approach, which I just happened to stumble across, should be added as a matter of urgency for those in need of urgent dental treatment.

Secondly, I am aware that many NHS patients have been culled by dental practices, often on the basis that they were not making use of the service on a regular

enough basis. I cannot give accurate figures for Knowsley, but I suspect that thousands of people are former NHS patients. However, no appeal process is available to such patients, who have just been struck off and there is nothing that they can do about it, other than pay to be treated privately. I am aware of one case involving a Knowsley resident who, as a result of extremely debilitating, extended cancer treatment, was unable to contemplate much-needed dental treatment. When he felt strong enough to do so, however, he tried to make an appointment as an NHS patient, only to discover that he had been struck off the list.

My second short-term suggestion is therefore to urge the Secretary of State to institute an appeal process whereby such patients could apply to NHS England in order for it to prevail on the medical practice concerned to reinstate NHS patients who had good reasons for not being able to visit the dentist during lockdown, or who could not do so for medical reasons, such as those I have referred to. On the medium term and longer term, and the national problems to which I referred, I simply urge Ministers to enter into meaningful discussions with the British Dental Association to help to resolve the issues that I are so bedevilling NHS dental services nationally.

I hope that Ministers will accept that I have tried in my approach to deal with this important matter as constructively as I can. I sincerely hope that they will respond in a similar way and try to help to resolve the short-term problems that my constituents are experiencing in ways that can be easily implemented.

2.24 pm

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): First, I must congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). This is the second time that I have heard him pronounce on NHS dentistry—I think he has done it more often than that—and he is becoming something of an expert. I wonder whether the British Dental Association might give him an honorary medal or something for that. I also have an interest—a very part-time interest—that means that I have to speak on this; otherwise, the profession would ask me what the heck I was doing. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to the Government Front Bench to become our voice on dentists and dentistry. It might not last as long as he anticipated a few days ago, but it is a dubious honour and one in which he will find many friends and many on the other side of the argument.

The problem we face is that there are not enough dentists. Many suggestions will come from the debate, so I will just skip through a few. The problem is not so much that there are not enough dentists—there are not enough dentists prepared to do NHS dentistry. That has been exacerbated by covid, but it is far from new. It has been a problem to a greater or lesser degree for more than five decades. I arrived in this country in 1970, produced my certificate from my university in New Zealand, got it rubber-stamped by the General Dental Council and went straight into business. I cannot see why we cannot do that now. I was one of a stream of New Zealand and Australian doctors and dentists. Once we moved into the common market, that stream was shut off.

The practice of dentistry is complex and intricate if it is done properly. A small group of members of the all-party parliamentary group for dentistry and oral

health recently visited King's College dental school. I think it was enlightening for many to discover how complex and difficult dentistry is. The staff provided our members with a high-speed drill with a tungsten carbide bit and virtual molars. It is just as well that they were virtual molars—I have never seen so much tooth destruction in my life.

As I said, the problem has been exacerbated by the covid backlog, and that will be with us for some time, but we are—I hope—looking at the long term and the short term. I will touch on the short term. Some with dental interests such as the organisation My Dentist are campaigning to increase the number of NHS dentists and other groups providing facilities, surgeries and so on. But there are—I hope that the Minister is aware of this—many dental firms working hard to pull dentists out of the NHS and into the private sector.

As has been said, we must maximise the output from our dental schools. I am sure this has been done. I have heard calls for new dental schools; we have heard one today. Dental schools are enormously expensive organisations to build, stock and run. I was just in New Zealand, where there is a new school on the same site as the old one. It is fantastic, but it took years to build, stock and run it. A new school probably takes two to four years to set up and then it is four to five years before the graduates emerge. As with how a person gets their driving licence and then learns to drive, a dentist gets their certificate from the school and then starts to learn dentistry. In the short term, it would be faster and more productive if the General Dental Council were given the ability to enable overseas dentists with good English from competent overseas dental schools to enter the United Kingdom as practising dentists, without having to go through the insulting rigmarole and costs of further exams. It is an insult to most people from most of the top university dental schools to have to sit examinations here when the competence of their own schools is at least as good as those here. It would take only a small movement to enable that to happen.

A large-ish number of elderly-ish dentists who are about to retire have pulled out of dentistry because of the bureaucratic overload. Many have retired because of the strain of the job. The regulatory strictures of the Care Quality Commission in particular have added to that. Of course, that applies to small practices. The CQC is necessary. We must have it, but its extensive, detailed, time-consuming form filling has been the final straw for many dentists, especially those in small practices. Many have just retired in disgust. For my tiny part-time practice, I pay an independent company £150 a month to help me ensure all regulations are met and documented as met. It is time-consuming, expensive and unnecessary. I would therefore rather like to see an opportunity for the GDC, with outside help, to look at the bureaucratic requirement and consider whether it could ease and reduce the strain on practitioners. When it has finished with that for the dentists, it could also start looking at how hospitals and medical surgeries are treated.

Negotiations on the revision of the contract have been mentioned. It is a massive gripe among the profession in England, because of the use of the semi-mythological coinage called “units of dental activity”. They are a mythical thing. How many dentists get them to actually come together and work, and balance them so they are fair, is beyond me. Negotiations on the revision of the contract have been going on for many years. There have

[*Sir Paul Beresford*]

been many trials and heaps of tribulations. Over the past decades, dentistry has moved forward. Materials and techniques have been developed and adopted. The service available on the NHS dental menu has enlarged with that, but I question that some items on the menu are not strictly health, especially when alternatives are an option and would ease the strain on NHS dentists. If we accept that there is an NHS dental emergency, then I suggest the Government, for a short period of time, run a simple separate contract on a reduced NHS menu of strictly dental health items. A simple fee per item would remove arguments about those mythical units of dental activity. A simple contract could specifically target the NHS patients looking for a check-up and simple dental health care, particularly if it involves pain relief. At the same time, we ought to accept, because of the change in the nature of dentistry, that mixed private and NHS services are here to stay and should be encouraged, as that actually helps the NHS service.

Finally, on two really positive points, one has already been mentioned and that is teaching children, even little children, how to brush their teeth. When I first came here, I spent a lot of time in east London. When I mentioned a toothbrush, the blank stares made it quite apparent that they just did not have a toothbrush, let alone use one. The excitement, in the schools that I and other dentists have been into, of little children with toothbrushes and toothpaste is really worth watching. And the mess is phenomenal!

My final point is on fluoridation. We have now got to the stage where we can install fluoridation in our water supplies. We are an absolute disgrace in the western world. Much of the western world has 60%, 70% or 80% of their water supplies fluoridated, while we have 10%. The obstructions have been taken away and I ask the Minister to rapidly move forward with that. The payback period will be obvious after about two years and will make a tremendous difference, along with toothbrushing, as it progresses. We can be a nation with some of the best teeth in the world if we have 100% fluoride and if we teach every child, “This is a toothbrush and this is toothpaste—get on with it!”

2.33 pm

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate and I thank my co-sponsor, or co-conspirator, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

If you might indulge me this once, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did, in preparing for this debate, look up my past remarks on this issue; a sort of compendium of forecasting doom for NHS dentistry that, as it turns out, is entirely accurate. As we have heard, Members from across the House and across the country are raising concerns on behalf of constituents who are simply unable to access an NHS dentist. The current system remains unfit for purpose. Recent BBC research found that in the south-west, the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber, just 2% of dental practices were taking on NHS patients.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that not a single dental practice in either the current former Prime Minister’s constituency or the Health

Secretary’s constituency is accepting new NHS patients? Should it not spur on the Government that the former Prime Minister’s constituents and the current Health Secretary’s constituents cannot get access to NHS dentistry?

**Judith Cummins:** I am indeed aware of that fact, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) raised it with me yesterday. Sadly, she cannot be here today to make that very point, so I thank my hon. Friend for doing so.

In Bradford, 98% of dentists are closed to NHS patients, forcing people to go either to accident and emergency or to go private, whether they can afford to or not, often taking out a payment plan because they do not have the luxury of an NHS dentist available to them. In Bradford, 16% of three-year-olds and over a third of five-year-olds are now suffering with visible signs of tooth decay. In Yorkshire and the Humber, over 2,700 children under 10 had teeth extracted in hospital between 2020 and 2021. In fact, children born in Bradford are eight times more likely to be admitted to hospital with dental decay before their sixth birthday than if they were born in the former Prime Minister’s region. The truth is that NHS dentistry in its current form is just not working anywhere for anyone.

How did we get to this position? The answer is threefold: a contract not fit for purpose, dramatic underfunding and an exodus out of the NHS workforce. During my time in this place, Minister after Minister after Minister has stood here accepting that fundamental reform of the contract is needed. And yet we are still waiting. After years of delay, the Government announced in July some small contract changes, but unfortunately those quick wins completely failed on the fundamentals. NHS dentists in my constituency tell me that the financial uplifts are minor to the point of insignificance. The Government are conducting a polish and a clean when what is needed is root canal treatment. Will the Minister tell us exactly why the Government have not delivered the long-awaited full-scale contract reforms? Is it still their intention to conduct those reforms? If so, when can we expect them? If not, why not?

It is important to put on the record that the issue here is not a shortage of dentists. The number of registered dentists is at a record high. We have the dentists, but they are working in private practice. Until the Government fix the problems with the contract, which sees highly qualified and experienced dentists squeezed out of the system, they are simply pouring water into a bucket with a giant hole at the bottom of it.

My next point is on funding cuts. We saw funding to NHS dentistry fall by around a third in real terms over the last decade and that was before the cost of living crisis. In January, the Government announced a £50 million catch-up fund for dentistry, funded from clawback, that gave practices three months to offer urgent care appointments to deal with the pandemic backlog. I warned the Government at the time that their strategy was flawed and that the funding to tackle the covid backlog would prove to be unusable and the system unworkable. ITV recently revealed that approximately £14 million of the promised £50 million was actually spent. That is just 28% of the funding allocated, which delivered only 18% of the 350,000 appointments it was meant to. In Yorkshire and the Humber, my region, only 16% of the allocated funding was actually spent.



The shortfall was clawed back by the Government once again and not reinvested back into dentistry in my region. That is less than a third of the money spent, not because it is not needed, but because the Government set up a system that was unworkable.

We need targeted funding to address an acute problem in areas of high need. The successful Bradford project that I developed with former Ministers back in 2017 really worked. It was a transformative project that meant we got 4,200 extra NHS dental appointments for people who had not had a dentist appointment for over two years. In the long term, however, we need fundamental change, and a comprehensive reform of the contract to push prevention is absolutely critical to that reform. Good oral health must not be restricted by either postcode or wealth. Going to A&E cannot be an alternative to NHS dentistry.

Although I welcome the Minister to his new role and, indeed, welcome the Secretary of State's new emphasis on dentistry in her ABCD of priorities, whoever the Secretary of State is, in whatever Government, they should learn the lessons of targeting and invest in NHS dentistry, as prevention really is better than the cure. We simply cannot go on like this. The public are fed up to the back teeth with inaction and excuses.

2.40 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The dental services that my constituents use are the responsibility of the Scottish Government in Edinburgh. My comments will focus on the challenges that we face in Scotland in accessing NHS dentistry.

I begin by thanking the dentists in my constituency, who are doing the best they can and working hard to provide essential services for people across the Scottish Borders. There is no doubt, however, that dentists, dental staff and medical professionals are hamstrung in their ability to meet the needs of every constituent because of the lack of support and help they get from the Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh. Although the SNP would like to pretend otherwise to deflect from their failures, Scotland's NHS is devolved and is the sole responsibility of the SNP Government in Holyrood.

However, instead of focusing on improving waiting times in Scotland's NHS for dentists and GPs, the SNP Government are again distracted by their endless obsession. They are again banging on about another referendum when people across the Scottish Borders and across Scotland want the focus to be on their everyday needs. Whether we are talking about nationalists or Unionists, the SNP or Scottish Conservatives, would it not be better for everybody if the Scottish Government's No. 1 priority was to deliver better public services for the people across Scotland? We know that that will not happen with the SNP. Its first, last and only real priority is another referendum to break up the United Kingdom, as it proved again this week.

If SNP Members were here to represent the SNP, I would tell them that those who talk about division all the time are letting down my constituents. They fail my constituents across the Scottish Borders every day and every week. One constituent wrote to me recently about the lack of emergency care on weekends. While in pain and clearly in need of help, they were told to go to the shops and buy a temporary filling repair. If any Members

were here to represent the SNP, I would ask them to tell me how that person is helped by another independence referendum when the SNP Government are failing to deliver for them right now.

Another patient wrote to me about the closure of dental services in Berwick-upon-Tweed just across the border. As a result of the lack of local services, she was not offered a spot for treatment nearby in the Scottish Borders. She was told that the only dentist available was miles and miles away. It was far too far away for her to travel there. That is another direct result of the SNP Government in Edinburgh not understanding the needs of local people in the Scottish Borders and rural areas across Scotland.

My constituents should be able to see a dentist in person when they need help. Local people in the Scottish Borders deserve the same access to the NHS that people in the rest of Scotland and the United Kingdom receive. Despite the best efforts of healthcare staff, that is simply not happening. Too often, the needs of people in the Scottish Borders have been overlooked by the SNP Government in Holyrood. So I would ask SNP Members, if they were here—I add again, for the *Hansard* record, that they are not—how the flimsy economic plan for independence revealed this week helps my constituents get access to the health services they need.

Another constituent wrote to me about her two-year-old son, who has not been able to see a dentist since he was born. The next time the SNP is making big, overblown promises about the future of Scotland, why does it not try delivering for future generations of Scottish people by doing the day job and providing the basic services that people need?

The SNP Health Secretary, Humza Yousaf, is completely failing to deliver for Scotland. Recent statistics revealed that one in four people in Scotland have tried and failed to get a dental appointment over the past year. In rural areas, the problem is even more acute. Access to the NHS is a big problem for local people in the Scottish Borders. It is time that the SNP recognised that, accepted responsibility for its failures and got a grip on the situation. To conclude, will the UK Health Minister engage with colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that my constituents are given the best support possible to access the dental services they deserve?

2.45 pm

**Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): I share the concern of the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who tabled the motion. Many of my constituents in Blackburn are at the sharp end of this crisis, because there are currently no practices accepting new NHS patients in Blackburn or Darwen and families are facing the consequences. Children end up in hospital because they cannot get the dental treatment that they need. Between 2020 and last year, 135 children under 10 were admitted to hospital for tooth extraction. That is an appalling state of affairs. Constituents in Blackburn and many around the country are being forced into DIY dentistry.

Although we are here to discuss NHS dentistry, Members will be painfully aware that these sorts of fires are burning throughout primary care and throughout our health system. The workforce and access inequalities

[Kate Hollern]

are driving health inequalities between the regions. The Government have let the problem get out of hand, because they cannot introduce a serious workforce plan to ensure that we have the staff we need to treat patients on time.

A recent briefing from BUPA stated:

“There is a lack of data about the dental workforce to inform a clear, centrally driven plan focused on improving recruitment and retention...the registers of the General Dental Council only list dental practitioners, but not whether they are practicing.”

It is important to have meaningful data so that we can start making the plan to deliver the dentists that this country needs.

A constituent of mine, who works for the NHS, said that she is

“expected to provide a minimum standard of care to all patients”—and asked:

“Where is the support for dentists to provide the same?”

She asked me to ask the Minister: where is the additional support to train and retain NHS dentists, especially for areas in the north—such as Blackburn—to which it is traditionally hard to recruit?

The Minister needs to publish the Government’s health and social care workforce plan as soon as possible. It needs to account for how communities in places such as Blackburn are often under-served by the primary care system. Dentists, like GPs, often want to practise and work in more urban communities. It is important that the right incentives are delivered to get them practising and staying in the most under-served communities, like Blackburn.

2.48 pm

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): This is the first debate for a long time in which I have agreed with every single word of the motion, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins). Frankly, we and all our constituents are concerned about the growing crisis in NHS dentistry. We are worried that nine out of 10 practices are not accepting new NHS patients, including large numbers of children. We also regret the number of dentists who are moving away from NHS practice. Those are all issues to which all hon. Members could strongly relate, if they were here.

I have been asking myself how the problem came to be and what can be done. First, it strikes me that there is a wider issue with the delivery of public services. Governments will always be judged on the same things: whether they can achieve economic growth to provide jobs and fund public services; whether they can manage those public services competently; and whether they can do so with compassion so that our most vulnerable constituents are looked after. In the health and care sector as a whole, there is no doubt that there are significant challenges in all three aspects. Dentistry is just one aspect of the effective delivery of public services, an issue that we all recognise from emails and telephone calls with often very frustrated constituents.

However, there is a particular aspect of dentistry that is unique. With acute hospitals, mental health services, ambulance trusts and so on, MPs have some agency: we can organise regular meetings with NHS trusts, hold

them to account, ask difficult questions, discuss problems and find out what they need from the Government. With dentistry we have no agency, because the local NHS organisations—they are currently known as integrated care systems, but frankly in most of our constituencies it is easier to refer to them as the local NHS—have no agency. They have no say in the contracts between NHS England and the dentists.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) helpfully pointed out, the contracts go back to 2006. Most of us have no idea what is in them. I have never seen them; I was not aware of them. No dental association, nationally or locally, has ever contacted me—or, I suspect, many of us—to say that there is a problem that needs to be resolved or to ask for help. The first we hear of it is when constituents contact us to say, “I cannot get an NHS dental appointment for myself, my children or my family.” At that stage, we go back to the local dentists and ask what the problem is.

This is what a local dentist in Gloucester has come back with:

“The majority of dentists move away from the NHS because of the continual pressures that the NHS contract places upon them in terms of requirements, payments, audits...and many other factors”.

She writes that an NHS dentist in her surgery, who has ceased to be an NHS dentist,

“was under a prototype contract that was patient-centric and when this was discontinued and changed to align with the usual NHS contract, the dentist did not feel this gave the best type of care for patients”.

She goes on to say:

“I’ve continually battled”—

she has been doing this for 25 years, by the way—

“to ensure that any patients who want NHS dental services should be able to access them, but there needs to be correct remuneration for the time and quality of services, removing a treadmill of patient care.”

That suggests that there is a problem with the contract, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly says, as well as the problem of there being no local NHS involvement.

I welcome the Minister to his role. I know that he will bring to it the same quality of analysis and compassion that he brought to his role in the Department for Work and Pensions. I hope that he will look closely at how the contracts can and should be changed—I believe that there is a window of opportunity in April—to allow all local NHS organisations to play a key role in the distribution of resources, emphasis, recruitment and so on. We will then finally have some agency, so we can do better than replying to our constituents with “I am very sorry to hear this, but there is absolutely nothing I can do,” which frankly is more or less the situation at the moment.

Several colleagues have helpfully indicated solutions beyond the contract. I agree with the point about making it far easier for dentists, whether they come from the nations of the Commonwealth, such as New Zealand and Australia—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley—or from India or Hong Kong, which is another example that was given earlier. The Government clearly have an opportunity to do something about this if they wish, not just in the short term but in the longer term, and I hope the Minister will give us some good news in that regard.

There is also the issue of skills and training. Setting up a new dental school, first, takes time; secondly, is expensive; and thirdly, will not solve short-term problems, although we do need to look at capacity for the longer term. There is a continuing problem with longer-term thinking—in the context of public services, and indeed in other contexts—to which all Governments have been susceptible for too long.

The private sector certainly has a role to play. At the risk of plugging a particular organisation, I will mention an organisation of which I think the Minister will be aware: Genix, which has a training facility in Leeds. Its founder and CEO, Mustafa Mohammed, has a strong track record of supporting the whole business of upskilling and training dentists and providing NHS dentistry services around the country. Let me reassure my constituents and others who feel that dentistry is an entirely public-sector activity by saying that just as the private sector, through GP surgeries, plays such an important part in, for example, the delivery of covid vaccinations, it can play an important part in dentistry as well.

There is, in fact, a role for a mixed economy, and, as was pointed out earlier, there is an opportunity for some short-term contracts. Perhaps the Department could step in directly, with NHS England, to provide relief for those in pain and for those with children who may never have seen a dentist in their short lives. I am sure we would all welcome that.

That leads me to the question of what some term the nanny state—the role of education and proselytising about the value, particularly for young families, of getting stuck in with toothpaste and toothbrushes, and, perhaps, the opportunity to relieve them of VAT. We know that, just as with education, if things start well there is a strong likelihood that they will continue well, whereas if they start badly and people's teeth do not get the treatment they need at an early stage, there will be problems later. I believe that the Government have an opportunity to play a part in this, although not uniquely, for everyone can play a part; and I hope the Minister will allude to that as well when he winds up the debate.

Let me finally say that dentistry clearly needs to be represented in local NHS bodies—especially if they are actually going to play a role in it, which I very much hope they will—and that cash will be crucial. Nothing comes cheaply, but I think we can all agree that sorting out dentistry and making sure everyone has access to NHS dentists is a very precious cause, and we all hope we will find solutions fast.

2.57 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I have been horrified—honestly horrified—to hear reports of people pulling out their own teeth because they are unable to see a dentist. Unfortunately, that is now a reality as a result of Government underfunding of dentistry over many years. In my constituency, only three in 10 patients have seen an NHS dentist in the past two years and only six in 10 children have been able to see a dentist in the past 12 months, although the NHS continues to recommend that all under-18s see a dentist at least once a year.

The way in which the Government have let the NHS dentistry system collapse is a national scandal. Nearly a quarter of all British people have failed to secure a local NHS dentist appointment in the last year. Of those, one in five have resorted to what we now call DIY dentistry,

which is terrible. Our public services are so starved of funding that people are being forced to stop trying, or to pay for private treatment. The British Dental Association says that we are facing an “existential threat”. People's health is at risk if they do not have access to dentistry. Tooth decay is the No. 1 reason for hospital admissions among young children. Oral cancer is one of the fastest-rising types of cancer, and claims more lives than car accidents in the UK: we should remember that.

People in deprived communities are the most likely to suffer. Healthwatch research shows that those on lower incomes are worst hit by appointments shortages. The problem has been made worse by the pandemic, which increased the backlog, but the problem was there before. Limited access to such primary care means that problems cannot be caught early. People should not be facing a choice between being left in pain and paying for private care as we head into this difficult winter. We must do all we can to make sure that they can access the right services and that we address these profound health inequalities.

One of the major reasons for the backlog is staff shortages in the NHS. The number of NHS dentists is falling: one in eight is approaching retirement and 14% are close to leaving the profession. My constituents have been particularly affected: nearly 15% of dentists have been lost from Bath clinical commissioning group since 2016. At a time when demand for NHS services is increasing, we urgently need a strategy to plug these very big staffing gaps.

The Government admit that they do not know how many dental practices applied to access the extra £50 million of funding announced earlier this year. To me, that means that they are asleep at the wheel. The Government must make sure that we have enough dentists if support for the sector is to be effective. We need increased numbers of dentist training places in the UK and continued recognition of EU trained dentists' qualifications. Dentists must be incentivised to take NHS payments and there needs to be more funding for the sector to meet patient demand. Everyone in the UK should be able to access a dental health check-up on the NHS. Proper workforce planning for health and social care must be written into law, including projections for dentists and dental staff.

The crisis facing NHS dentistry is on an unprecedented scale. Although it has been worsened by the pandemic, the emergency is not new. Most importantly—I am repeating what many have said this afternoon—the Government must reform the NHS dental contracts, which create absurd disincentives for dentists taking on new NHS patients. A review was promised earlier this year. Where is it? Oral health cannot be treated as an afterthought and my constituents cannot wait any longer.

3.2 pm

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): I rise to speak on behalf of a number of dentists in my constituency. Nicola Jones, an oral surgeon at Salisbury District Hospital, contacted me to say that the lack of available NHS dentists is causing significant challenges in the constituency. I recognise that from my mailbox over recent weeks. I met Matthew Clover, a specialist orthodontic practitioner, in February. He took me through the challenges of the “units of dental activity” model: it does not discriminate properly when it comes to the classification of the different activities that he has to undertake.

[John Glen]

The challenges derive primarily from the lockdown two years ago and the interruption to supply: 38 million appointments were lost. I welcome the Government intervention earlier this year to provide the additional £50 million and 350,000 additional dental appointments. I also welcome the Government's statement in July, but this is an opportunity for the new Minister to challenge his officials and work with industry representatives to find a deeper and more enduring set of changes that address some of the ongoing challenges that have existed for a very long time.

I would not suggest that I have anything like the expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) or, particularly, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who has a lifetime of experience at policy level and as a practitioner. But I am aware that since 1951 there has been a model of co-payments, in which dentists act as independently contracted professionals to the NHS but also typically receive an income from private practice work as well.

**Wera Hobhouse:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point that, basically, private patients have been cross-financing NHS patients, but that model is no longer sustainable.

**John Glen:** I respectfully say to the hon. Lady that my mother is a resident of Bath and has received excellent service from her NHS dentist. Although I recognise this problem exists in different spots of intensity across the country, it needs a comprehensive solution.

The fundamental point is this: how can the model of rewarding dentists incentivise the maximum amount of engagement? All dentists start their professional life wanting to help people and wanting to do as much good as they can. I totally embrace what my hon. Friends the Members for Mole Valley and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) said about the need to deal with the oral health and education of young people, including how to clean their teeth at an early age. There will need to be a focus on how those practices can be embedded in a funding model that has to pay some respect to the geographic coverage of a dentist, while ensuring that each cohort of the population has access to basic dentistry.

The proposed new dental contract goes some way towards dealing with some of the challenges of the UDA model, but it probably does not go far enough. I urge the Minister to go beyond what his officials may be suggesting to him, to think radically and to take this opportunity to ask, "How can we reset after the dislocations caused by covid?" I urge him to come up with something that incentivises dentists to offer an holistic service to people of all means and to help those communities that have cold spots of dentistry supply.

I would like to make a few observations about supply and, again, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley made some very good points about streamlining bureaucracy to ensure more people qualify as dentists in this country. Of course, it is right that we have ongoing quality assessments through the CQC, but that organisation's focus, as across all industries, needs to be on where there are vulnerabilities and risks. When we think about NHS medical and dental services, I feel we

are continually trying to be perfect and to remove all the risk, which sometimes has a cost because it involves using resources to fill in bureaucratic processes that might not necessarily, in most cases, give us much return.

My message to the new Minister is to build on the good start made by his predecessor in the summer, but to consider a more radical and fundamental review of the UDA funding model, to consider the volume of patients and to consider the real dynamics of the choices a dentist makes about how to maximise the number of patients they see who cannot afford to make a contribution.

I feel hopeful that the enthusiasm to provide the service I saw from my dentist in Salisbury means there will be a solution. I wish the Minister well, and I acknowledge the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who showed a mastery of this subject.

3.9 pm

**Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab):** Where are we to begin with this? We have been here before, time after time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for bringing us this debate. We have discussed this many times and we had a debate in Westminster Hall in the summer, but nothing has really moved on. Nothing at all seems to have changed.

I want to read out part of a letter I received from a constituent, and this is typical of the problem we are facing. I have received even worse horror stories, to the extent that one local dentist told me that they may close in the next few weeks. That is typical and symptomatic of this bigger problem. My constituent said:

"I wanted to take the time to get in touch with you over my experience of getting on the books for an NHS dentist. I have had no luck and have had to have private dental visits. I have luckily not had to have any treatment as I would not be able to afford it. I have reached out to a few dental practices in the area...to be told that they are only taking on children on the NHS."

That is typical of the experience of everyone in this Chamber. I exhort Conservative Members to stop dealing with this in the abstract, as though it is only affecting individual Members of Parliament; it is a collective issue, and it needs a thorough review and a thorough push by the Government. It is not in the abstract. The hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) referred to covid. I completely accept that covid had an impact on the provision of dental services—it hotheaded an already challenging situation—but dental services in all our constituencies were under huge pressure before covid. Let us not pretend that covid was the be all and end all of the dental health problem.

**Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con):** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are systemic problems, part of which goes back to the contracts agreed with dentists donkey's years ago, under the Labour Government—the same applies in respect of GPs. That genesis of the problem was there, but we then face the problem of training too few dentists, which I think we do, and the problems in particular parts of the country, including, Lincolnshire, which is among the worst affected. My constituents cannot get an NHS dentist and they need to have one. That particularly applies to young people and children. He is absolutely right on this.

**Peter Dowd:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who reinforces the point that I am trying to make. We are being contacted by constituents, as I have just set out. We are being contacted by Bupa—I suspect that Members will have had a briefing. We have had a briefing from the British Dental Association. We have had contact directly from dentists. They are all saying exactly the same thing and the Government have to listen. Not only do they have to listen—it is dead easy to do that—but they have to act. The Government have to put their hand in their pocket. So let us stop pretending that £50 million just before the summer is going to do anything in any significant or substantive way to resolve this problem—it is not.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) referred to an existential threat, and there is one—dentists are telling us that, as is the BDA. In practical terms our constituents are saying that to us, because their experience shows that there is an existential threat. The contract is a discredited one and it needs to be put right; it puts targets ahead of patient care. But this is also down to the fact that, whether we like it or not, and whether the Government like it or not, cuts in dentistry have not had any parallel to any other cuts in healthcare. We are talking about cuts of more than 25% between 2010 and 2020. That factors in and it creeps up on us year after year until we get to the situation where access to dentistry is the No. 1 issue raised with Healthwatch.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I was pleased to hear that the mother of the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) has had excellent NHS dental care in Bath, and of course dentists are excellent practitioners and professionals. The thing is that his mother will have been a long-term NHS patient and the problem is that dentists do not take on new NHS patients, because the dental contract completely disincentivises them to do so.

**Peter Dowd:** That is a point well made. Another factor is that there are deep inequalities in access to dentistry. In my constituency, it is difficult to get to see an NHS dentist for love or money. I am not blaming the dentists; they are doing a fantastic job in the circumstances. They are going over and above their duty. I put on the record my thanks—as I am sure we all would—to my dentist practice, which I have been with for over 45 years. Dentists are doing a fantastic job, but they have both their hands tied behind their back at the moment. That has to change.

Some 91% of people, including 80% of children, are not able to access a dentist, and 75% of dentists are reducing their NHS engagement. The new contract announced before the summer did not really do anything and there was no new money with it. There is a significant gap—potentially as much as £750 million—in the resources that dentists need.

Another aspect is dentists' morale, with 87% having experienced stress, burnout or depression in the last 12 months. That is a dreadful situation to put a committed profession in. We have a scenario in our country in which dentists who trained for seven or eight years—possibly more—and practised for many years are now getting to the stage where the majority are stressed, burned out or depressed. That is dreadful. According to one study, half of them are considering changing career. Some of them are seeking early retirement or going fully private.

They are getting stressed out because they just cannot move the dial. They are waiting for the Government to move it, but the Government are not moving it.

Children in my constituency are three times more likely to have their teeth extracted in a hospital because they do not have access to a dentist. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) and the hon. Member for Bath referred to oral cancer. That is identified very early on—and who does the identification? Surprise: it is often the dentist. We need substantive support from the Government, not tinkering around with the contract. We need them to provide adequate funding.

Dentists must not be an afterthought. They are a vital component of the health of the nation. We must build on the historical commitment to prevention; that is key—as the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Dentists have had enough; they are under pressure. My constituents have had enough; they are under pressure. The Government have to do something about it.

In the debate before the summer, I referred, in relation to the lack of substantive action by the Government, to a rejigging of what Ian Fleming said about crisis: if once is happenstance and twice is coincidence, three times is friendly fire and four times is enemy action. We are now in a situation where the Government are perceived as the enemy because of their lack of action.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I apologise that I was not able to be here for the whole debate; I have been in a Bill Committee. In York, people have to wait six years to see a dentist. Of course that is completely unacceptable, but my real concern is that, with the transition of dental services into integrated care systems, ICSs will not have the powers—the levers—to make the difference on training, funding and the contract and, ultimately, dentistry will be pushed into a tug of war between ICSs and the Government.

**Peter Dowd:** I am glad that my hon. Friend raised that matter because it is something that I was going to raise. The health service, because of the reorganisation, is in an element of flux. It is feeling under a bit of pressure. Potentially, people are having to reapply for jobs in the broader sense in the NHS because of the reorganisation. That is a fact. I am not sure whether we should be having a reorganisation of the NHS in the post-covid environment, but that is a different argument for a different day. The broader dissonance in the system now multiplies the problems that we are having in dental practices, because they are getting pushed further away, which is why practices need representation on these boards. I am glad that my hon. Friend highlighted that point.

As I said in the debate before the summer, we do not want any more excuses from the Government. We do not want any more prevarication, any more procrastination, any more pretext or any more self-exoneration. I hope the Government and the Minister, whom I welcome to his place, really get the sense of the frustration and, in certain situations, anger in the Chamber today. They really must pull their finger out—if not people's teeth.

3.21 pm

**Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con):** Like other colleagues, I have spoken out many times in this House about dentists, including in the debate earlier this year.

[Selaine Saxby]

Indeed, the very first letter that I wrote as an MP back in 2019 was about the dental contract, which was brought to my attention by one of the dental practices in Barnstaple. I cannot stress the severity of the dental desert that is now Devon, with not a single NHS practice accepting new patients. Not a week goes by without correspondence from a constituent in distress. As William Shakespeare himself said in “Much Ado About Nothing”:

“For there was never yet a philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently.”

And nor should they. It really is time that something is done. I thank the current Health and Social Care Secretary for recognising dentistry within the ABCD and that there is a problem. I thank, too, the current Minister’s predecessor for at least taking some steps towards redressing the issue of the contract, which is clearly the undermining problem. However, that is a long-term solution. The steps outlined there and the training of more dentists are not going to address the current situation.

Only last weekend, a friend, who was already registered at a dentist, told me that they had actually managed to get a dental appointment. When they got there, they were told that they needed to see the dental hygienist. They went to book an appointment and were told that there was a six-month wait to see the hygienist, who then told them that they needed to have a second appointment to do the other half of their mouth. They went to book, only to be given another six-month wait before they could see the hygienist, so it took a full year. As they said, it is a bit like cleaning the Forth bridge. This is not how our constituents’ teeth should be treated.

My concern extends to my younger constituents. The No.1 reason youngsters under 18 are admitted to hospital in my patch is linked to their teeth. At a time when our hospitals are under such duress anyway, could we not do something to help to ensure that people are able to see a dentist?

My frustration is extended by the fact that I have now managed to secure and find two separate methods for getting dentists into North Devon. Although I do not mind doing this for my constituents—indeed I welcome doing anything I can to help my constituents—I do not quite understand why it is coming down to us as individual MPs to deliver the dentistry that our constituents so desperately need.

Less than 13% of the covid catch-up funding in Devon was spent because there is no one to deliver the treatment. My NHS dentists who train up new dentists at the nearest dental schools advise that these youngsters do not wish to remain in NHS dentistry. We need to address that. Those who train to become dentists under the public purse should have to serve as NHS dentists for a certain period, but they wish to go on to do cosmetic dentistry, which pays much better. The good people of North Devon in the main are not looking for cosmetic dentistry. We are much more interested in fillings and dentures and in ensuring that our young people go on to have good-quality teeth when they get past the age of 10. I urge the Minister to push forward some of these changes, and I hope the new team remain in place long enough to do so.

We need dentists on buses or similar to get to remote rural communities and into schools, to enable every child to have the dental check-up they deserve and to

provide emergency access for those people who have failed to secure a dental appointment—not because they have not tried or because of covid, but simply because there is not a dentist available to see them and many people cannot afford to pay for the treatment that they now need after waiting so long.

**Sir John Hayes:** My sons, who are now 21 and 18, have access to NHS dentistry, as I have, at the excellent Fen House dental practice in Spalding, but many of my constituents’ children do not, as my hon. Friend says. She talks about dental deserts in rural areas, and Lincolnshire is among the worst of those, with 38 dentists per 100,000 population. She is right both about young people and about the particular problems of rural areas. The Minister, for whom I have high regard, needs to give us very firm answers to those questions and a clear plan for what the Government intend to do about them. There is a plethora of private dentists, but too few NHS dentists.

**Selaine Saxby:** My right hon. Friend’s comments are wise, as always.

On international dentists, during the first lockdown, I had an Indian dentist come and meet me privately, and I forwarded that information back to the Department; apparently, there are many, many Indian dentists who would be delighted to come. We would welcome them to North Devon with open arms—indeed, we would welcome dentists from anywhere into North Devon, such is the need. I urge the Minister to look at what else can be done to speed up access for those people who are well trained internationally to come over and look at our teeth.

I will finish by reminding hon. Members how important our teeth are. I ask the Minister to do anything that can be done to help both our youngsters and those people who have struggled to see a dentist, so that we can again say that the dentist will see us now.

3.26 pm

**Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) on securing what is clearly an important debate.

I take this opportunity to thank those in the dental profession in Loughborough and across Leicestershire for everything they have done over the past few years and particularly for the way they adapted to implement the huge changes needed to ensure the safety of their patients throughout the covid-19 pandemic. This year I have met with nearly all the dentists in my constituency, who have highlighted a number of issues they face and the impact they have on the profession and the patient experience more broadly.

**Richard Graham:** The points my hon. Friend is making are particularly important to constituencies such as hers, which have towns but are also rural.

**Jane Hunt:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is a true hero in every way.

One concern is about the UDA system, with the recurring message being that the system in its current form is not fit for purpose. I welcome the package of initial reforms to the NHS dental contract announced in July, in particular the introduction of enhanced UDAs to support higher-needs patients.

However, the reforms do not address my local dentists' concerns that the current system is based on rewarding reactive treatment, rather than preventive, meaning that dentists are driven to do the minimum necessary to meet the terms of the target. That is a source of frustration for some, who have expressed their preference for being remunerated for using their initiative and working in the best interests of their patients.

Furthermore, while it is welcome that a minimum indicative UDA value of £23 has been introduced, UDA payments are not rising in line with increasing overhead costs, which is devaluing contracts and, in some cases, leaving dentists out of pocket. That was highlighted recently during a conversation I had with Bupa in Loughborough. Bupa expressed that that is compounded by the fact that UDA payments vary geographically, so that a UDA is worth £36 in its Sheffield practices but only £24 in its Loughborough one. Finally, the reforms do not address the issue of dentists not being given leeway under their contracts for last-minute cancellations and no-shows, even though they can lead to missed targets. I ask that this be urgently reviewed, so that we do not punish dentists for trying their hardest to continue to provide the care needed.

It is clear that there is still a way to go to make NHS dental contracts more attractive, both in terms of the nature of the dentistry performed and the level of financial reimbursement received for services performed. I fear that if the Government do not continue to work at speed, we will lose even more NHS dentists through early retirement, a reduction in time spent completing NHS work, or a full move into private practice. That would be detrimental to patient care and the availability of NHS appointments. I know that the former Minister of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), was working hard to review UDA contracts, and I would welcome confirmation from her successor that they will continue that hard work.

As well as difficulties retaining dentists, I have been informed that locally, we are having difficulties recruiting them. One reason for that is that there is no dentistry school in the east midlands, our nearest being in Sheffield and Birmingham, and students are choosing to enter into the workplace close to where they study. That is causing supply issues in the NHS service, and has created a gap in the market that is being filled by private dentists with a focus on cosmetics. We therefore need to ensure we are training up enough dentists and providing them with incentives to move away from where they are studying to areas with greater demand. Bupa has also advocated for putting dental practitioners on the shortage occupation list in order to increase overseas recruitment and fill shortages, then upskilling those practitioners via short courses to meet UK standards. Could the Minister please comment on the actions being taken to increase the number of dentists from overseas?

I am very concerned that NHS England has proposed closing the intermediate minor oral surgery service in Loughborough, meaning that local residents will have to go as far as Leicester for treatment. That city is some considerable way away, and there has been a recent cut in bus services, the No. 2 bus service in particular. Loughborough is effectively Leicestershire's county town, so there is more than enough demand there for that service. Closing the centre will only increase pressures on the Leicester centre, extending waiting times and

further impacting on patient care. That centralisation of services does not meet the needs of the patient, and I ask that the Minister look with some urgency at local services' availability throughout the country, especially throughout Leicestershire.

Having listened to the whole of today's debate, it has been very interesting: there are a small number of points that need to be addressed, which have been made by Members from all across the Chamber and all over the country. I do not think this is an insurmountable problem to solve, and I feel sure that the Minister will be able to address it.

3.33 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) on having secured it. We support the motion in the form in which it has been moved; there is nothing in it that we disagree with. If some of the political arguments are removed from the debate, I think there is consensus across the House as to what the problems are and what needs to be done.

**Sir George Howarth:** I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend so soon. I agree with him about the motion, but I did make the point that there were some short-term measures that could, and should, be taken within the three-month period that the motion envisages before the Government report back on progress.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no reason why the Government cannot expedite action on the issues he mentioned in his contribution and get those improvements in place.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend and to my hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd), as well as the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Salisbury (John Glen), for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for their contributions.

I welcome the Minister to his place. I am not sure how long he is likely to be at the Department of Health and Social Care, but I hope he is there long enough to implement some of the changes. I am all for a bit of stability in the Department. He is a good person and a good friend, and I wish him well. However, when he comes to the Dispatch Box, he will no doubt seek to deflect from the situation that has been described by my Members across the Chamber by saying that we are here today because of the pandemic.

The backlog has not helped—we all acknowledge that; it goes without saying—but the Government's spend on general dental practices in England has been cut by more than a third over the past decade, with the number of NHS dental practices in England falling by more than 1,200 in the five years prior to the pandemic. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) raised that, and it cannot be ignored. It creates the regional imbalances and dental deserts we have heard about. This is not a rural-urban thing; it is a rural and urban thing, sadly. My right hon. Friend the

[Andrew Gwynne]

Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) spoke about those dental deserts, which are very real.

The Minister's next line of defence, if I were to guess what the officials have put in his red folder, will be, "It's all because of the dental contract." There is some truth in that. It is 16 years since that dental contract was introduced, and it was introduced for a perfectly good reason. There was no golden age of NHS dentistry before it. There is a reason why people of my age have a mouth full of fillings and my children do not. It is not because I did not brush my teeth as much as my children do, and it is not because I ate more sweets than my children do. It is because the emphasis for paying dentists prior to the introduction of the changes was on early treatment that was perhaps not necessary—"drill and fill" is what they called it. We recognised in 2010 that the contract had not worked in the way we hoped it would, and we proposed changes. Of course, we lost that election, but after 12 years of this Government, I am afraid the line will not wash that it is solely the contract, because they have had plenty of time to make changes to that contract and have not.

We hear about the ABCD plan, and I certainly welcome the "D" in it; at least there is a recognition of dentistry. However, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, I worry that this kind of "Sesame Street" strategy does not come close to tackling the scale of the emergency that is gripping dental care. All we have heard from the Secretary of State is sticking-plaster solutions that tiptoe around the edges while failing to address the root cause. That is apparent in the Government's "hit and hope" approach to dentistry. The £50 million of emergency funding announced earlier this year is a prime example. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle said, it is a time-limited, inaccessible pot of money that has done precious little to improve access. In fact, figures obtained by the British Dental Association showed that just 17.9% of that funding was drawn down. This is indicative of a sector that has completely lost faith in the Government's ability to act, and to be frank, I do not blame them, because when we do see action, it does not meet the scale of the crisis, and in some cases it makes things worse.

As we have heard, the geographic, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities affecting access to NHS dentistry are becoming starker by the day. What does the new Health and Social Care Secretary do in response to that problem? She scraps the health disparities White Paper. It is beyond bizarre that in the face of such overwhelming evidence, the Government will not even consider possible solutions—let alone implement them.

I fully support what the hon. Member for Waveney and other hon. Members on both sides of the House have said about education. Dentistry in schools, a prevention strategy and an emphasis on good oral health is absolutely crucial. We would support the Government in implementing that—hopefully sooner rather than later. The consensus and mood is there to get that done, so I hope the Minister will take that up and get going on that opportunity.

As for many issues facing our NHS, much of the problem with NHS dentistry can be traced back to one thing: workforce. Several hon. Members raised that

point. Any hope of an NHS recovery must be underpinned by a comprehensive workforce strategy. Where is that strategy? Was it accidentally shredded with the mini-Budget? I am sure the Minister will hail the fact that NHS stats show an increase of 539 dentists practising in 2021-22, compared with the year before. When we drill down beneath the surface, however, there is not much to be positive about.

Those stats are rendered worthless by the fact that a dentist performing a single check-up on the NHS in a 12-month period is weighted the same as one with a full cohort of NHS patients. BDA survey data shows that for every dentist leaving the NHS altogether, a further 10 are significantly reducing their NHS commitment. No matter how much Ministers might try to fudge the numbers, they simply do not add up. We cannot afford more bluff and bluster. We need action, which the Opposition will support.

The outgoing Prime Minister said that dentistry was in her top three priorities for her first 90 days. That now seems rather optimistic given that she is Liz of 44 days, but we really want the Government to act on that commitment. Can we have an update on how things are going?

The Labour party will fund one of the biggest NHS workforce extensions in NHS history. We will double the number of district nurses qualifying every year, train more than 5,000 new health visitors and create an additional 10,000 nursing placements every year. We will fund this transformative expansion by abolishing non-dom tax status. We will give dentistry the staff, equipment and modern technology it needs to get patients seen on time. Labour has a plan. Where on earth is the Government's?

3.42 pm

**The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Will Quince):** I thank the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) for his kind words. He will be pleased to know that, despite what he said, I scribbled my own speech today and I can confirm that it will be a fudge-free zone. In fact, I have not had any fudge for about three years and I do not intend to start now—not least because it would not be great for my teeth.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) on securing time for this hugely important debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time and all right hon. and hon. Members who have made constructive contributions to the debate. It would be remiss of me not to thank all those who work in NHS dentistry, not just for their work throughout the pandemic, but for the work that they continue to do serving people up and down the country.

In the relatively short time that I have available—I am conscious that there is another important debate to follow—I will endeavour to respond to as many of the points, themes and questions raised as possible. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members know me well enough already, however, to know that my door is always open. I have never turned down a meeting with a parliamentary colleague and I do not intend to start now. This is an important issue and I hope that we can continue to talk about it at length, even if not in this Chamber.



As the new Minister—or new new Minister—for primary care and therefore dentistry, I have spent the first few weeks in post learning more about NHS dentistry, including by meeting dentists; meeting people at the coalface and the grassroots is really important. Of course, I have my constituency experience too. Despite the events of today, I very much hope to be here for some time to come.

Let me say at the outset, in response to I think nearly all of the contributions made today, that I get it—I really do get it. I know that in many parts of our country access to NHS dentistry is difficult or far more difficult than it should be, and I want to make it clear that dentistry is an incredibly important part of the NHS. The Government and I are committed to addressing the challenges that NHS dentistry continues to face across the whole country, and as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish rightly pointed out, it is in our ABCD strategy.

I turn to some of the themes raised. The first is access, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), my hon. Friends the Members for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Salisbury (John Glen), the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). Access to NHS dentistry varies across the country—we know that—and it was an issue, as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish rightly pointed out, even before the pandemic, but the pandemic has exacerbated it and added further pressure to the system.

The Government are taking a number of important steps that will improve dental access for patients and make NHS dentistry a more attractive place for dentists and their teams to work in. I will outline just some of those. These changes include improvements to the current NHS dental contracts—I will come on to that in a moment—and of course to the recruitment and retention of dental professionals. I say dental professionals specifically because this is of course about far more than just dentists, as important as they are. As the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish pointed out, rightly, we have seen an additional 539 more dentists returning to NHS dentistry last year, which of course means they are able to treat more patients, but I recognise the point he rightly made, and we do need to go further and faster.

On the steps taken, notwithstanding the points made by the hon. Member for Bradford South, we made £50 million of extra funding available for NHS dental services at the end of 2021-22, which provided more appointments and increased capacity in NHS dental teams. I noted her points, and we have learned from that. Given that experience, I would certainly want to do things a little differently if we considered such a proposal again. We announced a package of improvements to the NHS dental system on 19 July, as a number of Members have pointed out, which was set out in our plan for patients. These are an important first step to system reform and are designed to improve access to dental care for patients, particularly patients with the most complex treatment needs.

A number of hon. Members raised the much criticised—and that is as far as I will go, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish will be pleased to know—2006 contract. We are making improvements to ensure that

dentists are more fairly remunerated, especially for more complex oral health needs. The one example we hear very often is of dentists getting paid the same for doing one filling as for six fillings. As numerous hon. Members have pointed out, we have also set a £23 minimum UDA value, notwithstanding the points made about the variation around the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester raised accountability locally, including to Members of Parliament. In part the answer to that is their coming within the remit and purview of integrated care systems. I have no doubt that my hon. Friend is well aware of the chief executive of his integrated care system, and will know how to contact and meet them on a regular basis.

**Richard Graham:** The Minister is absolutely right: not only do we know the chief executive, but all Gloucestershire MPs have had regular meetings with them, including one specifically on this issue. That is why I raised the importance of their being given the opportunity to take responsibility, which I hope my hon. Friend will welcome.

**Will Quince:** I certainly do welcome that, because this is not just about commissioning, but about accountability and oversight.

Our changes will allow NHS commissioners to have more flexibility in commissioning, and I think that is really important, because if they have that flexibility in commissioning additional dental services, they are the ones who know the local need within their area. I want to see far more responsive management of contracts, so if they have underperforming practices and practices that can do more, we should enable such practices to do that. For example, a high-performing practice should be able to deliver beyond its existing contract to make up for the fact that a neighbouring practice is not doing so. That addresses some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney about the clawback of UDA funding at the end of the year, and then its not necessarily being spent on dentistry. As part of that, I also want and expect more transparency. We will make it a requirement for NHS dentists to update the information on their NHS website, so people can see which dentists are accepting new NHS patients for treatment.

On that point, I want to bust the myth about being registered with a dentist. There is no such thing as being registered with a dentist or a dental list. People approach an NHS dentist for specific treatment. They go on their list, register and have the treatment. They can have an ongoing relationship with a dentist, but anyone can book an appointment with any dentist with an NHS contract, regardless of where they live in the country. It is important to get that message out, because when our constituents say to us, “I can’t get a dentist locally”—I want to address that point—I want to ensure that they know that they could travel to a neighbouring town or city. They could travel half way across the country if they wanted to, for example if they had relatives there, if there was a NHS dentist who had capacity to see them.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Does the Minister recognise that because of the abnormalities of the dental contract, and dentists not knowing which patients they are getting, NHS dentists would rather take a patient whom they already know, and whose history of dental problems or otherwise they know, rather than taking somebody they

[Wera Hobhouse]

have never seen? There is a disincentive to take on new patients, but there is a continuity for those who are already with an NHS dentist.

**Will Quince:** Of course I take that point—it is a fair one—and when those who seek NHS treatment have an ongoing relationship with a dentist, they are more likely to get seen. When considering reforms to the system we will certainly take that point on board.

**Sir George Howarth:** The description that the Minister gave of the existence, or otherwise, of lists is accurate, but when anyone seeking to get NHS treatment in a dental practice rings up, they are most likely to be told by the receptionist that the practice is not taking NHS patients. The difference between the two situations, while technically correct, is not there in practice. Before he concludes his remarks, will he address the issue I raised about the short-term measures that can be, and I believe should be, taken to improve the situation?

**Will Quince:** I am conscious of your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am certainly willing to meet the right hon. Gentleman to consider what short-term measures we can take.

There is so much I want to say about the contract and my ambitions for the future, but politics is the art of the possible and deliverable, and I will be honest and frank with the House, and with stakeholders across the sector, about what we can deliver. We will then work towards what is within the art of the possible. International dentists are a vital part of the UK's dentistry workforce, and I am happy to meet hon. Members to set out exactly what we are doing. I hope to bring forward legislative changes later this year. On dental training, I would love to talk more about the Advancing Dental Care review and the centre for dental development, but that may have to wait for another day—you have advised me about the time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Prevention and oral health has been raised by many Members and is an important part of our strategy. I am looking closely at what more we can do with other Departments, especially around supervised toothbrushing, but also fluoridation, which was raised by numerous Members. Access to urgent care is important, and if people struggle to get an appointment they should call 111. This is the beginning of our work to improve NHS dentistry, not the limit of my ambition. This is just the start, and we are committed to long-term improvements, including changes to improve access to urgent care, and further work on workforce and payment reform. In the meantime there is lots we can do to improve access to urgent care, provide better access for new patients, and make important changes to workforce and payment reform. With that short response I hope I have assured hon. Friends and Members that action is being taken

now to address the challenges of access to dental care, especially around recruitment and retention. I also want to reassure Members of my personal ambition and passion for bringing about the medium to long-term positive change that we want for NHS dentistry.

3.54 pm

**Peter Aldous:** We have had a full and productive debate. I will quickly run through a few points—I apologise if I miss any hon. Members. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) rightly highlighted the importance of addressing oral cancer quickly. I take on board his proposal for the short-term fast-tracking of emergency support. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) suggested a short-term simple contract to get on top of the backlog. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) highlighted how £50 million was made available but that the system is so broke we spent hardly any of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) highlighted that the problem is not just in England but in Scotland. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) mentioned the importance of workforce planning. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned the importance of the local NHS being involved. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) highlighted the alarming rise of DIY dentistry.

It was good to have my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) in his place for the debate. He emphasised the importance of the short-term UDA model. We have been going back to 1951 as a basis, and we need to bring that right up to date. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) is right that we have been here before. There is now a need for action. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) mentioned dentists getting on the buses—an interesting way to improve accessibility. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) again highlighted the short-term arrangements.

Finally, the Minister said that his door is always open. I welcome that. I hope that he will be in his place for some time, because the last thing we need is more change. If the motion is agreed to, when we come back in three months it must be a question not just of what we will do but of what we have done.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House is concerned by the growing crisis in NHS dentistry; notes that nine out of ten dental practices in England do not accept new NHS patients; regrets the number of dentists moving away from NHS practice; welcomes the Government's commitment to levelling up health outcomes and dental health across the country; calls on the Government to take urgent steps to improve retention of NHS dentists and dental accessibility for patients; and further calls on the Government to report to the House on its progress on the steps it has taken to address the NHS dentistry crisis in three months' time.

## Motor Neurone Disease

*[Relevant documents: e-petition 564582, "Increase funding for urgent research into devastating motor neurone disease", and e-petition 301033, "Explore options for making NurOwn available to treat Motor Neurone Disease (MND)."]*

3.56 pm

**Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of investing in the future of Motor Neurone Disease.

After much delay due to circumstances out of our hands, I am grateful that we have the opportunity to debate this vital issue. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its efforts in finding us time to speak about it today and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for her support. Time is of the essence for those affected by motor neurone disease, but a time of calm seems not to be fated for the debate, having endured rail strikes at the first attempt and our national loss of Her Majesty at the second attempt. I had intended to comment that at least today was a day of calm, but that does not appear to apply.

I do not usually speak in the Chamber as filler material for procedural purposes. I speak only when I think that I have something to contribute, and that is very much the case today. Back in 2017 when I was selected to stand in my constituency of Northampton South after my time as an MEP, my first meeting was during a visit to the Motor Neurone Disease Association headquarters, which is in my constituency. I had heard of motor neurone disease, of course, but I had no idea that it would become so central to my time in this place and an issue that I would hold so close to my heart. As soon as I joined Parliament, I became a member of the all-party parliamentary group on motor neurone disease. I became a vice chair, and then chair, following Madeline Moon, a former colleague and a formidable campaigner on this topic.

I am sure that hon. Members know what comes with a diagnosis of motor neurone disease. It is a fast-acting and rapidly progressing neurological disease affecting nerves that control muscles. It leads to a rapid deterioration of the body, leaving many sufferers unable to speak. Ultimately, it results in death. Sadly, at present there is no cure. About a third of MND sufferers pass away within a year of diagnosis, and more than half within two years. It affects up to 5,000 people at any one time in the UK. However, I stress that that number would be much greater were it not for the fast-acting nature of the disease. It is therefore in a critical sense not a rare disease.

The debate is about not just stands and numbers but people, many of whom I have worked with and been inspired by. All hon. Members in the Chamber as well as those watching in the Gallery and at home will know about the campaigning of rugby league legend Rob Burrow and his family, as well as his teammate Kevin Sinfield, who have not only brought the Government's attention to MND but raised its profile. Colleagues will know about the powerful BBC documentary that Rob produced.

Alongside Rob, Doddie Weir and Stephen Darby have shown the same tenacity and dedication to raising the profile of MND, as well as Lee Millard, David

Setters and Chris Johnson, who have worked closely with the all-party parliamentary group. They have attended several of my meetings in Parliament and met Ministers as well. From my own constituency, Emma Moss, a mother and former deputy headteacher diagnosed with MND, has just received a Points of Light award for her campaigning. I am in no doubt that her family, especially her daughter, are immensely proud of all she has achieved in the face of adversity. I would like to also mention Ganesh and Rachel Thayanithy, whom I spoke with recently following from Rachel's diagnosis. They have also shown that inspirational quality.

There are a lot of people I could mention who have done so much to highlight MND and support those with it, but I want to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) whose help was crucial as Secretary of State for Health, one of the busiest roles in Government. When I arranged for a group of MND sufferers and carers to come—this remains one of my most treasured memories—and proceed through the streets to No. 10 to demand action, my right hon. Friend came to see us. He did not just come and say hello; he stayed and spoke to virtually everyone. He had a lengthy discussion with the MND teams and with Professor Al-Chalabi in particular. Outside the bubble, and indeed even inside it, it is not always possible to know who really treats people well and with respect and gives them a fair hearing. I have certainly had some experiences of that myself here, but none of that applies to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove, so let the record show that he really is one of the good guys.

In recent years, there has been ever-growing interest from the research community and the pharmaceutical industry in MND. A real surge in studies and trials have offered sufferers and their families some renewed hope for treatment and a cure. Some of those have included the treatment of spinal muscular atrophy, an inherited degenerative condition that targets motor neurones that predominantly occurs in infants and children. The ATLAS trial is actively recruiting SOD1 gene carriers and aims to establish a blood test which can give an early warning that physical disease will manifest within the coming six to 12 months. Participants can then take part in trials of the Tofersen treatment, which initial evidence suggests can substantially slow progression of severe disease, thereby boosting respiratory function, muscle strength and quality of life.

Essential to enabling that research is, of course, funding. After long dedicated campaigning, the United to End MND coalition achieved a huge victory in November 2021 with a commitment from the Government to invest £50 million over the next five years into targeted MND research, involving the creation of an MND research institute to accelerate the quest for treatments. What a rollercoaster that was from there not being any announcement in the Budget—down—to a special announcement a week later—up—that £50 million was forthcoming, made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove. The Government further confirmed in September 2022 that the funding would be ringfenced, which provided confidence, and further victories have followed. A group of charities and Government research organisations have awarded £4.25 million to MND experts at six UK universities to kick-start collaborative moves to find solutions to problems hindering MND research, such as better testing, data collection, wider

[Andrew Lewer]

trial participation and wider access to the only current life-extending treatment for MND, with the aim of making real progress and making it fully treatable within 10 years.

There is, however, so much more to do. The initial ambition of the bid was that the virtual research institute would free up researchers from having to engage with multiple application systems and assessment exercises marked in Whitehall. That detracts from the time researchers can spend on pure research and progressing treatments. I therefore suggest to Ministers that this would be a perfect opportunity to put into practice the new, new Government's emphasis on cutting red tape. Researchers, desperate to get on, are presenting a way to make better use of public money for the benefit of the cause. Please be more imaginative about tackling process. Please do not let officials say that we have always done it that way. I am very pleased to go and see the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) to make progress on this issue. I believe that if anyone can cut through this, given his skills and experience, it is him.

Another key area on which progress is needed is access to genetic testing. That is particularly critical in the case of the Tofersen treatment, because it is a gene-based therapy targeting an inherited form of MND caused by mutations in the SOD1 gene. Currently, genetic testing for MND is typically restricted to patients with family members also affected by the disease and patients who do not have a family history but have symptoms starting early in life. According to the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London, that state of affairs potentially overlooks hundreds of people, including many over-40s, who have a genetic form of the disease and for whom those new treatments, which are gene-based, could make a real difference. However, there are broader benefits in widening access to genetic testing, too, because it enables people to have an understanding and therefore earlier access to key advice and counselling, regardless of their age.

The confirmation of an MND diagnosis is devastating for anyone to hear. A survey by the Neurological Alliance of 8,500 people living with such conditions found that 40% of those surveyed did not feel that they had adequate access to mental health services. That needs to change. Many said that they had waited a year from their first symptoms after seeing their GP to see a neurological specialist. That also needs to change— notwithstanding the backlogs from the pandemic, and so on—and not only for MND, but for the majority of neurological conditions. In the light of that, I hope that the Government will listen to growing calls from the MND community for the Government to invest in and establish a neuro taskforce to drive forward improvements in neurology services and ensure that the impacts of the pandemic are both understood and addressed for people seeking help for living with MND.

Many sufferers require around-the-clock care, which often falls to family members and loved ones. Although many will give the care that their loved one deserves, that is a difficult and demanding experience. The MNDA carried out a survey and found that 33% of those surveyed spent more than 100 hours caring for their

loved one and 45% of those received no benefits at all. That heartbreaking situation should not happen, with even those who receive the carer's allowance struggling to support somebody, having had to give up a full-time job to care for an MND sufferer—not to mention the problems with disabled adaptations. The MNDA is therefore calling on the Government to publish a recovery and respite plan for unpaid carers, which would focus on packages for carers, including mental health, financial and other measures.

As we move into the winter and spring, there are justified concerns from the MND community about the non-inclusion of MND carers in the winter and spring covid booster vaccination programme. I would be grateful if the Minister considered expanding access to MND carers.

MND is a disease that affects people from all communities. The nature of the disease requires specifically trained carers, as that not only ameliorates the condition but helps to prolong sufferers' independence and autonomy, maintaining their wellbeing and dignity as the disease progresses. Given those specific needs, it is conspicuous that only 26% of people with MND received that sort of care.

Social care has been a matter of much discussion over the past few years and is one that I have spoken about many times in the House. As a former county council leader and a member of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, I can say that the situation for sufferers of MND is a reflection of wider social care failings. The complexity of taking care of MND sufferers should not limit their access to services because agencies are reluctant or unable to commit time or money to that service. There is a need for specific support, particularly for respiration, but people with MND try to live their lives as richly as possible and the failings of social care must not hinder that.

Limited specialised care will otherwise continue to contribute to unnecessary danger. Inadequate understanding on how to use equipment, for instance, has left patients leaving hospital with incorrectly attached tracheostomy tubes, resulting in individuals having entirely preventable critical emergency readmissions. In the best-case scenario, the lack of access to skilled social care puts the burden on friends and families; otherwise, it leaves people going prematurely to hospital or to a hospice. The Department of Health and Social Care, which provides 20% of the £50 million that I referred to, clearly needs to recognise the relevance of social care to the conversation. We ask the Government to invest wisely to improve the quality of and access to social care. Those who live with MND need skilled and trained staff.

We are talking about significant sums being invested, but it is imperative that the closer-to-home costs of MND are also addressed. Given how aware of finances we are in the current cost of living crisis, it does not take a very significant stretch of the imagination to understand that those with MND are all the more vulnerable to rising energy costs. Indeed, the household costs are double for people with MND, piling on top of already rising costs. The bills that MND sufferers face make very sombre viewing.

It is no surprise that four out of five people with MND consider the impact of the disease to be very negative. Their costs only increase over time as the disease progresses and they rely further on energy-consuming equipment. Inevitably, they spend more time

at home fatigued by the disease, which has an energy impact. For those with MND, who have more to deal with than most of us can imagine, that financial uncertainty should be one less thing to have to think about.

I therefore hope that the Government will try to ensure that disability benefits are uprated in line with inflation and that those who live with MND and other disabling conditions receive continuing support with energy costs after the proposed end to the cap scheme in April. I also hope that the Government will increase the emergency support package that they announced in May to ensure that the most vulnerable are supported through the coming winter.

There are a huge array of issues to tackle with MND, simply because of the severity of the disease, but I hope that I have provided a run-through of the issues that need to be considered, especially by the Government. I look forward to colleagues' speeches.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. It will be obvious that we have well under an hour left for this debate. If every Back Bencher takes about six or seven minutes, everyone will have an equal chance to contribute. I hope we can manage without a time limit.

4.12 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer).

Motor neurone disease is a rapidly progressing neurological illness. About 400 people in Scotland and 5,000 people in the UK are living with this terminal condition. In a healthy person, the motor neurones carry signals from the brain directly to the muscles, but motor neurone disease stops signals from the brain reaching the muscles. Over time, muscles weaken, deteriorate and eventually stop working. At present, there is no cure for motor neurone disease, although there are treatments that aim to manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

My first encounter with the disease was when one of my sporting heroes announced that they had received a diagnosis. A landmark study by the University of Glasgow found that the risk of MND among Scottish sports players was 15 times higher than in the general population. The research, which compared 412 former Scotland internationals born between 1900 and 1990 with more than 1,200 non-players of the same age, area and socio-economic status, also found that rugby players—all male—were twice as likely to develop dementia and more than three times as likely to receive a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. A 2017 study at the University of Stirling by the same researchers showed direct evidence for short-term sub-concussive changes in the brain following any sport-related impact to the head. The research found that former professional footballers were three and a half times more likely to die from illnesses such as motor neurone disease and dementia than the general population.

Ultimately, MND claimed the life of my sporting hero, the great Jimmy Johnstone, but not before he put up a heroic fight against the illness, helping to educate people on the disease. Knowing that any cure would come too late for him, he campaigned valiantly for stem cell research so that others could get some relief.

These important studies have added to the growing evidence that repetitive head impacts in the sporting arena may lead to an increased risk of neurodegenerative disease, and that it will be even worse in 20 years' time.

It would be remiss of me not to mention someone who has been a tireless MND campaigner in recent years, the former Scottish rugby player and icon **Doddie Weir**. **Doddie** was diagnosed with MND in 2017, and has since set up the foundation **My Name's Doddie** in order to raise funds for research into cures for the disease and to provide grants for people living with the condition. So far he has raised more than £1 million. I am sure all Members on both sides of the House welcome that, and will join me in commending him for it.

I am also sure you agree, **Madam Deputy Speaker**, that it is only fitting for the UK Government to do **Doddie's** legacy justice and reconsider their approach to MND funding. They are currently spending £50 million on MND research, and we in the Scottish National party welcomed the announcement of that in November last year. However, given the increasing impact and prevalence of this disease in our communities, it is surely only right and proper for the Government to outline the progress they have made in allocating the funds. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in that regard.

This becomes even more important because there is optimism—optimism that increased research outputs will translate into discoveries, and those discoveries will ultimately lead to the new treatments and the cure that we all wish to see. Just this week, researchers at the University of Aberdeen found that the same proteins thought to contribute to MND can be found in the gut many years before brain symptoms crop up. Those amazing findings have led researchers to suggest that it could be possible to detect and act on MND long before the brain is affected. Not only would additional funding from the UK Government result in an increase in MND investment, but it might contribute to tackling other neurological diseases.

We cannot allow such diseases to progress. Instead, we as a society must progress, find treatments to help those who are suffering, and then prevent others from suffering also.

4.16 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Motor neurone disease is an incredibly cruel and scary illness. It can strike anyone at any time. It can knock young and healthy people down in their prime. What makes this disease so frightening is the fear of the unknown. There is no cure for it. We do not know why it occurs. All that makes it even more remarkable that so many brave people suffering from MND find the courage to speak out candidly and publicly about their condition. I pay tribute to all those who campaign so passionately to find a cure, especially those who suffer from the awful effects that the disease causes to them personally. In this debate, however, I want to highlight one particular inspirational person who suffers from MND, and whom I am proud to say I represent as his Member of Parliament in the Scottish Borders.

Long before he was told he had MND six years ago, my constituent **Doddie Weir** was a hero to people across the Borders and all over Scotland, but he has become

[John Lamont]

even more of a hero since his diagnosis. In his playing days he was a tartan colossus, a giant of Scottish sport. He was a big character on the pitch at Murrayfield—once famously described by the Scottish commentator Bill McLaren as being

“on the charge like a mad giraffe”.

However, Doddie is an even bigger character off the park. He lives his life to the fullest, even now. His positive energy is infectious. When anyone has been around Doddie, they are happier for it. He fought hard every time he took to the rugby pitch, and he continues to fight, even harder, on his mission to find a cure for MND.

I cannot say enough how much I admire Doddie for remaining relentlessly positive, no matter what life throws at him. Receiving an honorary degree earlier this year in Scotland, he said:

“Six years later, still fighting, still pushing for that cure, and still winning with every new day. If things don’t go your way, don’t give up. Instead, use your tremendous energy and brains, try again. There’s always a way round, another way to achieve your goals—find it.”

We owe it to Doddie and everyone in his position to keep fighting for a cure, and we owe it to Doddie to listen closely to his frank assessment of the Government’s funding for research. He said recently that the Government needed to act with more urgency. He said that the fight for a cure was

“definitely getting better but the government has not given MND the money they promised.”

He also said:

“The current process for accessing the money is just not delivering for the MND community. It needs to be streamlined or the professors will spend their valuable time writing multiple applications instead of tackling MND.”

Last year, the Government made a generous and welcome commitment to invest £50 million in motor neurone disease research. I was incredibly proud to play my part in pushing for that funding towards a cure for the devastating disease. That victory, won overwhelmingly by Doddie’s relentless campaigning, was a wonderful display of compassionate government; it is one of the finest actions that this Conservative Government have taken.

But just as Doddie never stopped on the pitch and continues never to stop loving life, we must keep pushing to make sure that this vital funding reaches the frontline faster. Today I want to urge the Government and the Minister to listen to Doddie and do what he asks—not just for his sake, but for every patient in need of some hope. I urge them to provide more resources for MND research, to improve the process and to deliver on our promises. Let us continue to play our part in finding a cure for this awful disease.

4.20 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) for setting the scene so well. I also commend others for their contributions and look forward to those to come from Back Benchers, the shadow Minister and the Minister.

Most of us here will be aware of what MND is: a fatal, rapidly progressive disease that affects the brain and the spinal cord and attacks the nerves that control

movement so that muscles no longer work, leaving the sufferer locked in a failing body unable to move, talk or, eventually, breathe, although their mind remains completely intact—a prisoner in their own body. It affects people from all communities, classes and cultures and it is equally devastating to them all. It is a death sentence for too many, killing a third of people within a year and more than half within two years of diagnosis. Six people per day are diagnosed with MND in the UK. It affects up to 5,000 adults in the UK at any one time and kills six people per day—just under 2,200 per year. Currently, it has no cure.

Others have referred to those they have known and to inspirational sportspeople. Back in 2010, before I came here, I was a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. I had a good friend and colleague—an alderman; we came from different political parties, but worked together on so many things. I was elected here in the May, but met him—I am not going to mention his name—at an event at Portavogie in the September. I said, “You don’t look too well.” He said, “Jim, I’m not well.” When I asked him what was wrong, he told me that he had MND. I visited him as his health deteriorated. I watched an exuberant, energetic gentleman, who was very much aware of what was happening around him, go downhill rapidly. He lasted only slightly over a year. I also remember the impact on his family, who ended up selling the house, which had too many bad memories for his wife and children. They moved on. That is my personal knowledge of how the disease affects people.

I want to comment about Northern Ireland, which is not the Minister’s responsibility so I am not expecting an answer. I will give a perspective of how we do it back home—or perhaps, in this case, what do we not do, although we should.

People with MND in Northern Ireland have a worse standard of care and access to specialist help and support than those in any other part of the United Kingdom. There is a lack of specialists and multidisciplinary care for people with MND in Northern Ireland, where only one part-time specialist neurologist is available. They are available for only one day per month to help people with MND—my goodness! That inevitably leads to longer waiting times for diagnoses of MND and in turn to poorer outcomes and potentially shorter life expectancy post diagnosis. There is only one specialist MND nurse in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that does not have an MND care co-ordinator. We fall badly short of what is needed.

The situation for carers in Northern Ireland, both paid and especially unpaid, is a matter of shame. Carers receive almost no support, but they are a vital part of the lives of those living with MND, particularly in light of the current lack of care provision within the NHS in Northern Ireland. For many reasons, including those outlined above, there has been no specialist research into MND in Northern Ireland. People living with MND in Northern Ireland should be offered full and equitable access to MND research.

I am ever mindful that health is devolved, but has the Minister contacted his counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss a UK-wide MND taskforce? MND has been overlooked, and that must be reversed. Northern Ireland can gain and learn from what has been done in England, Scotland and Wales.

After months of dedicated campaigning, the United to End MND coalition of patients, charities and researchers won a huge victory in November 2021 with the news that the Government would invest £50 million over five years in targeted MND research. I thank the Minister, the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, as this funding is welcome. The announcement was made by the then Prime Minister on 14 November 2021, and £50 million was the exact figure requested by the coalition's submission to the 2021 spending review for the establishment of a virtual MND research institute to initiate a comprehensive five-year plan specifically for translational MND research to accelerate the discovery of treatments for this devastating disease. It is really good news that something like this is coming from the Government.

Since the announcement, the coalition has engaged with both the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department of Health and Social Care, and we understand that BEIS will provide 80% of the funds and DHSC will provide the remaining 20%. This is incredible news, and I ask to Minister to confirm it in his response.

Without the funding, the existing system will not support the infrastructure needed for close collaboration between five of our leading universities and 22 research centres. Without this ongoing close collaboration, game-changing progress cannot be realised. How can we better use the universities and that collaboration? Having full, reliable funding over five years, without the need to reapply repeatedly, will free scientists to conduct science, rather than making time-consuming grant applications, as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said. The funding will also support the retention of key staff, and cash will be released at pre-determined time points, according to the approved work plan.

The challenge posed by the existing system is that the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health and Care Research fund grants of up to £2 million at most, and many grants are for far less. The aim of a co-ordinated national approach is to avoid piecemeal efforts that break the united vision of a single co-ordinated UK team working to cure MND.

The Government's "Life Sciences Vision," which seeks to establish the UK's position as a post-Brexit life sciences superpower, refers to building on the "ways of working from COVID-19 to tackle future disease challenges". We learned a lot from how the Government responded to covid-19, and we can use that expertise to research cures and treatments for MND. One of the vision's missions is:

"Improving translational capabilities in neurodegeneration".

MND is the neurodegenerative disease that is most ready for translation. MND is a gateway disease to illnesses such as dementia.

We need to address the cost of living issues with a benefit uplift, increased support for unpaid carers and the provision of access to skilled social workers. These are all essential, and they all need ministerial direction. I look forward to hearing from the shadow Minister, who is a dear friend, and the Minister, who has the power to give that direction. People with MND are living in a prison, and we have the ability to open the door and let in some light. I believe we must do that by providing the help they are crying out for.

4.29 pm

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The issues and concerns about MND were brought back to me in the past few weeks when Jim Hughes, a very prominent local businessman in the community where I live, in Moffat, in my constituency, was taken by the disease. Jim was a larger-than-life character and this just reaffirms that the disease can take anyone.

The disease first came to my attention during the referendum campaign. In the "Better Together" campaign, there was a young man called Gordon Aikman who had worked in the Scottish Parliament for the Labour party and was an important support to Alistair Darling during those activities. Gordon was just in his late 20s and his initial symptoms were very minor—he had a numbness in his fingers, for example. When he went to have some medical examination, he received this dreadful diagnosis. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) mentioned Doddie Weir, as I will, because the disease has often been dwarfed by the courage of those who, like Jimmy, Doddie and Gordon, have been driven to raise awareness of it. Gordon, before he died at only 31, raised half a million pounds, some of it through a dreadful thing—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) will remember—called the ice bucket challenge. People had to appear, often on video, and have a bucket of ice poured over their head. Lord Darling having that done to him was a moment of amusement I will retain.

As well as campaigning, Gordon summoned the strength to give a stark message that, a number of years on, is worth repeating. He said:

"MND is a progressive, neurodegenerative condition that eats away at your body until you can no longer walk, talk, eat or breathe for yourself. There is no cure. Soon it will kill me...It'll be too late for me, but we can and we must find a cure for the next generation. With your help I can turn a negative into a positive."

From the experiences that Members have relayed in today's debate, that is what we want to see the Government do, Minister. We want them to take the negative, and the experiences, passion and fervour of these individuals, and turn that into action.

It has been a huge pleasure for me on a number of occasions to meet Doddie Weir, a giant of a man both on and off the pitch. He has the courage and the ability—I am sure Jimmy Johnstone was the same—to reach out to people who do not necessarily take health seriously and connect. We have heard many discussions in the Chamber about how men, particularly middle-aged and older men, do not take their health seriously, but by working with rugby interests and in communities across the Borders and across Scotland, his My Name's Doddie Foundation has been a hugely positive force. For anyone who has not visited its website, let me say that it really is very worthwhile and demonstrates a host of ways in which people can help and become involved. Constituents of mine, such as Hilary Carmichael in Boreland, in Dumfriesshire, who had no personal connection to Doddie have been inspired to campaign locally—to run small events to raise funds. We see that happening across the piece, including to larger organisations such as Peebles rugby football club, which took part in August in the MND big pull weekend. Given all the money that has been raised by Gordon, Doddie and

[David Mundell]

those people who have come to understand and be concerned about the disease, we want to see the Government matching that level of support.

Some of these issues are devolved in Scotland, and the Scottish Government have played a positive part. Indeed, the Euan MacDonald Centre for MND research in Edinburgh is making great strides. There is also research into terazosin, which may be able to slow the progression of MND, and, again, that is to be welcomed, along with the £50 million the Government have already committed and the £375 million for research into neurodegenerative diseases in general.

However, as Members have indicated, they want to see a vigour and a focus in that research and they want to see the Government playing their part to ensure that we can move, hopefully, towards a cure and a fitting real legacy for people such as Doddie, Gordon, Jimmy Johnstone, and Jim Hughes who have effectively given their life for this disease.

4.35 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for arranging this very important debate, and to the hon. Members for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for securing it. I am grateful, too, for the thorough manner in which this debate was opened.

This vital issue clearly has cross-party support. I find myself in complete agreement with all the points that have been made from both sides of the House. I, too, have been impressed by Doddie Weir, whom I met last year before speaking in a previous debate. I was taken by his positivity and energy, which was truly inspirational and something that inspires so many.

I will keep my remarks brief as the points have been so well made by earlier speakers. As we have heard, MND seems like a rare disease, but it is sadly all too common. It is the most common neurodegenerative disease of midlife, and many younger people are also affected. It is currently a terminal and incurable progressive condition. Progression is rapid, with one third of people dying within a year of diagnosis. It is a truly horrible disease. As people with the condition generally die so quickly, only 5,000 people in the UK live with the disease at any one time. However, MND is not rare. One in every 300 people across all communities develops MND in their lifetime, and about 200,000 of the current UK population will die of MND unless effective treatments are found. It is diagnosed in 200 Scots every year, and in more than 1,500 people across the UK.

There are clear links between research and investment in palliative care standards to improve the quality of life of those with MND while research continues to develop. All NHS boards in Scotland have a named MND clinical nurse specialist, either employed directly by the board or provided by a neighbouring board through service level agreements. I encourage the UK Government to follow the lead of the Scottish Government in providing universal free prescriptions. Free prescriptions are just one small way that we can help improve the quality of life of those who have been diagnosed with MND while research is still ongoing. Prescription charges, as we know, were abolished in Scotland in 2011, while in England the current charge is £9.35 per item.

Most worryingly, MND is on the increase, and we do not yet know why. The only effective drug available to fight it is called riluzole or Rilutek, which can deliver a small improvement in patients' overall survival, but it is not a cure and does not stop the condition progressing.

Last year, I spoke at length on this issue when opening the Petitions Committee debate in July. The urgency and potential benefit of dedicated research funding has been well made over a sustained period by many Members here and Members who were in that previous debate. That need is more urgent than ever now.

The research for new therapies requires a truly multi-disciplinary and pan-national approach, spanning the entire translational pathway. Establishing a virtual MND translational research institute, which campaigners have consistently called for, will deliver that. There is no doubt that extra MND research funding from the UK Government is needed to support effective patient treatment and medicines, in the hope that a cure for MND can be found soon. That is what the petitioners in the previous debate and the sufferers of this disease need, and I believe that it is possible. Sufferers simply do not have time to wait for action. They need results now—their life expectancy is, sadly, too short.

I was truly delighted, therefore, when the UK Government announced the £50 million funding specifically for research into MND last November. I have praised them on the record for it before and I do so again today. I am also grateful that we had confirmation only last month that that funding is ring-fenced. However, I would particularly like to know what progress has been made in allocating the funding. Just when will the consultation on the MND partnership result in a tangible plan? Progress on that feels too slow for my liking, so if the Minister could address those points I would be grateful.

4.40 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on securing this debate; I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and I welcome the Minister to his place. I also pay tribute to the MND Association, the My Name's 5 Doddie Foundation and MND Scotland for their tireless campaigning to improve the lives of people affected by MND.

This has been a short and small, but perfectly formed debate. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for his kind words of tribute to Gordon Aikman. I also thank the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who leads for the SNP on these matters.

We know that MND impacts up to 5,000 adults across the whole UK at any one time. Tragically, MND kills one third of people within a year of diagnosis and more than half of people within two years. Many people have experienced the tragedy of motor neurone disease in their own families and communities; I know I am not alone in that. My cousin's husband tragically died in his late 40s from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, as



it is known in the United States. He and my cousin moved there to live their dream, but sadly the dream was shattered by this dreadful disease.

Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) spoke on behalf of the Opposition in a Westminster Hall debate on MND. She rightly called on the Government to turbocharge investment and reform in MND research, bringing together industry, the public sector and charities to ensure the best possible outcomes for those affected by the condition.

The moral case for investment in research is clear, to help to find treatments to transform the lives of those affected by this condition, but the economic case is just as strong. Treatments in the late stages of MND are up to nine times more expensive than early intervention. Investment into research that enables earlier treatment leads to better outcomes for the NHS and better value for the taxpayer. Investment in MND research also has the huge economic benefit of building on our world-class research and science sector, delivering the high-skilled, well-paid jobs we so badly need.

In November 2021, the Government made a welcome announcement of £50 million of ring-fenced funding into MND research over the next five years. However, almost a year since the promise was made, we still have a long way to go to achieve the progress we need to support those living with MND. Unsurprisingly, given the uncertainty around the future of our economy and the future of our Government, there is also uncertainty about what the future holds for MND and those affected by it.

I will start briefly with the future of MND research. First, when the Minister rises, will he confirm that the pledge of £50 million of ring-fenced money into MND funding is still Government policy? If it is still policy, when will it be delivered? We will support him in turbocharging that roll-out.

Will the Minister also give assurances about the wider future of R&D spending? As he knows, there are worries in the sector: we are being told that, at the current Chancellor's forthcoming fiscal event, we can expect cuts to public services and public funding. Should we expect cuts to R&D spending, as many in the science community fear? I hope that is not the case. As the Minister also knows, soaring inflation means that funding counts for less, and the devalued pound means that the cost of the imported equipment and technologies that are crucial to running research laboratories is rising. What assessment has the Minister made of that issue?

Investment in research is crucial to treating MND, but it is not the only thing that matters: if we want to invest in a better future for those with MND, we must also invest in a better future for our NHS and social care system. If we look at the workforce, there are 132,000 vacancies in the NHS and 165,000 vacancies in social care. Given those chronic shortages, it is hardly surprising that, according to the MND Association, more than a third of people with neurological conditions such as MND have reported waiting more than a year between first experiencing symptoms and getting a diagnosis; that only 44% of adults with neurological conditions ever have an appointment with a specialist nurse; and that only 26% of people living with MND receive social care support. Those figures are further proof of the desperate need for a workplace strategy, which this Government have not yet delivered. I hope to

impress on the Minister the urgency of that matter. Will the Government listen to the MND Association's calls for a recovery and respite plan for family carers? As the Minister knows, the enormous stresses that those people are under anyway have been compounded by the impact of the pandemic. Again, if the Government produce such a plan, we will support it.

Finally, providing housing that meets the accessibility needs of people with MND is a vital part of making sure they can maintain their dignity, independence, and the choice to stay in their own home for as long as possible. A guiding principle of Labour's approach to social care is "home first", because the vast majority of people want to stay in their home for as long as possible, yet too many struggle to get even the basic support for home adaptations that makes that possible, with a quarter of housing authorities describing their need for accessible homes as severe. Investment and reform in research, the NHS, social care and housing are the steps needed to ensure a better future for those with MND. Labour is committed to delivering that better future, and to supporting this Government to deliver it while they remain in office. Please, let's just get on with it.

4.47 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for securing this important debate, and thank everyone who has taken part. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South has been a fantastic champion for research on this cause. I was grateful for his comprehensive speech, and for the chance to speak to him beforehand. He has given me very clear marching orders.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) made important points about head impacts in sport, which is clearly a key priority for research, while my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) gave us the inspiring words of Doddie Weir and made the important point that we must simplify funding for researchers. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a typically compassionate and experienced speech, and made important points about the need for all of us around the UK to learn from each other and the interaction between MND research and research into other diseases. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) told us about the inspiring courage of those who have been victims of this terrible disease, but go on to channel that into campaigning for improvements. He also made important points about the need for older people to get themselves checked up, and talked about some of the encouraging research that is happening in Edinburgh.

I was extremely sorry to hear about the terrible personal experiences of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). To answer some of his questions directly at the start, that £50 million is still absolutely Government policy. He was completely correct to highlight the importance of social care, hence our announcement the other day of an extra £500 million for social care.

I pay tribute to all those impacted by MND who dedicate their time to campaigning for a better future, including those involved in the "United to End MND"

[Neil O'Brien]

campaign and the My Name's Doddie Foundation. There is a lot that we must be grateful to them for.

MND is a brutal condition. We have heard throughout the debate about the devastating impact on people and their families. We have made great strides in research, but we still do not know exactly what causes motor neurones to die off. I echo the sentiment expressed in the House: we must move fast for people living with MND now and those who will be diagnosed in future. We need a better scientific understanding of the causes and mechanisms of MND, and we need to ensure that we are delivering the highest-quality care and support for those living with it and their families.

I will now talk about how we are supporting people living with MND and then talk about research. People living with MND need treatment and support to ease their symptoms and maintain their independence for as long as possible. As such, NHS England has set out that all services for patients with MND should be specialised, commissioning the specialised care that those patients may receive from 25 specialised neurological treatment centres across England. That includes the prescribing of complex communication devices, to enable people with MND to communicate as effectively as possible; offering non-invasive ventilation to support respiratory function; and compassionate personal care and support that meets people's individual needs.

In 2019, the National Neurosciences Advisory Group published a toolkit for improving care for progressive neurological conditions, including MND. That toolkit is helping commissioners to make improvements to pathways for people with MND, enabling quicker and more accurate diagnoses. It also helps to commission services that are co-ordinated, flexible and responsive to the rapidly changing needs of the patient, with improved choice in end of life care for people with MND. That will ensure that people with MND receive the best possible care.

We know we need to get things right for people living with MND and other neurological conditions. That is why we are delivering the neuroscience transformation programme, which will support services to deliver the right service at the right time for all neurology patients closer to home. NHS England has appointed a national clinical director for neurology, who will provide national leadership and specialist clinical advice, and an announcement on that is expected imminently.

Through research, we are making major advances in understanding and treating the disease and funding world-class researchers across many of our universities in the UK. We are seeing real progress, and there are many reasons for optimism. The Medical Research Council invested £10.3 million in MND research in 2020-21, supporting vital research to increase understanding of the causes and genetic mechanisms of MND. At the UK Dementia Research Institute, scientists are investigating the root causes of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS—the most common form of MND—and identifying ways to protect brain cells from damage. Earlier this year, the researchers developed a test to detect abnormal protein in the brain. This protein causes 40% of familial ALS cases—that is, ALS that occurs in more than one family member. That highly sensitive test is now being used in a clinical trial to assess the effectiveness of a new treatment for ALS.

At the Francis Crick Institute, researchers are working with stem cells to investigate the molecular processes that cause MND. That research is identifying what may go wrong with neurones, to find ways to treat the underlying disease mechanisms. The National Institute for Health and Care Research translates scientific breakthroughs into treatments that will benefit patients. The NIHR spent £3.2 million on MND research last year, supporting research on care and quality of life, as well as trials of new therapies. Researchers at NIHR's biomedical research centre in Sheffield have pioneered evidence-based interventions to manage the symptoms of MND. For example, many people with MND struggle to consume sufficient calories, even though there is evidence that eating a high-calorie diet may improve survival. Researchers are developing nutritional interventions to support people with MND in eating a high-calorie diet, which may enhance their quality of life.

The NIHR is also supporting trials of potential new therapies to treat the underlying disease. One study under way is the Lighthouse 2 study, which will test the effectiveness of Triumeq, a repurposed drug from the treatment of HIV, in improving survival rate, function and quality of life for people with MND. In September, NIHR-funded scientists reported findings from a phase 3 trial of the drug tofersen. The trial showed that the drug can slow and reduce progression of the disease in patients with MND caused by the faulty SOD1 gene.

During the debate, we have heard about the need for greater investment in MND research. We have already talked about the £50 million that we are investing over the next five years, and that commitment was reaffirmed in September and again today. That money is available to apply for now from the NIHR and UKRI, and officials continue to work closely with the MND research community and those in aligned scientific disciplines to ensure that the scientific ambitions for MND research can be realised.

In June, we launched a new £4.25-million collaborative partnership, which is jointly funded between Government and charity partners, to bring the MND research community together. That partnership will be led by Professors Ammar Al-Chalabi and Chris McDermott. I know that they and the patient group that has been campaigning for greater investment in MND research are optimistic about the opportunities that the new partnership will provide. Some of its key aims are: to develop better ways to clinically measure MND progression, to develop a bank of human cell models on which to test new therapies, and to improve MND registers so that doctors can collect detailed, high-quality data about the disease. We also launched an NIHR highlight notice on MND to signal to the research community that MND is a priority area and to invite ambitious research proposals from all researchers working in MND and aligned scientific areas.

I am sympathetic to researchers who want to minimise the number of applications that they have to make to secure funding, which is why, during the summer, officials from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the NIHR and the Medical Research Council met researchers linked to the United to End MND campaign to discuss how the MND research community could effectively access funding through a smaller number of

focused applications. The NIHR and the MRC look forward to seeing those applications when they come in and to talking more about how we simplify things.

I personally welcome the opportunity to meet some of those researchers in due course to discuss their progress and how we can further streamline funding and avoid wasting researchers' time with lots of applications for small penny packets of research funding. That is an important priority in research across the piece, but it is more important in this area than anywhere else, because the research is so urgent and there are many people desperate to see progress. I am keen to meet those researchers and take that forward.

Motor neurone disease is a priority for the Government. I am encouraged that we are seeing progress in research. We will continue to invest in MND research and work with charities, the research community, and people with MND and their families to build on the successes and deliver breakthroughs for people living with MND now and in future.

4.57 pm

**Andrew Lewer:** I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in this debate—I will not name them because I do not want to miss anyone—for their powerful speeches and for being here. It illustrates the importance of the work of the all-party parliamentary group, which provides an opportunity to work together and put political differences to one side for the benefit of our constituents. We know about dashing around for APPGs and emailing people to get them to turn up, but I never have to do that for the APPG on motor neurone disease; we always pack the room when we have a meeting.

The Minister has listened closely to the debate and the contributions of hon. Members, including the Front Benchers. His comments have been very encouraging,

especially about getting to grips with red tape. He also made reference to the Francis Crick Institute—Francis Crick was, of course, a Northampton man.

“Moonshot” is the word used for MND research, but the genetic breakthroughs that I spoke about earlier mean that we now know where the moon is and we have a good idea how to get there. That £50 million can help us to achieve a cure for MND, but we need more haste in getting launched and onwards to the dream. What we have heard today has been really encouraging in that regard.

I thank all those at the MND Association for all their hard work and support over the years for me, and for the contribution that other key charities, such as MND Scotland and My Name's Doddie Foundation, make towards this work. That led to United to End MND, which has really punched through, as I described in my speech earlier.

This debate has focused on those who suffer from MND and their tremendous courage in facing something that none of us wants to face. We can hardly imagine the severity and experience of those who go through it and those who care for them and love them. I hope that we have demonstrated today that we take those suffering seriously and we take the inspiration that they provide us with seriously. It is a tribute to those who care for them that we are all so determined to help to find a way forward for people so that they do not have to suffer in that way in future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of investing in the future of Motor Neurone Disease.

## Fuel Poverty in Manchester Gorton

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

5 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): No one can deny that we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis. Many of our constituents will be looking in despair at their energy bills. Some of them will, maybe for the first time, be worrying about how to make ends meet, and having to make a decision that it is unlikely any of us in this House will have to make—choosing between heating and eating.

A few weeks ago, one constituent in Abbey Hey told me:

“I have no idea how I will manage these next few months. I will only put on the heating in one room if the temperature goes below zero. I only heat my kettle twice per day and cook hot food only three times per week to save electricity.”

It is outrageous and shameful that here, in one of the richest countries in the world, anyone is forced to limit the number of times they can cook per week because they cannot afford the energy used, but this is not unusual.

Staff at Fallowfield & Withington food bank tell me people are requesting meals and ingredients that cook fast as they cannot afford to keep their cooker on for more than a few minutes. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to Fallowfield & Withington food bank and all the other food banks working in my constituency for all their incredible work to support my constituents. I will be following closely their new collaboration with the green doctors to support residents saving on energy bills by becoming more energy efficient.

Another constituent, a lone parent with three children in Fallowfield who is working two jobs to make ends meet, wrote to me desperate for help. She told me she has no idea how she and her children can make it through the winter warm and fed. Numerous churches, schools and community centres have written to me expressing the impact of energy bills that are four to five times higher than they were last winter. Many of these places—including Manley Park Methodist church, Longsight Makki Masjid mosque and the Levenshulme Inspire centre, as well as our fantastic Manchester City Council libraries—want to remain open as warm hubs for those who cannot afford heating at home, but growing energy bills alongside inflation make this so much harder for these organisations. I am grateful to these places for remaining open for those most vulnerable in our society, and I am grateful for our food banks, their staff and volunteers.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way, and I would just like to echo his thanks for the work of Fallowfield & Withington food bank, which does a fantastic job in my constituency as well. We obviously need to tackle energy prices and bills now, but does he agree with me that the long-term strategy needs to be a massive programme of retrofitting houses to make them insulated for the future, which will not only reduce bills for the future, but tackle the climate crisis?

**Afzal Khan:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree with him, and I will be touching on that subject as well.

No one should ever be put in such a situation. The cost of living crisis makes this debate feel timely, but it would be wrong to say that fuel poverty is new. The most recent available official statistics are from 2020, before the current cost of living crisis. They indicate that 10,364 households in my constituency were in fuel poverty—that is 24%—which was the sixth highest proportion in England and Wales, and the highest in the north-west. In some parts of my constituency, notably Fallowfield, Rusholme and Longsight, the picture is even bleaker, with nearly 40% of households affected in some areas.

I am not sure whether levelling up is still Government policy, but the statistics show significant regional inequality. The south-east has just under half the proportion of houses in poverty than the north-west—I note that the Surrey constituency of this week’s Chancellor has only 7% of households in fuel poverty, which is less than a third of the number in my constituency. There is also a racial disparity: the proportion of ethnic minority households in fuel poverty is 1.5 times that of their counterparts who identify as white. Purely anecdotally, it is notable that cities and towns such as Manchester, Bradford, Wolverhampton, Walsall and Birmingham, which have high proportions of people of south Asian heritage, are disproportionately represented in the top 50% of households in fuel poverty.

It is important to recognise that fuel poverty is more than being chilly. It is not a case of just putting on another jumper, and it has been shown that cold homes worsen respiratory conditions, cardiovascular disease, poor mental health and dementia. A review by the Institute of Health Equity led by Sir Michael Marmot indicated that diseases linked to cold and damp cost the national health service £6.9 million a day. Fuel poverty has a disproportionate impact on children. In addition to impacting on their health, according to a report from the Childhood Trust fuel poverty has a number of additional indirect impacts, such as lower rates of educational attainment, and it places strain on young people’s mental health.

Although low pay, insufficient welfare support or unemployment are factors in fuel poverty, as are global energy prices, there are structural reasons why people from less affluent neighbourhoods are more at risk of falling into fuel poverty. For example, many of my constituents, who are generally in private rented accommodation, are forced to use prepayment meters for electricity and gas. Households with prepayment meters pay what Fair By Design calls a “poverty premium”. They are forced to pay suppliers’ standard rates without being able to enter fixed-rate contracts, and unlike many others, they were immediately affected by hikes in retail energy prices. They are subject to higher standing charges that apply even if no energy is used, and they are unable to access discounts for direct debit payments or paperless billing. That leads to households simply cutting themselves off. If customers with traditional meters do not pay their bill, their energy company might be able to offer them support. If those on a prepayment meter do not have enough money, they simply do not top up, yet they still rack up more debt because of the standing charges. All that adds up, and we know that people with prepayment electricity meters are three times more likely to be in fuel poverty than those with a traditional meter.

In my constituency, Edwardian terraces are the most common form of housing. Now more than a century old, they were built long before modern energy efficient building techniques and insulation. Many residents cannot afford to improve the energy efficiency of their home, or they live in privately rented accommodation and are therefore at the mercy of a landlord. To address fuel poverty we must acknowledge the need for retrofitting—my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) made that point earlier. Retrofitting would address not only cold homes but the UK's carbon emissions, because 23% of all emissions come from home heating and powering. The least energy efficient houses pay over £900 per year more on their bills.

As the Minister will know, the Government previously ran the green homes grant voucher scheme which—let us face it—was a failure. It completed work on only 7% of the projected targets, and only 224 energy efficiency measures were installed in my constituency.

The average person cannot do this on their own. The estimated cost of a full-property retrofit is £25,000 to £30,000, which would be impossible for most people to pay, let alone those struggling to pay their energy bills. That is why the Government must create a scheme to get homes insulated and retrofitted. It must be a scheme that works, creates green jobs and helps working-class families to heat their homes.

We should acknowledge the work by organisations such as People Powered Retrofit which are helping to tackle the skills gap across the construction sector by offering “retrofit fundamental” courses. Such courses provide the background knowledge needed to begin green construction.

There are great local projects happening in Manchester and across the country. I draw the House's attention to the work of the Carbon Co-op and its Levenshulme area-based retrofit scheme. The scheme shows the savings from and benefits of a street-by-street approach to home retrofits and how retrofit can be made a possibility for homeowners who may never have had the opportunity otherwise.

**Jeff Smith:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. May I add to his comments the example of the Arrowfield Road estate in Chorlton in my constituency, where Southway Housing is, alongside a new heat pumps programme, retrofitting the houses on the estate? That will make a significant difference to the bills and warmth for those houses.

**Afzal Khan:** I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. The more of those schemes, the better.

As we all know, net zero by 2050 is a guideline, but we do not have until 2050 to make serious changes to our emissions. We are already seeing the detrimental effects of climate change. Just recently, we saw devastating floods in Pakistan, where an area the size of the UK was under water and overnight 33 million people became refugees in their own country. Scientists have said that the impact was worse due to climate change. That is why we must treat energy issues as environmental issues. If the whole of the UK was powered by renewables, solar would use only 2.1% of land, which is roughly the same amount currently used by golf courses. Some might say that would be a good swap.

Fuel poverty is an issue of dignity. Households deserve to eat and feel warm this winter and every winter. No one should be made to spend hours on a bus to stay warm or skip meals because they cannot afford the energy that they would use, and no child should go to bed cold.

5.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate. His wider engagement on the matter clearly demonstrates his commitment to his constituents in Gorton, to Manchester and to those households facing financial challenge more widely across the UK. I thank him for that. I understand the challenges that people face when they are severely cold in their own homes. I remember how, when I was a student—I am not trying to create a comparison—and our heating had gone, I had to sleep at night with jeans and tracksuit bottoms on just to try to keep warm. This is a very real issue for people, and at the heart of all of this we must remember the individuals facing these challenges. I was pleased to see his humanity come through in his speech. I welcome our engagement on the debate, because this is truly an important matter.

I also thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for his contribution. I remember fondly our time co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on mental health. I know of his passion for people and, in particular, as was alluded to, the mental health impact of fuel poverty, especially as we hit the cold of the winter months.

I assure the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton that fuel poverty remains a key concern for the Government. Recent increases in energy prices and the cost of living are having a significant impact on all households, but we know that many low-income households were already struggling. I assure him that the Government are taking the situation very seriously and have already taken action to support many of those in greatest need.

I thank everyone who has spoken for sharing their experience today. For all the reasons discussed, the Government are committed to tackling fuel poverty and supporting households in both the short and long term. This winter we are focusing on how best to help those struggling to keep their homes warm against the backdrop of high energy bills and cost of living pressures. That is why the Government are providing direct support to households. The energy price guarantee and the energy bill relief scheme are supporting millions of households and businesses with rising energy costs, and the Chancellor made clear they will continue to do so until April next year.

Those recent announcements are in addition to the wider support to help households with the impacts of unprecedented global gas price rises set out earlier in the year. Most households will be impacted in some way by high energy prices. That is why the Government are providing support through the energy bill support scheme, which provides a £400 discount for around 29 million households. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that that will no doubt help many of his constituents and reassure them.

[Dean Russell]

However, we recognise that not all households will be impacted equally and that we need to ensure targeted support is available to those who need it most. That is why, in May, the Government announced a support package to combat the increased cost of living. This support is targeted particularly at those with the greatest need, providing 8 million of the most vulnerable households with up to £1,200 of support in instalments across the year. That includes support for those on means-tested benefits, older households who are more vulnerable to the cold, and households requiring disability support who may have higher energy costs as a result. Further help is available for low-income and more vulnerable households through established schemes such as the winter fuel payment, the cold weather payment and the warm home discount. The warm home discount has been extended to 2025-26 and expanded to support 750,000 more households, while increasing rebates to £150. We have also reformed the scheme in England and Wales to provide more rebates automatically and to better target households in fuel poverty.

As well as immediate support to help households stay warm this winter, improving the energy efficiency of homes—this was mentioned by the hon. Gentleman in his excellent speech and in interventions—remains the best long-term solution to reducing energy bills and, therefore, tackling fuel poverty in a more sustainable and long-term way. Energy efficiency improvements can help make it cheaper and easier to heat a home, enabling warmer, safer homes with reduced carbon emissions. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the floods in Pakistan. They had a dramatic impact on many people in my constituency of Watford, where there was a fundraiser for the many friends and family members who were impacted by the floods. Climate change is a huge issue for us all and the Government are committed to tackling it.

The energy company obligation is delivering measures across Great Britain. ECO4, the current iteration of the scheme, which runs until 2026, has an increased value of £1 billion per year. In Gorton, up to March 2022, over 10,700 households had been in receipt of ECO measures. I believe that that is in the upper scale of communities across the UK who have received them. That help is ensuring long-lasting, sustained improvements are available for those households.

We have also recently announced energy efficiency support through ECO Plus, which will help hundreds of thousands of households reduce their energy bills. ECO

Plus will be worth £1 billion and deliver an average household saving of around £280 per year, with at least half of the support directly targeted at the most vulnerable, which is where we are really making sure that we are supporting as best we can. The local authority delivery scheme is prioritising homes with some of the lowest energy efficiency ratings. More than 200 local authorities took part in phase 1 of the scheme and participation increased further through phase 2. The first phase of LAD led to 560 homes being upgraded in Greater Manchester and more than 630 homes have been upgraded in phase 2.

The social housing decarbonisation fund will upgrade a significant amount of social housing stock to an energy performance certification rating of C. The total sum committed for that fund and associated demonstrator is more than £1 billion. Manchester City Council received around £3 million in grant funding to upgrade around 90 homes under the SHDF demonstrator, and Greater Manchester Combined Authority received around £10.5 million in grant funding in SHDF wave 1 to upgrade 1,286 homes. The engagement of local authorities, energy companies, industry and the local community and support sector has been pivotal in delivering those schemes and will remain essential. I thank everyone for their continued commitment.

I thank the hon. Gentleman, in particular, for raising this issue. This is such an important debate, but hopefully, when his constituents hear about it—he will no doubt share the video or the *Hansard* entry—they will note the number of schemes available to them, which will help to reassure them about the support that is available. We are trying to ensure that, at the heart of Government, we provide support to those who are struggling with their energy bills and energy costs, and particularly to those who are in fuel poverty, which is a key part of this. I also reassure them that, although there are challenges, and I appreciate the concerns that they may have—we mentioned mental health earlier—help is out there. I am sure that if his constituents write to him, they will get guidance on where to find that support. Finally, I thank him and the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington for their excellent points and for raising this issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.21 pm

*House adjourned.*

## Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 October 2022

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS

## Homes and Buildings: Levelling Up Health and Wellbeing

1.30 pm

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

That this House has considered the role of homes and buildings in levelling up health and wellbeing.

As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This is a very important issue. I understand from others that some other statements are being made at this moment in time, or thereabouts—well, people cannot always be in this Chamber when other things are perhaps more engaging.

We have not had a debate on this issue in Westminster Hall or, indeed, in Westminster for a year and a half, maybe even two. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on healthy homes and buildings and we wanted to refresh the House's awareness of the issue, so Westminster Hall seemed the obvious place to come to do just that. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to my application and I am delighted to have secured a debate to discuss the very important role homes and buildings play in levelling up health and wellbeing.

I came into the House in 2010, when the independent Marmot review was taking place. Let me set the scene with a quote from a House of Commons Library paper:

“The causal link between poor housing conditions and poor health outcomes is long established. The independent Marmot Review (2010) said housing is a ‘social determinant of health’ meaning it can affect physical and mental health inequalities throughout life. The Marmot Review 10 Years On—Health Equity in England, recorded an expansion in research on the relationship between poor housing and health”.

We cannot divorce the two. Quite simply, wellbeing, health and housing are intertwined. Today's debate is important because, as the Government move forward with their policies and strategies, we need a clear strategy that takes up the issue of housing and health. The 10-year review of Marmot said:

“Poor-quality housing harms health and evidence shows that exposure to poor housing conditions (including damp, cold, mould, noise) is strongly associated with poor health, both physical and mental. The longer the exposure to poor conditions, including cold, the greater the impact on mental and physical health. Specific physical effects are morbidity including respiratory conditions, cardiovascular disease and communicable disease transmission, and increased mortality. In terms of mental health impacts, living in non-decent, cold or overcrowded housing and in unaffordable housing has been associated with increased stress and a reduction in a sense of empowerment and control over one's life and with depression and anxiety. Children living in overcrowded homes are more likely to be stressed, anxious and depressed, have poorer physical health, attain less well at school and have a greater risk of behavioural problems than those in uncrowded homes.”

I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health—I am wearing my two chairs' hats. Furthermore, of the many all-party parliamentary groups

on which we all serve, I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on vascular and venous disease. Again, these issues are key. That is why the debate is so important.

Let me spend some time on the hazards. Across England, Yorkshire and the Humber are the regions with the highest proportion of homes with category 1 hazards, at 15%. The east had pretty damning figures as well. The figure for Northern Ireland, which concerned me greatly, was that 9% of homes had a problem. The midlands was at 13%, the north-west 12% and the south-east and London had the lowest proportion. I find that hard to believe, considering some of the information I am aware of. I see that the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) is present to speak on behalf of the Labour party, and some figures from others' constituencies may contradict what is being said. An estimated 18% of homes in Wales had a category 1 hazard. Given the busy job that I do in my office as an elected MP, I know that mould growth in houses—be they Housing Executive houses back home, housing associations or private rentals—affects people's health.

The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) asked how the Government's levelling-up policy planned to tackle “illnesses directly linked to living in cold, damp and dangerous conditions.”

The then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), replied that it was an important issue and that a

“decent home can promote good health and protect from illness and harm.”—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 12.]

All those things set the scene for where we are today and why it is so important that we move forward in a constructive and positive fashion. Most of us spend over 90% of our time indoors, so the nation's homes and buildings should positively contribute to our physical and mental health and wellbeing, and not in any way diminish it.

The covid-19 pandemic highlighted prevailing health inequalities in our society. The most vulnerable are more likely to live in unhealthy homes that are damp, energy-inefficient, noisy, poorly ventilated and crowded. The inextricable link between our health and wellbeing, and the homes and buildings where we work, rest and play, is clear—never more so than during the pandemic. There were a great many negatives to the pandemic, and it emphasised some of the areas where improvement can take place. Having to spend more time in our homes, with many more people working remotely, emphasised the impact that our homes and buildings have on our health. Unhealthy housing impacts on economic growth, business performance, educational attainment, life chances, climate change and our nation's health and wellbeing. Therefore, it makes sense to join up policy thinking, frameworks and standards and to ensure that all future housing, net zero and health policies do not contribute to, cause or exacerbate poor health and wellbeing.

The current energy and cost of living crises will only increase the problems caused by unhealthy homes and buildings. It is like a double whammy, because as the energy crisis hits and prices increase, that puts pressure on landlords, tenants and families from sides that they were perhaps not expecting. Many charities and other bodies across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland predict—I hope they are wrong—a record number of excess winter deaths this year linked

[*Jim Shannon*]

to thermal inefficiency in the housing stock. We must try to prevent deaths and ensure that they do not become a critical issue, although all the pointers seem to indicate that that will happen. There is strong evidence to support the idea that poor-quality and unhealthy homes cause or exacerbate poor health, thereby placing more pressure on our NHS.

Like others in this Chamber, I believe that if we can have early diagnosis and stop things happening in homes, we can improve further down the line when we do not have the major health problems that come off the back of poor housing. The Building Research Establishment, or BRE, estimated that in 2010 poor housing cost the NHS £2.5 billion in first-year treatment costs—it is a big figure. Again, that indicates exactly where the issues are and why it is so important that every step is taken to address them. Building design, the retrofitting of buildings and the renovation of the current housing stock should adopt a holistic approach.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I agree with him that the places we call home can have a huge impact on our health and wellbeing, particularly given the amount of time that we spend in them. In rural areas such as my part of Devon, that is even more pronounced, as buildings tend to be older, which means that they are often less energy-efficient and lack modern insulation. Does the hon. Member agree that the key to protecting people's health and wellbeing is to ensure that buildings, and particularly our homes, are properly insulated?

**Jim Shannon:** I fully support that. I am probably of a greater age than nearly everybody in this Chamber, and I remember when we had not heard of insulation. We know about it today, and it is clearly part of having healthy homes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which sets the scene for what we need to do. I look to the Minister for a positive response.

Energy efficiency, indoor air quality, ventilation, lighting and acoustics are all clearly big issues, and the health, comfort and wellbeing of residents should be placed at the heart of good building and infrastructure planning. I understand that the Government have a policy to ensure that new builds adhere to those conditions to ensure the betterment that we want to see, but we must also address the question of homes that do not have those things, which brings me to insulation. There must be a plan of action. Will the Minister give us some indication of what the Government are doing to help buildings that do not come up to that standard?

I am very pleased to see the shadow Minister in her place, and I look forward to her contribution. I also look forward to the Minister's contribution, and I wish him well in his new role.

UK Green Building Council research found that 75% of new developments have poor thermal quality and performance—the very issue that the hon. Gentleman raised. To level up and reduce health inequalities, the Government must commit to deliver higher standards, and performance must be measured rather than just designed. It is very easy—I say this respectfully—to have a plan of action, but we also need the action. Again, I look forward to the Minister's response.

We need to futureproof the built environment. New building and planning law must be designed and reformed to be fit for our long-term future. Some 85% of our homes will still exist in 2050. It is a sobering thought that the homes that are built today are there for a long time, so let us make sure energy efficiency, wellbeing and health implications are all part of an intricate system.

To level up, we need a national retrofitting strategy focused on delivering health and wellbeing. The Building Research Establishment estimates that poor housing in England costs £18.6 billion per annum. That affects the health of thousands of people. Again, that is really worrying.

The subject of the debate is critical for people's health. Health and wellbeing must now be placed at the heart of Government housing, environment, skills, planning and energy policy in order to level up and reduce the UK's health inequalities. There is a collateral burden on our healthcare, education and public services.

I thank the Library staff for their background notes, which greatly enhance my knowledge of the subject and add to the debate. They refer to a number of things, including housing and covid-19, which we all, as elected representatives, know about. We must also look at housing and dementia. I am sure it is no different for other Members, but I have more constituents than ever being diagnosed with dementia and Alzheimer's. The population is living longer. That does not always mean that people with Alzheimer's or dementia are of a certain age, of course, but the fact is that most of them are. There are some things that we need to do about housing and dementia. I have also never seen so many people with mental health issues. Covid-19, dementia and mental health are three things that need to be correlated with housing and health.

The all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings is calling on the Government and the Minister to take forward its recommendations in its "Building our Future: Laying the Foundations for Healthy Homes and Buildings" white paper, to adopt a more holistic and joined-up approach to tackle the problem of unhealthy homes and buildings in Britain, and to adopt Lord Crisp's Healthy Homes Bill. I am sure that the Minister is very aware of that. He might wish to comment now. The white paper sets a clear direction and has a clear focus, which is helpful. I always make my comments in a constructive fashion; I am in the business, as we all are, of solutions, not negativity. If we highlight the issues, we can highlight the solutions.

Lord Crisp has called for a joined-up, holistic approach to healthy homes, health and wellbeing in the context of the Government's levelling-up agenda—which I know the Government are committed to and which I welcome—the Government's heat and buildings strategy, the decent homes standard review, the Building Safety Act 2022 and updated planning reforms. Those are five things into which the Government have a direct input.

We must also recognise the cost benefits of improving and levelling up our homes and communities, to remove health inequalities and positively contribute to the climate agenda. We cannot ignore climate change; it is a reality. When we build our homes, we must recognise that we need more energy efficiency. We want to meet the Government's net zero 2050 target, to which this United Kingdom is committed.



We also want to commit to introduce legislation that addresses the growing health problems caused or exacerbated by the UK's unhealthy homes and buildings. I watched a news story on flats in London. I just could not believe that anybody could ever live healthily in some of those properties, with the decay and mould growth. The danger to people was quite real.

We must also act to reduce health inequalities right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I am ever mindful that the Minister is directly responsible only for England—and ensure that Britain's homes and buildings do not cause or exacerbate poor health and wellbeing. The cost to society and the NHS is far too vast, and it is the poorest in our society who are particularly affected; it always is. I have a duty—we all do—to help those who need help most, and those are often the poorest in our society.

We must also enshrine a clear definition of health and wellbeing in future legislation. The healthy homes and buildings APPG white paper referenced the World Health Organisation's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being".

A healthy home is a safe home. However, at present, many homes are unsafe. I have some information from a group that I work with back home, Electrical Safety First, which gave me some stats for England. In England alone, there are five fires every week caused by electrical installations in homes. Electricity causes the majority of house fires, accounting for 53.4% of all accidental dwelling fires. I have also worked with a good friend, a fella called Michael Hilland, who was an electrical contractor. He no longer has his business, but he advises. I thank him and his organisation for the information.

Electrical Safety First believes that house fires can be reduced by mandating periodic electrical safety checks in homes across the United Kingdom. That is already the case for the private rented sector, and it should be for all housing associations, and indeed for the Housing Executive, which we have back home. However, enforcement measures do not go far enough. In the social rented sector, tenants will soon be protected. However, clarity is needed about whether electrical safety checks will cover installations and appliances, and also whether landlords will be given statutory powers to undertake electrical safety checks. I look to the Minister for some direction on that.

In the owner-occupier sector, there are currently no electrical safety protections. That is concerning, given that owner-occupied housing is likely to have the most dated electrical wiring, and houses a greater proportion of the elderly population, who are more vulnerable to electrical safety risks. The fact is, our mobility decreases as we get older. If we are living in a house that may be outdated or, indeed, where it takes time to get up and down the stairs or time to get out of the house, then, when it comes to electrical safety, more action needs to be taken.

The issue is particularly concerning because the owner-occupier sector makes up the largest housing tenure, accounting for some 65% of all households in England. As a result, the majority of households have no statutory protections from electrical safety risks. Again, I ask the Minister: what can be done? I know he will be positive in his response, and I appreciate that in advance, but I need to have the assurance in *Hansard* that the Government will take on board the things we are outlining. In total, across England, that means that some 15 million households

have no statutory protection from electrical safety risks. That is a concerning figure. Data from the London Fire Brigade found that a greater number of owner-occupiers had experienced a fire than social and private renters combined. Again, that indicates a greater onus to try to sort out owner-occupiers and give them some guidance over what can be done to ensure they are safe and in no danger.

Separately, while there are provisions for vulnerable customers to receive free gas safety checks, no analogous provisions exist for electrical safety checks. I suggest that it is time to put electrical safety checks on the same level as gas safety checks for the simple reason of the number of fires and the dangers that are caused. I believe this must all be taken into consideration.

Health and housing are and always have been linked. That is why this debate is important. If we are to move forward and improve the health of our nation—which, as my party's health spokesperson, I am happy to promote—housing must be an integral part of that. I do not think we can divorce the two issues; they come intertwined, hand in hand, together. If one defines a person's basic needs, the right to a healthy home is surely fundamental.

Healthy homes and buildings are not simply those where there is a lack of ill health; a healthy home should mean homes and buildings that maximise the occupants' physical, mental and social wellbeing. In a nation where mental health, anxiety, covid and advancing diseases have all grown in number, the focus of future housing policy must now shift to health creation. That is why this is an important debate. I hope the Minister will be able to give us some reassurance. We must not look at ill health prevention alone. Ill health prevention must become part of the strategy.

Delivering healthy homes and places is vital to levelling up our communities, towns and cities. This must be integrated together. Health and Housing—the two Departments must work constructively together in a positive fashion. Healthy homes and buildings will make Britain healthier, save money and contribute to increased educational attainment and wealth creation.

In conclusion, I urge the Minister to support the White Paper and the recommendations put forward by the APPG on healthy homes and buildings, and to place healthy housing at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda. I know that the Minister will have had a chance to look at the recommendations made back in 2018; they are as relevant today as they were then. Those recommendations show a strategy and a way forward. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North, and others contributing.

1.54 pm

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech. I could not agree more. The Departments for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and of Health and Social Care—health and home—need to work more closely together.

This debate is about an important issue that affects many of my constituents in Coventry North West. In my city, a recent study showed that high air pollution contributed to one in 18 deaths of people over 30 in 2019.

[*Taiwo Owatemi*]

That equates to more than 150 deaths in a single year. It is totally unacceptable. We know how damaging pollution is to children and their long-term health, but not enough is being done to improve air quality. The evidence is unambiguous. Those exposed to high levels of pollution are at a much greater risk of respiratory disease, learning disabilities and brain damage. It is inexcusable.

Despite that, homes are being built alongside the busy Tamworth Road in my constituency, with more families moving in every day. As lorries and cars block up the road at all times, children are forced to play in spaces where they are constantly inhaling toxins and fumes. The Government must set high standards, and set councils free to build social housing within communities on brownfield sites. It cannot be right that children with their entire lives ahead of them are constantly exposed to such dangerous chemicals.

Giving developers too much power means they often fail to establish the risk of developments, which can become incredibly dangerous for the safety of our young people. Two years ago, an 11-year-old was killed on Tamworth Road after a car struck her. Such tragic events are preventable. When building homes, the safety and health of our young children must be prioritised. Whether we use pavement barriers, bollards or slower speed limits, it is vital that we find ways to protect those who live alongside busy roads.

Tamworth Road is not the only part of my constituency with new homes that are exposed to high levels of pollution. A new development in Spon End will see 750 homes built next to an extremely busy dual carriageway. Those homes will be occupied by families from across my constituency. I will always fight to make sure that no child grows up with avoidable health problems. The Government and the developers know how dangerous this is, yet they are failing children on their watch. I urge the Government to legislate to bolster the chances of young children across the country. Every child deserves an equal chance in life. Inadequate housing is taking that chance away from them, and it needs to end.

To reduce the levels of pollution in our towns and cities, all new homes must be built as efficiently and sustainably as possible. In practice, that means electrical charging points built into homes to make it as easy as possible to have an electric car. Solar panels must be standard in all newly built homes. That is how we can increase air quality to make sure the next generation of young people do not develop the same ailments that plague so many across the country.

Although pollution is a serious risk, poor-quality homes are equally damaging to health. When I speak to medical professionals across my community, they tell me that the health impact of poor housing is clear. Children who live in damp and mouldy homes are more likely to develop or experience trigger symptoms of asthma and adult respiratory problems than children who live in homes without those issues. We know the solution: warm and dry homes improve general health outcomes, and reduce the risk of respiratory, cardiovascular and other health conditions.

The Government must legislate to make sure that developers are held responsible. The current planning free-for-all gives big developers too much power, and too often they do not know what type of housing is

required in what parts of our towns and cities. Housing has a huge influence on the mental health and wellbeing of so many families in my constituency. They are made to live in crowded homes far outside their communities, with limited access to shops, GP surgeries and other facilities. It is no wonder that we have a mental health crisis.

The Government must empower local authorities and build sustainable homes to reduce generational health inequalities in a way that will have a real impact for decades to come. I hope that the Minister is able to comment on some of my points in his response.

1.59 pm

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this valuable debate on an area of importance to all our constituents, and one that too often flies under the radar. He speaks with compassion and experience about the link between health and housing. I also thank the other speakers this afternoon, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for their reasoned and insightful comments.

Whatever melodrama is happening outside, this issue matters to the people we represent. When it comes to the nation's health, we know that prevention is unequivocally better than cure, in terms of the human cost and the toll on individuals, but also in terms of the sound management of public finances.

We see the impact of under-investment in social and primary care settings on our acute hospitals. We know that investment to tackle the scourges of public health, such as smoking and obesity, ultimately pays for itself in the long run, as well as helping people to live happier, healthier and longer lives. It should not be controversial to aspire to want that for our constituents. It is common sense, not nanny-statism, as some would have it. It is no different from other factors that impact public health and wellbeing, which are many, varied and not always immediately obvious, as we have heard today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West spoke eloquently and passionately, from her considerable experience in the public health field. We know that diseases such as cancers, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease cause around 89% of deaths in the UK. The House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS concluded that:

“These conditions are also, to a significant extent, preventable and the costs, in human, social and economic terms, are largely avoidable.”

The World Health Organisation has made it clear that poverty is closely linked with these diseases. Vulnerable and socially disadvantaged people get sicker and die sooner than people of higher social positions. As the hon. Member for Strangford rightly said, we saw that play out starkly with the covid-19 pandemic. We need to see action taken to close those health inequalities.

Risk factors associated with poverty and deprivation include tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet and the harmful use of alcohol. Economic and social conditions contribute significantly to levels of preventable ill health. The levels of health inequality in the UK were already too great but, shamefully, they are just getting

worse. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2018 to 2020, males living in the most deprived areas were living almost 10 years less than males living in the least deprived areas, with the gap at around eight years for females. Both sexes have seen statistically significant increases in inequality and life expectancy at birth since 2015 to 2017.

This is not necessarily about regions, or differences from one end of the country to the other. In my constituency of Luton North, we see the difference in life expectancy from one end of the town to the other, and that is to say nothing of the consequences of poverty and deprivation for mental health. Being deprived is not just about a lack of money. It is a lack of quality of life. It is community insecurity and a lack of resources overall, whether that is about exposure to stressor such as violence and crime, or a lack of public green space.

Public Health England has stated that:

“Insecure, poor quality and overcrowded houses cause stress, anxiety and depression, and exacerbates existing mental health conditions. 19% of adults living in poor quality housing in England have poor mental health outcomes.”

I feel that figure might be a gross under-representation. We also know that the research shows that people with a mental health problem are much more likely to have preventable physical health conditions as well.

What can be done? It would be disingenuous of me to stand here and say that poor mental and physical public health could be remedied by action on housing alone, but it is a key part of the puzzle of reducing the UK's entrenched geographic, ethnic and demographic inequalities. That being said, there are things that the Government can and should do now, which have the potential to have a rapid and significant impact on ending the creation of unhealthy homes.

In the longer term, we need to overhaul the complex, fragmented system that allows new homes and places to be built that do not guarantee that all new homes provide for residents' basic human needs, such as access to green space and local services, and clean air. We need developments that are guided by communities, with input from public health professionals on design, and proper infrastructure to support them, whether that is about encouraging active travel, access to green space, public leisure facilities or even allotments and communal vegetable gardens—although do not let me anywhere near those, because I am not green-fingered.

We need to do much better in setting standards for developments across the country and looking at methods for how they can be delivered. Research by Public Health England in 2017 clearly demonstrated the relationship between the built environment and health and the positive impact provision of these basic amenities can have.

A matter of more immediate concern is the liberalisation of permitted development rights by the Government in 2013, which has had a significant detrimental effect on the quality of dwellings produced as a result. Ministers both past and present have claimed—and future ones possibly will—that liberalisation of planning and permitted development rights removes unnecessary impediments to development. However, the evidence overwhelming shows that the impact of extending permitted development rights to convert office, commercial and industrial units into supposedly residential spaces—although I think very few of them could be described as such—is negative.

We have seen a huge increase in poor-quality housing that lacks space and natural light, and there are accompanying implications for public health and wellbeing as a result. The Government's own research has shown that schemes created through permitted development projects are far less likely to meet national space standards and far more likely to have reduced access to natural daylight and sunlight. Space and daylight are the very basics. The former Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's housing and safety rating system states that

“lack of space has been linked to psychological distress and various mental disorders”

and problems such as

“accidents and spread of contagious disease.”

Some residential conversions are as small as 13 square metres, which is a third of the minimum space standard recommended by Government. Terminus House in Harlow, a former office block converted into hundreds of dwellings, was described as a “human warehouse”. That sounds like something from the Victorian era, not 2022. The Government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's final report also concluded that:

“In some instances, we have inadvertently permissioned future slums.”

The 2018 Raynsford review of planning also concluded in a reference to the liberalisation of permitted development rights that:

“Government policy has led directly to the creation of slum housing. Such slums will require immense public investment, either to refurbish them to a proper standard or to demolish them. Morally, economically and environmentally it is a failed policy.”

That is a damning indictment of this policy and the Government's approach to housing. In the light of all we have heard in this debate and the examples I have outlined from reports commissioned by the Government themselves, I would be particularly keen to hear from the Minister what possible justification there is for retaining these liberalised permitted development rights in their current form.

Reducing socioeconomic and health disparities in this country cannot happen without serious consideration of the role of housing and planning in creating buildings and communities that promote healthy lifestyles. We owe it to communities up and down this country to make positive changes a reality. They will not be achieved by the proposed deregulation in planning in investment zones. We have seen from the experience of permitted developments that further liberalisation is a cowboy developers' charter for poor-quality, profit-maximising estates. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we will approach the issue of promoting health and wellbeing in new developments in these zones.

2.8 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Andrew Stephenson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and pay tribute to his tireless work and that of the healthy homes and buildings APPG in improving the conditions of those living or working in poor-quality, unhealthy environments.

We can all agree that the past two years have brought into sharp focus just how integral our homes and communities are to our physical and mental wellbeing.

[*Andrew Stephenson*]

It has underscored the imperative of the APPG's mission to tackle poor-quality housing and our collective endeavour to ensure that everyone in our society lives somewhere decent, warm, safe and secure. That mission is only becoming more pertinent as winter fast approaches and as we act to help people struggling with the rising cost of living. I understand that the Healthy Homes Bill had its Second Reading in July, and today I hope to outline how the Government are already dealing with many of the issues highlighted in that Bill.

Before I turn to levelling up, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for making two excellent speeches. Both their contributions were fantastic. There was very little I would disagree with in either of their speeches. That demonstrates the broad consensus across this House for dealing with the challenges we face.

I want to reiterate the Government's commitment to levelling up, which remains a key priority for the UK Government. We know that the UK's economic challenges are hitting some places harder than others. As well as the immediate Government help that we need to therefore provide to those communities, we need to build places up to help them become stronger and more economically resilient. With that in mind, the Government have set out a UK-wide aim to boost our GDP growth.

We recognise that the UK economy is made up of many different local economies with different characteristics, opportunities and challenges. We therefore aim to achieve and sustain strong economic growth by unleashing the untapped potential of places around the UK. That does not mean we want to dampen down the success of London or the growth of the south-east. We want to grow the whole economy, focusing on every part of the country. We want to ensure that we support growing parts of the economy—for example, life sciences in the north-west of England, advanced manufacturing in the midlands, semiconductors in Wales, renewable energy in East Anglia and fintech in Northern Ireland.

It goes without saying that everybody deserves to live in a safe and secure home. As hon. Members know, the decent homes standard has been in place since 2001. It set the minimum standard of quality to be met for all dwellings provided by registered providers of social housing. The decent homes standard sets out four criteria for evaluating decency. It requires that homes are free of serious hazards, are in a reasonable state of repair, have reasonably modern facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms, and have efficient heating and effective insulation to provide a minimum degree of thermal comfort.

The regulator of social housing requires that social rented homes are maintained by landlords to at least the quality set out in the decent homes standard. Good progress has been made on ensuring that social rented sector homes meet the standard, with non-decency in the sector at around 11% in 2020, although I acknowledge the regional disparities in those rates, which was highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford.

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Department published the social housing Green Paper. During the consultation, we heard that the decent homes standard was no longer fully effective. That is why in the social housing White Paper we committed to review the

decent homes standard to ensure that it works for residents and landlords. Part 1 of the DHS review concluded in September 2021 and established that there is a case for change. Further details on taking forward the review will be set out in due course.

The Government are equally committed to ensuring a fair deal for private renters. Over the past two years, we have introduced regulations that will make privately rented homes safer in respect of their electrical installations—again, a point focused on extensively and eloquently by the hon. Member for Strangford—and through the provision of smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.

We have also reviewed the housing health and safety rating system—the tool used to assess conditions in all homes. That will enable local authorities to take more effective, targeted enforcement when they discover health and safety hazards. Last week, our current Prime Minister re-committed to the ban on section 21 no-fault evictions to protect tenants. We are, of course, carefully considering the next steps to support the rental market.

Several hon. Members talked about the importance of energy efficiency and decarbonisation, including the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) in his intervention. As I said, we will make sure that rented homes are warm and dry. To meet that aim, we will deliver our net zero target, requiring all of our housing stock to become more energy-efficient. My Department is working closely on that with colleagues from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Improving the energy performance of our buildings presents an opportunity to provide warm, well ventilated spaces and healthy environments in which people can live and work. That will avoid physical illnesses such as heart and lung conditions—again, issues that were spoken about passionately by the hon. Member for Coventry North West and the shadow Minister.

The journey to net zero buildings starts with better energy performance and improving the energy efficiency of homes and buildings. It is a no-regrets action. That is why we are committed to upgrading as many homes as possible to energy performance certificate band C by 2035, as a cost-effective, practical and affordable step. Building on this, we have committed to consider setting a long-term regulatory standard to improve social housing to EPC band C, and we will consult on this in 2023.

Improving the energy efficiency of homes is also the best long-term method of reducing energy costs for vulnerable households and those living in fuel poverty. Our target is to ensure that as many fuel-poor homes as is reasonably practicable achieve a minimum energy rating of band C by 2030. To this end, we are investing £12 billion in Help to Heat schemes to make people's homes warmer and cheaper to heat. We will deliver upgrades to more than half a million homes in the coming years through our social housing decarbonisation fund, the home upgrade grant scheme and the energy company obligation scheme. To future proof buildings, the heat and building strategy also commits us to considering overheating risk and indoor air quality when developing future decarbonisation policies.

Further to this, from 2025, the future homes standard will ensure that new homes produce at least 75% less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than those built to the 2013 standards. That represents a considerable improvement in energy efficiency standards for new homes. In December 2021,

we introduced an uplift in energy efficiency standards that delivers a meaningful reduction in carbon emissions and provides a stepping stone to the future homes standard in 2025.

Looking towards health and safety, the Building Safety Act 2022 established a more stringent regulatory regime in design and construction, strengthening building regulations requirements and their oversight. The Act introduces a Building Safety Regulator, which will make buildings safer by enforcing a stringent new regulatory regime for high-rise residential and other in-scope buildings. The regulator will oversee the safety and performance of all buildings and increase the competence of those working across the built environment.

The Building Safety Regulator was established in shadow form in January 2020, and it is intended that the new regime will come fully into force in April 2024, with interim steps, such as requiring accountable people to register their buildings, coming in the meantime. Residents can be confident that their safety is a critical objective of the new regulator. The regime also introduces new oversight requirements during the build phase. This means that before proceeding to the next stage, the developer must satisfy the Building Safety Regulator that they have met the relevant requirements in the building regulations. Between these stages, the Building Safety Regulator can carry out on-site inspections or request information about the building work.

On planning, our policy and decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions. Through reforming the planning system, we will champion how beautiful design can enhance health and wellbeing, and encourage sustainable development accompanied by infrastructure that communities will truly benefit from. Building more homes is a fundamental task for the Government and local leaders. The measures we are already delivering—for example, those set out in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill—are a significant step in improving the way planning operates, but we want to go further in specific areas of potential through investment zones, for example, to deliver the attractive, well-designed new communities we all want to see.

**Jim Shannon:** I am pleased by the Minister's comprehensive response; it is very helpful. I will ask two questions. I said in my speech that landlords need to be incentivised, if there is a methodology to make that happen, to improve their homes. I appreciate what will happen going forward, but we have so many homes in the United Kingdom—18.5 million—that need to be retrofitted. I am ever mindful that this issue crosses different Departments and may not be the direct responsibility of the Minister when it comes to skills and a national training scheme.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) could not be here today because he had to return to his constituency. He said to me the other day that those who are in construction are getting older, and as they get older we need a new group of young workers coming through who have the skills to retrofit. Those are two questions. I am not sure if they are the direct responsibility of the Minister, but I know that he will deliver them to the person who has that responsibility.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank the hon. Member for that important point. It is not directly my responsibility, but it is the kind of thing that we must work to address collectively across Government.

In a former role, I was the Minister with responsibility for construction, and we looked at the contribution that modern methods of construction and off-site construction can deliver, both in speeding up the delivery of the extra new, nice affordable homes for families that we need, and in freeing up skilled labourers to retrofit the older housing stock and to do some of the other work that we need to be done, because skills are in short supply. It is therefore important that we have a solid skills strategy. That is something that my Department and Ministers in BEIS are particularly keen to look at and work together on to ensure that we have a consistent approach that helps to deliver what we both want to see in this area.

Turning to one of the final areas, design and placemaking, the Government seek to ensure that new homes and places are designed to support the health and wellbeing of residents and communities. The national planning policy framework, which local planning authorities must adhere to as a matter of law, is clear that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places. Those should support healthy lifestyles, especially where that would address identified local health and wellbeing needs. That could be through the provision of safe and accessible green infrastructure, local shops, and layouts that encourage walking and cycling.

The framework also refers to the nationally described space standard. That means that local councils have the option to set minimum space standards for new homes within their areas. The national model design code asks that local councils give consideration to the internal layouts within new homes, aiming to maximise access to natural daylight.

Through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, we are introducing a duty for all local councils to produce a design code at the spatial scale of their authority area. The measure will empower communities to have their say on what their area will look like through working with local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning groups to set clear design standards through design codes. We have also set up the Office for Place within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which will support councils and communities to turn their vision of what they like into local standards that all new developments should meet, helping to create beautiful, healthy, successful and enduring places.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and particularly the hon. Member for Strangford for securing today's important debate. There is a huge amount of consensus from all parties on the need to address the issues that have been highlighted today. I speak not just for my Department but for the wider Government in reiterating our commitment to building the sustainable green homes and communities of the future. That is a vision that I know is shared by all.

**Jim Shannon:** Will the Minister give way before he sits down?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Certainly.

**Jim Shannon:** I make these interventions in a constructive fashion, because I want to have the answers—I think we all do; that is why we are asking. So far, the Minister has

[*Jim Shannon*]

done brilliantly. I understand that 75% of new homes are not thermally efficient. Will the Minister confirm that that is the case, and say what steps will be taken to change that? The reason I ask the question is simply that it all links into the energy crisis, which has become a fact of life for all of us. I say that in a very constructive fashion. I am not trying to catch the Minister out—that is not my purpose. I would just like a wee bit of clarity on that matter.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I do not have the exact statistics to hand, but, as I said in my remarks, we are working on updating building regulations and standards. Putting energy efficiency at the heart of those standards is an important priority. This is something that my ministerial colleague in the Department leads on, but I will ensure that the hon. Member's views are fed back to him and taken into account in our discussions.

We all realise that the challenges identified by the APPG are real, and they are priorities that the Government will address. I am keen to continue to work with the hon. Gentleman, his colleagues in the APPG and others across the House to address those challenges. Even if I am not in this role in a few weeks' time, I am sure that my successor would be delighted to continue working with them. These are real challenges that are recognised across Government; I know that myself and my current ministerial colleagues are very keen to see them addressed.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Jim Shannon has 35 minutes to wind up the debate.

2.25 pm

**Jim Shannon:** Do not tempt me, Mr Hollobone. I am very pleased to have heard excellent contributions. The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) has a deep interest in the issue, and very kindly came along to support the debate. The hon. Member referred to children; that is an issue for us all. I am a grandfather now; my boys have grown up and we have the next generation coming through. I am conscious about what we are building for those children and the grandchildren who come after them. I know the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has a young child, so she will better understand what that means.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West said that no child should have a health problem and that every child needs an equal start in life. A society is judged by how it looks after the poor and the less well off. Those are the key issues of this debate. We have all grasped that. We understand from the Minister that there is a deep interest from Government in making that happen.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) referred to insulation and upgrading homes. It is retrofitting homes that do not have the insulation that a new home would have—that is the key issue. We have to have a programme of not only new homes coming in but older homes being upgraded.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North, gave a very knowledgeable, factual and evidence-based contribution that I thought was very helpful. She

referred to respiratory health problems that are preventable; if someone has a good house it reduces the risk of those. That is what we are aiming for. We are trying to reach the stage where those problems do not occur, because we have taken the precautions and preventive measures beforehand.

The hon. Member for Luton North referred to preventable health issues and life expectancy. I thought it was interesting that she referred to her own constituency, where in one town there can be people in one set of houses who have respiratory issues and health problems, and people in a different set of houses who do not. "A Tale of Two Cities" came to mind. The hon. Member referred to communities helped by the council. She said she was not green fingered; I cannot say I am, but I can usually turn my hand to anything. I live on a farm, so maybe it is more of a factor for me. She also referred to the lack of space and the distress, and the impact that has on children and families as a whole.

I am pleased that the Minister gave such a substantial response, for which I thank him greatly. I think every one of us will be encouraged by his knowledgeable responses to the questions we asked about the direction in which the Government are going. He said that the decent homes standard would be reviewed and talked about change, but what is the timescale for that change? Whenever I take things forward on behalf of constituents, I always ask the Department to give me a timescale. I hope that the Minister or whoever it may be—I hope he will still be there—will be able to come back to us on that.

On a fair deal for private renters, the Minister referred to the rating system to target enforcement. That is really good in the context of those who, for whatever reason, decline or respond slower than they should. He talked about people being "warm, safe and secure". If we had to pick three words to sum up this debate and the targets we are all trying to achieve, they would be warm, safe and secure. He also referred to net zero and better energy efficiency, which are all things we would like to see.

With that conclusion, I thank all who have participated. We very much appreciate the opportunity of today's debate and the statements that have been made, and we will follow that up through the APPG. As always, I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the way you chair meetings. We do not often say it, but we appreciate what you do. We also thank your *Hansard* staff—well, not your *Hansard* staff but our *Hansard* staff—for their contribution and those in the APPG who are here in the Gallery for their contributions and for supporting us in securing this debate. It did not last as long as we perhaps thought it might, but there are so many other things happening—I do not know whether people follow it, but I saw a wee PARLYapp message that said: "Jim Shannon for PM". Well, I don't think so, but there we are.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the role of homes and buildings in levelling up health and wellbeing.

2.30 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## FIFA World Cup 2022

3 pm

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's plans and preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

The World cup is the biggest of global events and it will take place in just a few weeks' time, so I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate and for recognising its importance and status in terms of both international relations and supporting our fans from England and Wales who choose to attend the World cup. I hope to answer any questions and concerns that any fans may have. It is an extremely busy day here in Parliament. Normally this debate might well have been held in the main Chamber, but of course recent restrictions on parliamentary time have made that more difficult, so as I say, I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance and timeliness of this debate, and for scheduling it here in Westminster Hall.

I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and remind colleagues that I have the privilege of being the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Qatar.

The fact that two UK nations will compete in a global event is a cause for great celebration by the whole country. This is the first time since 1958 that Wales has qualified for the World cup finals. We have been waiting 68 years for this occasion and I cannot overstate the enthusiasm with which Welsh fans are looking forward to the tournament. It was with regret that in the last qualifying game we had to knock out Ukraine, even though we felt the world supporting Ukraine in that contest. Ukraine had already beaten another home nation, Scotland. It would have been great if all four home nations had been at the World cup finals. We look forward to the next tournament in four years' time and hope they all qualify. However, before we do that, let us try to ensure that we play our full part in securing the success of this tournament.

In Wales, we have 68 years' worth of built-up passion. Our time has come and I would say that Qatar's time has come, too. We are two small nations punching well above our weight in our respective fields of expertise. The Minister here today, the Minister for the Americas and the Overseas Territories, represents a border constituency, so he will fully understand where my loyalties lie. Whereas we agree on almost everything else, this is one area where we will definitely differ. I look forward to Wales's victory on 18 December, and who knows? It is not impossible that England may well join Wales in the final.

This tournament is also noteworthy because it is the first World cup to be held in a Muslim state. The significance of that should not be underestimated. Sport has the capacity to bring people together, to share and to help us all to better understand nations and cultures, to challenge perceptions and to bring about positive change for all stakeholders. It was Nelson Mandela who said:

“Sport has the power to change the world.”

This is a World cup for the whole of the middle east. It is an opportunity for nations to come together and for cultures to share each other's successes. Many fans will stay in nations that neighbour Qatar, meaning that World cup fever will extend well beyond Qatar. The FIFA Arab cup last year was a great success and influencer, and an excellent precursor to this year's tournament.

The state of Qatar and the United Kingdom have a strategic relationship that goes back over centuries covering a range of policy areas. It was a privilege to attend the opening of the South Hook terminal in Pembrokeshire in 2009, when His Highness the Father Emir of Qatar and our late Queen opened Britain's first liquefied natural gas terminal. This terminal now has the capacity to supply 25% of the UK's gas needs. Some might say, “What great foresight those planners had!”

More recently, demonstrating a further deepening of relations, the annual Qatar-UK strategic dialogue has been central to our partnership. The last one was held in May, when further commitments were made on energy, education, regional security, humanitarian and development co-operation, science and innovation, trade and investment, and so much more. The breadth of the subjects under consideration demonstrates the strength of our relationship and how important each nation is to the other.

I want to use this opportunity to put on record and pay tribute to the support Qatar gave the UK and other nations in evacuating Afghan refugees just over 12 months ago, which to my mind has not been recognised as much as it should. Qatar's support was of significant strategic importance to so many nations around the world seeking to support Afghan refugees.

The communiqué to the dialogue highlights that the World cup also played a part in those discussions. UK military capabilities are providing support on security and counter-terrorism and against any malign activity. In August, it was good to hear the Qatar ambassador to the UK announce that it will be British Typhoons, flown by UK and Qatar pilots, that will be ready to respond to any threat to the tournament from the skies.

Of course, as with any major event of this type, there is rightly considerable press interest in a range of challenges, particularly as so many people from so many cultures will come together in this global celebration. Everything from travel and accommodation through to treatment of fans, human rights, policing, LGBTQ+ issues and alcohol consumption is being questioned.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I declare my own entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Obviously, concerns about attitudes towards LGBT+ issues in Qatar have been raised. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that holding the World cup in Qatar, thereby bringing together many people from around the world, from different cultures and different backgrounds, is actually an opportunity to move forward issues and attitudes there? Does he agree that many of the people who have voiced opinions on this issue should also focus their energies on the handling of LGBT issues in professional football in the UK? The number of footballers who are out is relatively small compared with the wider population. It is quite clear that there is still a major issue with homophobia in professional football in the UK. Rather than simply point out issues that might arise in other countries, we still need to focus on issues at home.

**Alun Cairns:** My right hon. Friend makes some extremely important points and I wholeheartedly agree with him. It goes back to comments I made earlier. I touched on what Nelson Mandela said—that sport can change the world—but I also highlighted, as my right hon. Friend underlined, the importance of bringing together cultures to better understand, influence and progress all stakeholders, so that that greater understanding and clarity move the agenda forward so that each nation respects, sees and supports human rights.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and I recognise the part he is playing. He rightly makes an important point about UK sport and UK football in particular. It is alarming that so few players have come out, which leading football commentators have commented on recently. It would be helpful to create momentum in the UK that would lead to the recognition and understanding of the fantastic diversity that people who actively participate in sport share and enjoy.

The APPG has taken these issues very seriously, as you would rightly expect, Mr Hollobone, and as my right hon. Friend, who is deputy chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, will recognise. We have organised and participated in a series of meetings and engagements with relevant and interested parties. I pay tribute to His Excellency Fahad bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah, Qatar's ambassador to the United Kingdom, and his team for their open approach in seeking to answer the questions and concerns that we have raised. Whenever reports appear, the matters are raised with the ambassador and his political team—in a positive spirit, I underline. Our dialogue always continues so that we can better understand and influence each other's thinking and background understanding, and develop a way forward.

In March, the all-party parliamentary group hosted a meeting in Parliament with His Excellency Hassan Al Thawadi—the secretary general of the supreme committee for delivery and legacy, which is responsible for bringing the World cup together—and the ambassador to the United Kingdom. Some 53 people attended. Members from all parties and both Houses, asked the most searching questions about some of the subjects that have been mentioned so far.

In May, the all-party parliamentary group on football, chaired by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), hosted a meeting with the independent body FIFA Ethics and Regulations Watch. The group's report on human rights, including LGBTQ+ and workers' rights, was interrogated similarly by colleagues. In June, the all-party parliamentary group on Qatar and the all-party parliamentary group for sport, modern slavery and human rights held a joint session with the UN-sponsored International Labour Organisation. Its evidence, gathered from 2017 up to the present, was scrutinised in detail, and changes and progress since 2017 on those subjects that I have underlined was recognised.

Each of those sessions offered different perspectives and evidence, and reassured colleagues on many of the issues that have been raised. The International Labour Organisation in particular, with its wider remit, commented that Qatar is a major reforming nation within the region. That should be recognised as we have a constructive dialogue about other changes that we would like to see in the region, and about how the region would seek to

influence the UK in terms of its understanding. I am aware of further speculation in the press and media, and look to the Minister and the Qatar authorities to offer further information and clarity on some of the issues that have been raised. Hosting an event such as the World cup is a fantastic privilege and it brings with it global attention. With that come further demands from the public and commentators alike.

On specific operational matters, it is good to see that the authorities have given reassurances that anyone with a ticket will have the right to accommodation. That is welcome, but fans seek further information on costs and available options. Many will travel with organised tour groups, and some from neighbouring countries, which will ensure that this is a World cup for the region. Fans will travel on shuttle flights between those nations. That will provide an additional complexity, but is a great way of bringing the region together to celebrate the hosting of the games. Cultural diversity in the region is also a relevant factor on which we must advise visiting fans.

Any movement into Qatar will require a negative covid test. Because of movement within the region during the group stages in particular, that could be a significant challenge for the host nation, wherever fans are staying. Further clarity on that would be helpful, because the host nation will face additional pressures in ensuring that fans can travel easily and freely within the restrictions that covid demands.

Alcohol is an interesting dimension of any tournament, and the World cup is no different. It will be even more complicated in a nation where the consumption of alcohol is more restricted than in many other countries. We are advised that supporters will be encouraged to visit the fan zones if they wish to consume alcohol. The policing and management of that will require a delicate balance. This is a challenge for whichever nation hosts such a major tournament, but police authorities in the western world are obviously more experienced in managing this type of situation. Any information from the Minister on how that will be managed would be helpful. I will, with the rest of the all-party parliamentary group, continue my dialogue with the Qatari authorities to bring better understanding, but the Government will of course have a distinct role in communicating and sharing the UK's experience of managing the challenges that come naturally with the organisation of any such large event.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Qatar. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that, as well as alcohol, mental health issues are taken into consideration? When large groups of people travel anywhere, some of those individuals will have mental health issues, so the ability to understand and provide adequate support, should it be needed, is important. Sport is fantastic for both physical and mental well-being, but some individuals who have mental health difficulties will need support. There has for a long time been stigma around mental health issues in the UK, but I think understanding of them is progressing right across the world, including in Qatar, and we would like to know a bit more about the types of support that may be provided.



**Alun Cairns:** I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for raising those questions, which I know she has raised with the Qatari authorities, among others. It is also fair to say that the UK's approach to and understanding of mental health has progressed significantly in recent times. I remember from a debate in the main Chamber that there was once an old rule whereby any parliamentary colleague with a mental health challenge was effectively barred from contributing to debates. That highlights how the UK has progressed in our time—although that rule could theoretically still exist in statute.

As we have already said, given our different cultures, there will be different pressures on different travelling fans, and perhaps, if a team is knocked out earlier than expected, on different supporting groups. That may well be a challenge, but I do not mean to be flippant about the serious issues raised by the hon. Lady. Her points go along with the delicate balance in managing a difficult situation—be it because of alcohol consumption or personal challenges—and how best to share our experience, learn from the experiences of others, and ensure that those sorts of issues do not become dominant because of a lack of understanding by those running events. She is ahead of the curve by highlighting the importance of mental health support.

**David Mundell:** My right hon. Friend raises the issue of alcohol consumption. It is obviously very important that we understand how fan zones will work and how alcohol will be consumed, but another related issue is the cost of alcohol. There were some undertakings on a maximum price that could be charged for a pint of beer. Is the Minister—or, perhaps, my right hon. Friend—aware of that cost and whether it will be enforced? Although it pains me that Scotland are not participating in these World cup finals, I would not want Welsh and English friends to be deprived of a pint of beer because of cost alone.

**Alun Cairns:** My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point—he may as well have read the next line of my speech. The cost of alcohol and the cost of accommodation really matter and will be a concern for the many people who will travel. The more information that can be provided, the more people will be able to plan, budget and recognise how long they can stay based on the relevant costs. He underlines his regret that Scotland will not be there, but I am confident that, when it comes to the home nations, all Scottish supporters will be supporting Wales at the World cup.

Policing is also relevant, particularly for public displays of affection, which I recognise are not part of the local culture. However, managing that will be a challenge, and it builds on the sensitivities I touched on earlier. It is worth underlining that managing the challenge is of particular concern to the LGBTQ+ community, as my right hon. Friend mentioned earlier. I believe that how delicate situations are policed needs considerable thought, experience and expertise.

The all-party parliamentary group was reassured by the Secretary-General at our meeting in March. He said that everyone was welcome and that it was their responsibility—meaning that of the authorities—to ensure that everyone feels safe. Any information on how that will be achieved will be welcome. From conversations with the ambassador and other officials, I am grateful for their reassurances. However, I underline that policing

support will be provided from a number of nations. That is entirely normal for large-scale tournaments, but communicating the strategic aims and wishes to officers on the ground will also be relevant. If an officer on the ground comes from a different culture but has not fully understood the strategic decisions taken to be sensitive and supportive and manage the issues around alcohol, mental health challenges and the real concerns of the LGBTQ+ community, the response will take a lot of skilled action. It would be helpful to know if the UK has provided any support and intelligence to help Qatar achieve the great success that it wants.

From the start, Qatar has opened up its plans to so many nations, and the UK has played a significant part in that planning, from architecture to supporting policing, counter-terrorism and construction. We all want to see this being a great success and not only on the pitch, as I am sure it will be when highlighting the potential of an England-Wales final. This really matters to the region and the best influence it can have there is to celebrate different cultures, recognise diversity and move understanding in all quarters in a positive direction.

3.22 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) for securing this very important debate. I know that people in Enfield, Southgate and across the country are looking forward to next month's World cup and I am no different. I will be cheering on England and hoping that Wales do well too. I live in hope that the tournament is as successful—if not more—for the three lions as in 2018, when we reached the semi-finals and the Southgate tube station in my constituency was temporarily renamed to pay tribute to Gareth Southgate. I will be the first to lobby Transport for London for the same treatment if we bring football home in December.

Of course, this is no ordinary tournament. It cannot be business as usual for the UK Government as we prepare for the tournament next month. We cannot avert our eyes from the problems in Qatar and the controversies surrounding its bid to host the 2022 World cup. On this side of the House, we will not be attending the tournament in person. I have received invitations, as I know other colleagues have, but to be clear, we will watch the World cup but will not be going. Dozens of construction workers have been killed putting this tournament on, and it is our view that we would be doing them a huge disservice if we turned a blind eye and did not use the World cup to campaign for stronger workers' rights internationally, especially for migrant workers.

The eyes of the world will be firmly fixed on Qatar over the next few months and that provides us all with an opportunity to shine a light on the situation in the country and across the region. It is right that Qatar has faced intense criticism from human rights groups, international trade unions and labour organisations over the treatment of migrant workers. *The Guardian* newspaper reported in 2021 that 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had died in Qatar since 2010. The International Labour Organisation has said that 50 workers died and 500 were severely injured during 2020. There are also serious concerns about the kafala system, which requires workers

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

to have the permission of their employers to change jobs, leave the country and renew residency permits allowing them to work and live in Qatar. By its nature, it gives employers substantial power and clearly leads to the exploitation of workers.

There are other issues surrounding delayed or reduced salaries, which put workers at risk of forced labour. There are barriers to obtaining justice for abuses, and the prohibition of migrant workers from trade unions. However, it is true that Qatar has made progress and we welcome the improvements that have been made on workers' rights, including steps to dismantle the kafala system in 2020 with the introduction of new labour laws, meaning migrant workers no longer need their employer's permission before changing jobs.

In 2021, Qatar became the first country in the Gulf to implement a minimum wage for workers, regardless of nationality or occupation. Reforms have also ensured protection from heat stress, and there have been efforts to enable the right to organise and discuss grievances with employers, but we remain concerned about the implementation of those reforms. Human rights organisations are still worried about the imbalance between employers and workers in Qatar, with reports that many migrant workers still fear lodging complaints.

Although steps have been taken to dismantle the kafala system, workers continue to face challenges in changing jobs, with 100,000 requests to change jobs between October 2020 and October 2021 rejected. It is clear that while progress has been made, the work cannot stop here. Indeed, as the tournament nears and there is less construction work, the wellbeing of workers in other areas of the economy is also of concern, including the hospitality and service industries, such as those working in hotels, security workers, cleaners, drivers and cooks.

More widely, we know that migrant workers have faced exploitation in Qatar, and there is real fear that the situation will worsen significantly as the world and the World cup move on. Progress cannot stop when the spotlight of the World cup ends in December. Next month's World cup means that the LGBTQ+ fans in my constituency and across England and Wales face the grim prospect of putting up with the tournament being played in a country where their sexuality is criminalised.

**David Mundell:** I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but does he not agree with me that there are serious issues with professional football here in the United Kingdom in respect of accepting people like me from the LGBTQ+ community? There are many issues to be dealt with in football more widely, rather than simply just the situation in Qatar.

**Bambos Charalambous:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are issues within our own game with footballers coming out as gay or LGBTQ+. That is an issue for sport across the UK and beyond. However, the point I am making is about supporters and the experience that they might have in Qatar, where it is a criminal offence to be gay. There are nuances in that, but I take the point and we need to do a lot more with

the UK game to make sure that professional footballers and other sportsmen and women feel confident and able to come out.

On sexuality being criminalised, it is not fair and it is not right. Football is for everyone and fans should not fear that they cannot support their team freely and be who they are. We should show pride in making that point at the World cup. As previously, it will be our footballers leading from the front. In Qatar they face a tournament underscored by human rights. It is great that England and Wales, alongside the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and Switzerland will join together and support the OneLove campaign during the World cup, symbolised by a distinctive OneLove armband worn by the team captains during the tournament.

For LGBTQ+ fans, the Foreign Office must continue to engage with Qatari officials to ensure that their safety is of paramount importance and that there are clear reassurances that it is safe for LGBTQ+ fans to visit the World cup. Unfortunately, I know that the majority of England and Wales LGBTQ+ fans will simply stay away from the tournament due to serious concerns about their safety.

More widely, it is vital that the UK continues to push for human rights to be upheld for all citizens, irrespective of their gender, sexuality, religion or other belief. That is not just an issue in Qatar; it is an issue across the region and it is important that we continue to raise concerns where possible. Standing up for human rights should be a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy. The UK and Qatar continue to enjoy a longstanding and productive relationship in defence, gas and other industries, as the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan eloquently described in his speech. We must use that relationship to ensure that difficult questions are asked and those important issues are always on the agenda.

I ask the Minister what efforts the UK has taken, and continues to take, to hold the Qatari Government to account following the deaths and ill treatment of migrant workers in Qatar? Will the Minister commit to ensure the progress that has been made in Qatar is not forgotten when the tournament ends in December? There must be a legacy of scrutiny from the World cup. Finally, on the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, will the Minister outline the support that has been provided for fans travelling to Qatar for the World cup? Will he ensure that the concerns of the LGBTQ+ fans are raised with his counterparts in Qatar?

Football has unique way of bringing people together. We saw that over the summer with the lionesses and the Euro championships in England. I am sure that we will see that again during the World cup in Qatar. Amid all the football that will come our way next month, we cannot pretend it is a typical tournament. We must continue to raise our concerns; they are the things that we cannot celebrate in Qatar.

3.31 pm

**The Minister for the Americas and the Overseas Territories (Jesse Norman):** I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) for securing this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who I know is a keen football fan, for his contribution—I hope we have cause to put into practice his suggestion for Enfield, Southgate.

I start by doing something that I am sure we will all agree with, but we have not done yet, which is to pay tribute to Sir David Amess as we pass the first anniversary of his absolutely tragic death—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] He was a corridor friend of mine for a long period as neighbours, and a friend throughout my parliamentary career; I absolutely cherish his memory—I know everyone in this Chamber who knew him does too. I also cherish the tireless dedication that he showed to his constituents and his country. He was a passionate advocate for UK-Qatar relations. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan, and the entire APPG, carry on his ethos. I thank them for pressing the issues constructively, but not unsparingly, with an ally. These are very important matters.

We have covered a gamut of matters, and I am going to talk about all of them. In the two contributions we have had so far we have had the question of the treatment of LGBT+ people, as well as the question of mental health, raised by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). There have been issues raised about the price of alcohol, public displays of affection and the level of UK support.

**David Mundell:** When I had the opportunity to travel to Qatar with Sir David Amess, he was at the forefront of raising those issues. The points that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) has made about the *Guardian* article and the concerns about the LGBT+ people—Sir David was raising those issues at the highest level. There was no holding back; he wanted to be a critical friend because we want Qatar to move forward on those issues, not sweep them under the carpet.

**Jesse Norman:** That is exactly right. It was very much in his nature to be warm and friendly, but also to tell people hard messages that they did not necessarily want to hear—albeit in his extremely engaging way.

This debate is timely for two reasons, and it demonstrates the cross-party interest there is in the forthcoming World cup. In the Foreign Office, our lead Minister for the middle east is Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon. I am acting as his proxy, but it is a great pleasure for me to respond on behalf of the Government and pick up all of the points that have been raised.

Of course, our priority is the safety and security of all British nationals who will be travelling to the tournament. I weep that the Scots are not involved and I am very sad that the Northern Irish are not involved, but I am thrilled and delighted that the Welsh are after 68 years. What a moment; it is absolutely fantastic. That safety and security emphasis includes, of course, working closely with the Qatari authorities that are ultimately responsible for that, and for ensuring British nationals know what to expect, what is expected of them when they visit and how to get assistance. Of course, there is a lot of good practice already in place from previous major tournaments, particularly Russia in 2018. That includes the importance of close co-operation with partners, such as the football associations and supporters' representatives.

Every event is unique, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan is right to say that this will be the first-ever World cup held in the middle east. It is also the first-ever hosted by a Muslim nation and

the first to be largely city based—in what is our winter but a more temperate time for them—so the Government have adapted our plans accordingly.

There has been close engagement on security with Qatari authorities, as the House might imagine, on various aspects of the preparation—particularly in supporting the delivery of a safe and secure championship. The UK police are offering support and advice in relation to fans, and have travelled to Qatar to build relationships and share their professional experience and knowledge. Many Members will be aware that the UK has a lot of experience in football-related policing, and our police typically deploy to overseas tournaments for that reason. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence will be supporting Qatar with military capabilities in relation not just to the much-travelled and advertised joint Typhoon squadron but to counter-terrorism, even more relevantly, which remains a threat—particularly at an event of this magnitude and profile.

Consular preparations are going on, as one might expect. The UK Government recognise that aspects of such tournaments can pose problems for fans—we have had several mentioned already, such as public displays of affection—from local laws and customs to geography and travel requirements. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is therefore implementing a range of targeted communications to provide England and Wales fans with practical advice and keep problems to a minimum. There is a dedicated World cup section in the travel advice we offer for Qatar, and the Government advise anyone attending to read that and sign up for email alerts so they can stay on top of developments.

Hon. Friends and colleagues will be pleased to know that the UK Government have today announced their six top tips for travelling fans to follow, supported by both the England and Wales managers. At the same time, there has been close engagement with Qatar on topics relating to the fans themselves. The one that has been first and foremost in the comments of all those who have spoken is the issue of LGBT+ visitors. I reassure colleagues that Ministers and senior officials have raised those issues at all levels, and continue to do so. The authorities are quite clear that their commitment is that everybody is welcome, and that they will respect that, but on our side we need to continue to encourage and press for the equal treatment of all fans and respect for individual rights not just in words, but in the action and the specific context of the matches as they take place, so that anyone of any background can go out and enjoy themselves.

When it comes to consular assistance, the FCDO will be offering an enhanced consular presence in Qatar throughout the tournament, and British nationals will have a 24/7 capacity to call the FCDO if they need help or advice. Of course, there are appropriate parallel plans in place for the wider region, because the Government are aware that many fans hope to base themselves elsewhere and travel into Qatar for matchdays. That is an important further preparation.

In terms of the legacy, which was raised by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, the World cup has allowed the UK Government to engage across much wider bilateral areas in recent years—on trade and culture, but also rights. One would expect engagement not merely in the more historically relevant areas of trade and culture, but in the one that is so salient now,

[*Jesse Norman*]

which is rights. Qatar is a close partner and we must use this opportunity to strengthen that bilateral relationship, to broaden it in the way that has been described, and to make it more enduring. Lots of British companies on the trade side have played a notable role in World cup preparations, including in relation to football stadiums and many other aspects of them, and NGOs have been collaborating on legacy and inclusion themes. Only last week, Street Child United successfully hosted the fourth street child world cup in Doha. There will likewise be opportunities during the event to showcase what the UK has to offer.

As I say, I am rooting at one remove—and, tragically, only after the three lions—for Wales. My right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan can tell me whether “Ymlaen, Cymru!” is the correct Welsh for saying, “Come on, Wales!” But I can say that we will be pressing this on behalf of the nation as a whole, provided that the matches do not yield any kind of contest between England and Wales until the final.

Of course, the other thing that has been rightly mentioned is workers’ rights, which must continue to be an important part of the picture. As I think colleagues will know, the UK absolutely welcomes the concrete steps rightly highlighted by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate hitherto, including the introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage. But the priority, as he rightly says, must be the implementation and enforcement of those reforms—not just when the attention of the world is on Qatar, but even once those workers move off the radar and in future years to come. He may be aware that the UK’s migration and modern slavery envoy visited earlier this month for a range of meetings to discuss precisely how the UK can partner with Qatar and the International Labour Organisation to support further progress in 2023 as part of the legacy of the World cup.

In conclusion, we are in regular dialogue with host authorities and continue to ramp up the plans that have been set out. I hope, and I know all colleagues will hope, that come 18 December we will celebrate a safe and successful World cup, with a home nation picking up that trophy.

3.43 pm

**Alun Cairns:** I, too, pay tribute to hon. and right hon. Members for all their valued comments. It is extremely important to highlight and recognise the issues, and to look forward with optimism not only to the World cup, but to the legacy that it will leave. I will comment a bit more on the legacy in a moment.

My right hon. Friend the Minister was absolutely right: “Ymlaen, Cymru!” could be “Come on, Wales!”, as he described it. It could be “Forward, Wales!” or “Go, Wales!”, but I do not care how we translate it, as long as it results in a victory. The Red Wall has had a

major influence on the optimistic spirit in Wales and the pent-up passion that we have been holding all these years since the last time we attended a World cup.

I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, and there are a couple of points that I want to pick up on. Many commentators have mentioned the rights of migrant workers. I deliberately pointed to the ILO and its evidence, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), but I also encourage hon. and right hon. Members to look at the progress. That is not to say that we have arrived at a destination—nor has any other developed economy—because it is an ever-evolving situation.

There have been some press reports giving data and numbers that have not always been reconciled with an independent body, such as the ILO or FIFA Ethics and Regulations Watch. Therefore, to continue the positive momentum and an intelligent debate, it is always helpful to look at the data, rather than repeat historical data that may or may not be accurate because the evidence is not as obvious.

I encourage colleagues to participate actively in the APPG on Qatar so that we can continue to raise these issues in the positive spirit that both the Minister and I have mentioned. Because of our deep relationship, we can ask tough questions and receive strong answers, and that works in a positive way.

Finally, let me reflect on the comments on legacy. On sustainability, this World cup will be a model for international tournaments on such a scale. The sustainability efforts within it will set the new standard. Qatar has the resources, and has made them available, to make it the greenest tournament possible. There are also the stadiums, to which the UK will have contributed through various architectural design and construction efforts. My right hon. Friend the Minister highlighted the legacy that they will leave, as the stadiums can be rebuilt in some developing nations, and commitments have been made towards supporting football in developing nations as well. That draws attention to the ongoing momentum that sport can bring to the whole region within the middle east.

Qatar has been recognised by the ILO as having made some of the most significant steps and progress in some of the areas that it has been called up on. I hope that the momentum will continue in that way, as well as in developing the sport in Wales, the rest of the UK, the developing nations and everywhere else that values what sport can bring. That brings us back to where I started: Nelson Mandela’s quote that sport can change the world. Let us ensure that the World cup plays its part.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the UK’s plans and preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

3.47 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Thursday 20 October 2022

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

### Correction to a Written Parliamentary Answer

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** On 23 June 2020, the Attorney General's Office answered a written parliamentary question tabled by Richard Holden MP. The written answer included incorrect figures relating to the number of overall appeals, and successful appeals that the Department has made against unduly lenient sentences.

The question was:

*“To ask the Attorney General, how many (a) appeals and (b) successful appeals the Government has made against sentences on the basis of undue leniency, in each of the last 20 years.” [61628]*

The Departmental answer was:

*The statistics from 2000 are provided below. It should be noted that Attorney General's Office does not hold accurate data prior to 2001 and we are not in possession of the data indicating the number of successful appeals for the year 2000”.*

However, checks on our data have revealed that some minor corrections need to be made. These corrections are included in square brackets below.

Year	<i>Appeals the Government has made against sentences on the basis of undue leniency</i>	<i>Successful appeals the Government has made against sentences on the basis of undue</i>
2000	31	Data unavailable
2001	147 [160]	90
2002	148 [135]	94 [92]
2003	96	78 [77]
2004	105 [136]	66 [85]
2005	108	67
2006	144	104
2007	76 [106]	53 [75]
2008	59 [71]	46 [51]
2009	84 [108]	58 [71]
2010	77 [78]	60
2011	117	94
2012	82	62
2013	70	61
2014	122	106
2015	136	102
2016	180 [190]	130 [141]
2017	173	137
2018	140	99
2019	97 [93]	63 [65]

Through this ministerial statement I am correcting this error, which arose out of the method used to collate the data. The Department now has more robust systems for collating and quality assuring the unduly lenient sentence data it publishes.

[HCWS331]

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Subsidy Control Regime

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):** I am announcing today, 20 October 2022, that the Government intend to bring the Subsidy Control Act fully into force on 4 January 2023.

The Act provides the framework for a new, United Kingdom-wide subsidy control regime. This regime will enable public authorities, including devolved Administrations and local authorities, to deliver subsidies that are tailored to local needs. This Government are determined to seize the opportunities arising from Brexit. We are no longer bound by the EU's bureaucratic and prescriptive state aid regime.

The Subsidy Control (Subsidies and Schemes of Interest or Particular Interest) Regulations 2022, which I have laid in draft before both Houses today, will define which kinds of subsidies and schemes should be referred to the new subsidy advice unit, or SAU, within the Competition and Markets Authority. Additional scrutiny of the public authority's assessment is sensible, given that these will typically be the types of subsidies that have the greater potential to lead to negative effects on domestic competition and investment and/or international trade and investment.

The Government have consulted, earlier this year, on their proposed approach to subsidies and schemes of interest and of particular interest, and on the terms of the draft statutory guidance. The draft regulations that have been laid today, and the forthcoming guidance, are the fruit of careful reflection on consultation responses, the large majority of which were offered in an open and constructive spirit. I thank all respondents to both consultations.

Further regulations will also be laid during the autumn. These will concern the Competition and Markets Authority's information-gathering powers in support of its subsidy control functions; the information requirements that public authorities must publish on our publicly available subsidy transparency database; and the gross cash equivalent rules for valuing subsidies in a consistent and comparable way, no matter in which form they are given.

The Government also intend that all four statutory instruments will be brought into force ready for the new regime to operate from 4 January.

More broadly, I wish to highlight some of the other positive features of the subsidy control regime that the Act establishes, and the work my officials are doing to implement it.

During the passage of the Act, Ministers were clear that improvements would be made to the functionality of the transparency database. Improvements have already been made, and a further programme of enhancements will be completed before the Act comes into force, to make the database even more transparent and easier for public authorities to use.

The Government are drawing up clear statutory guidance to expand upon and explain the intention behind the provisions included in the Act, among other supplementary guides and educational aides. This will help public

authorities to understand the obligations placed on them by the new legislation and design better and less distortive subsidies.

The Government will also hold a series of in-person and online events in November to inform public authorities of the requirements under the new regime.

The Government will make three streamlined routes for when the Subsidy Control Act fully enters into force. These are subsidy schemes that will be open to all public authorities, who can use them to give certain categories of subsidies even more quickly and easily, and without the need to assess them against the subsidy control regime's principles.

Next year, 2023, will mark the beginning of a new era for subsidy control in the United Kingdom. The Subsidy Control Act strikes a sensible balance between allowing public authorities greater freedom to grant subsidies for useful social and economic purposes, while protecting the interests of taxpayers by means of proportionate rules and reviews.

[HCWS333]

## DEFENCE

### Ajax: Armoured Cavalry Programme

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alec Shelbrooke):** I wish to provide an update on the Ajax equipment project that is part of the armoured cavalry programme.

My first concern is the safety of our personnel, which has been at the forefront of the work that has been ongoing over the summer. I am pleased to be able to inform the House that, following agreement from the Ajax Safety Panel, this work has led to resuming the user validation trials paused earlier this year and since 10 October there have been eight days of trials.

Successful completion of user validation trials will allow progression toward reliability growth trials.

I will continue to ensure that the House is kept updated on these matters.

[HCWS332]

## EDUCATION

### Trust Capacity Funding

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Jonathan Gullis):** My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School and College System (Baroness Barran), has made the following statement.

The Department is committing up to £86 million in trust capacity funding (TCAF) until March 2025, supporting the Government's vision for every school to be part of a family of schools in strong academy trusts. TCAF helps trusts develop their capacity and take on underperforming schools, particularly in education investment areas. Today we have launched the second window of TCAF 22-23. The application window runs until 16 December with guidance and application form available on gov.uk. We will soon announce details of the next application window which will be looking particularly for projects which address our priorities for the 55 education investment areas which we plan to publish later this year.

[HCWS335]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Final Report

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Grant Shapps):** At midday today, the report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse was published. This concludes seven years of investigation into areas of institutional failings, across England and Wales, to properly protect and safeguard children in their care from child sexual abuse.

I would like to thank the chair of the inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay, and her whole team, for their dedicated service in carrying out this inquiry.

Above all, I want to extend my sincere thanks to the thousands of victims and survivors who have shown exceptional courage in coming forward to share their testimonies and experiences with the inquiry.

The report provides truly shocking insight on the unimaginable abuse suffered by children, and draws out stark failings by institutions, leaders, and professionals to protect them from harm.

The report makes recommendations that focus on greater accountability, increasing reporting of this crime, redress for victims, increased focus on bringing the perpetrators of these abhorrent acts to justice, and creating a stronger voice from Government on this issue.

We recognise that this is a watershed moment, and that it will take time to fully review the inquiry's findings and recommendations. We will provide a comprehensive response in line with the inquiry's deadline.

We are committed to working across Government, and closely with partners in law enforcement, local authorities, the care sector, the third sector, and industry, to continue supporting victims and survivors. We will work together to pursue and bring perpetrators to justice, and to safeguard children and vulnerable people.

I have today laid a copy of the inquiry's report in Parliament and will provide a further statement to the House on this landmark report at the earliest opportunity.

[HCWS336]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### New Decade, New Approach: Delivery of Government Commitments

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** During the passage of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act in the House of Lords, the Government committed to laying a written ministerial statement every six months setting out which of our commitments in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) we have delivered on to date. The first of these statements was published on 23 March 2022. This is the second statement.

The NDNA agreement facilitated the restoration of the devolved institutions in January 2020 after three years of hiatus. The Government remain deeply disappointed

at the continued lack of a fully functioning Executive following the resignation of the First Minister in February and the Assembly election in May, and urges the parties to come together and form a Government in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Government have taken action to support the people of Northern Ireland, for instance through the energy price guarantee and the £400 energy bill support scheme payment which will help consumers with their energy costs, as well as the energy bill relief scheme for businesses, the public sector and charity organisations.

However, the people of Northern Ireland deserve a stable and accountable Government that can act directly on their behalf through the challenging times ahead. The Government's priority is to facilitate the restoration of the Executive as soon as possible, but if an Executive is not formed by 28 October, Ministers in Northern Ireland will lose office and I will come under a legal duty to call fresh elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. In law, this must take place within 12 weeks. This action will not be taken lightly, but time is running out for the parties to come together, form an Executive and avoid this outcome.

In the meantime, the Government will continue to implement its commitments and deliver for people in Northern Ireland. To that end, since January 2020 the Government have:

- published four reports on the use of the Petition of Concern mechanism, with the most recent report published on 20 January 2022;

- passed the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act to implement the institutional reforms agreed in NDNA;

- passed the Internal Market Act 2020;

- held a meeting of the Board of Trade in Northern Ireland;

- ensured that Northern Ireland can access the trade deals the UK is striking across the world;

- invited representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive to all meetings of the UK-EU Joint and Specialised Committees;

- changed the rules governing how the people of Northern Ireland bring their family members to the UK, enabling them to apply for immigration status on broadly the same terms as family members of Irish citizens;

- appointed Danny Kinahan as the first Northern Ireland veterans commissioner in September 2020;

- passed the Armed Forces Act, which further enshrines the armed forces covenant in law;

- conducted a thorough review of the aftercare service, the purpose of which was to consider whether the remit of the service should be widened to cover all HM Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland with service-related injuries and conditions;

- marked Northern Ireland's centenary in 2021 with a £3 million programme of cultural and historical events, including the delivery of the shared history fund and schools planting project;

- brought forward regulations that continue to ensure designated Union flag flying days remain in line with those observed in the rest of the UK;

- recognised Ulster Scots as a national minority under the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities;

- announced £2 million in funding for NI Screen's Irish language and Ulster Scots broadcast funds, which support a range of film, television and radio programming;

- established a new hub—Erskine House—in the heart of Belfast, increasing the visibility and accessibility of UK Government Departments in Northern Ireland;

- reviewed the findings of the renewable heat incentive inquiry report to consider its implications for the use of public money in Northern Ireland; and

- continued to foster closer ties and better collaborative working across sectors such as tourism, sport and culture, including through the potential joint UK and Ireland bid to host the 2028 European championships.

The Government have provided a total financial package of £2 billion for New Decade, New Approach. This financial package includes a £1 billion Barnett-based investment guarantee for infrastructure investment and £1 billion in funding across key priorities as set out in the deal. Of the £1 billion in funding, over £750 million has been allocated towards such outcomes as:

- bringing an end to the nurses' pay dispute in January 2020;

- putting the Northern Ireland Executive's finances on a sustainable footing by securing additional funding for the Executive in the 2020-21 financial year;

- the creation of a new Northern Ireland graduate entry medical school in Londonderry;

- supporting the transformation of public services;

- supporting low carbon transport in Northern Ireland, enabling the Department for Infrastructure to commit to ordering 100 low-carbon buses to be deployed in Belfast and Londonderry; and

- addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances through projects and programmes that tackle paramilitarism, promote greater integration in education, support economic prosperity, and support the Irish language and Ulster-Scots.

In addition, in the absence of Executive progress on the matter, the Government have continued to progress the New Decade, New Approach commitments relating to identity and language through the Identity and Language (NI) Bill. This will encourage and promote respect and tolerance for all of Northern Ireland's diverse identities, cultures and traditions. The Identity and Language Bill, as amended, provides for:

- the creation of a series of national and cultural identity principles, and an office of identity and cultural expression to oversee them;

- the creation of an Irish language commissioner;

- the creation of a commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition;

- a duty on the Northern Ireland Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the use and understanding of Ulster Scots;

- the repeal of the Administration of Justice (Ireland) Act 1737; and

- the establishment of a Castlereagh Foundation.

All provisions in the Bill will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive to administer, support and fund.

[HCWS334]

## TRANSPORT

### Transport Update

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** The Government are today introducing the Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill. This meets the Prime Minister's commitment to introduce

this Bill within her first 30 days of Parliament sitting and delivers on a commitment in the 2019 Conservative party manifesto.

The Bill paves the way for the introduction of minimum levels of service on transport services, like those already seen in other countries, including France and Spain. The Bill will ensure that specified transport services—which could include, for example, rail, tubes and buses—will not completely shut down when unions impose strikes. This Bill will balance the right to strike with ensuring commuters can get to their place of work and people can continue to make vital journeys to access education and healthcare during strikes.

The Bill sets out the legal framework for establishing minimum service levels. It will allow relevant employers and trade unions to negotiate and reach agreement between themselves on minimum service levels referred to as minimum service agreements (MSAs), provide for circumstances in which the MSA can be changed and include enforcement arrangements to ensure parties follow due process in their negotiations.

The Bill also provides for an independent determination process should employers and unions fail to reach agreement on an appropriate minimum service level after three months, whereby if an agreement has not been reached the Central Arbitration Committee will determine the minimum service level.

The Bill also includes a power for the Secretary of State to set interim minimum service levels by regulations which will apply where neither an MSA has been agreed nor an independent determination reached. These regulations will also be consulted upon and will need to be agreed by both Houses of Parliament before they are made. Under the Bill there will also have to be a minimum three-month gap between these regulations being made and their coming into force.

The specific details of how minimum service levels would apply to transport services will be set out in secondary legislation following appropriate consultation. A minimum service level would only be applied to an individual transport service once that secondary legislation has been agreed by Parliament.

The provisions of the Bill extend and apply to England, Wales and Scotland. The Bill's provisions relate to the reserved matter of employment rights and duties and industrial relations, and the subject matter of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, and do not engage the legislative consent process.

[HCWS337]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Bereavement Benefits

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Claire Coutinho):** My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (the Baroness Stedman-Scott) has made the following written statement.

We have today laid the draft Bereavement Benefits (Remedial) Order 2022. Copies of the draft Remedial Order and Explanatory Memorandum are available in the Journal Office and the Vote Office (Commons) and the Printed Paper Office (Lords). We have also laid the Government Response to representations made on proposals for a draft Bereavement Benefits (Remedial) Order 2021, including the eighth report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Session 2021-22 (HC 594, HL 91). We would like to thank the Committee, and other Members, for their observations on the draft proposed Order.

[HCWS309]



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