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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 1 December 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Intellectual Property and Copyright: Artificial Intelligence

1. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of artificial intelligence on intellectual property rights for performers and creative workers. [902496]

14. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What assessment the Government has made of the potential impact on the creative industries of the proposed copyright exemption for text and data mining for artificial intelligence. [902509]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): The recent Intellectual Property Office consultation on artificial intelligence and intellectual property sought evidence and views on text and data mining. A response was published in June. We recognise that the creative industries have significant concerns about the potential impacts of the TDM proposal and as a result, we are reflecting on whether to progress it in its current form. The IPO will be engaging with interested parties over the coming months to help to inform the Government's thinking and we will set out the next steps in due course.

Sarah Olney: It was encouraging to hear the Minister tell the Lords Communications and Digital Committee last week that she is confident that the text and data mining proposal will not go ahead. That has been warmly welcomed by the creative industries, which depend heavily on intellectual property rights for their income stream. What steps will the Minister be taking to ensure that any revised proposals to promote AI do not cause economic harm to the creative industries? Will she provide an update on her conversations with the Intellectual Property Office, including the detail of its plans to extend the consultation on the proposal?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue and speaking on behalf of the creative industries; IP is the lifeblood of many of those industries. As I said in the Lords Committee, I am not convinced of the

value of the proposal. Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), and I met the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who has responsibility for the Intellectual Property Office. As I mentioned, he is extending the consultation on this and we will be talking to him in the meantime. We hope to provide further details as soon as we can.

John Spellar: The Minister clearly agrees that our creative industries, especially music, are not only valuable in themselves, but part of what makes Britain great. It follows that we must encourage and support our creative talent across the spectrum. She also clearly understands and shares the industries' concern about eroding creative copyright for the benefit of the AI giants, so what will she do to stop it?

Julia Lopez: Hopefully, I have set that out in my previous answer. I raised the concerns of the creative industries with the responsible Minister and he was sympathetic to those concerns. He will go back and look at the consultation again to examine in greater detail some of the concerns that have already come from the creative industries and see whether the proposal can be revised.

Rural Broadband

2. **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to expand broadband coverage in rural areas. [902497]

17. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to expand broadband coverage in rural areas. [902513]

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): We are investing £5 billion through Project Gigabit to deliver lightning-fast, reliable broadband to hard-to-reach areas across the UK, and we are making great progress, having already launched procurements with a value of £780 million. Today, we announced the award of a new £108-million contract to connect up to 60,000 homes and businesses across Cumbria with the fastest broadband speeds. We are also boosting our voucher scheme: we have increased the value of the vouchers so that people can apply for as much as £4,500 towards the cost of installing gigabit-capable broadband in rural and particularly hard-to-reach areas.

Caroline Nokes: I assure the Minister that the people of Nether Wallop, Over Wallop and Barton Stacey do not feel that Project Gigabit is delivering for them. They have seen changed criteria; an inability to split postcodes, which is difficult when they are on a county boundary, delays in the processing of their applications; and then being told that they will not be able to reapply until 2023, because the project will still not be procured for those areas. They want answers and delivery, not the news that the project is delivering in Cumbria.

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend, although I cannot agree with her on the importance of Cumbria, which is one of the hardest to reach areas of our

country. That we are taking that area as one of our first shows just how much we care about narrowing the digital divide. More than 95% of premises in my right hon. Friend's constituency now have superfast broadband, which is up 55% over the past 12 years. During the same period, gigabit-capable coverage has risen from 0% to 71% in her constituency. I appreciate that particular villages and parts of people's constituencies do not have the coverage they need, and that is why we are significantly boosting the voucher scheme. We have launched two of our procurements in areas that cover my right hon. Friend's constituency in Hampshire. I also host regular Building Digital UK drop-ins for colleagues—I hosted one yesterday—and if she would like to come along and speak directly to BDUK officials, we shall look into the villages affected.

Mark Menzies: Everyone loves Cumbria, but some of us love Lancashire even more. Residents of Station Road in Singleton have experienced repeated delays to the installation of fibre broadband, with the project unlikely to be completed before 2026. In Lancashire the awarding of installation contracts for Project Gigabit is still a year away, and the voucher scheme remains suspended. While some rural areas enjoy great connectivity, many on the margins of commercial viability, such as Station Road, do not. How can we prevent our rural communities, especially those in Lancashire, from falling ever further into a digital divide?

Julia Lopez: I am sorry to hear about the challenges in Singleton, and I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend's constituents. He is right to highlight the digital divide, which we are ruthlessly focusing on closing. We will shortly reopen the voucher scheme across Lancashire. We have increased the value of vouchers, and we are assessing alternative procurement approaches to Lancashire. My hon. Friend should please engage with BDUK, which I would be happy to put in touch with him.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am pleased for Cumbria, Mr Speaker, but just 10% of Blaenau Gwent has access to gigabit broadband, compared with a 72% UK average. The swift roll-out of Project Gigabit will be essential for levelling up across our local economy, so will the Minister please ensure that areas with the least coverage, such as Blaenau Gwent, are prioritised first?

Julia Lopez: As the hon. Gentleman may be aware, the Welsh Government lead on that procurement in his constituency. We work closely with them, to support them in trying to accelerate the work they are doing, but I am happy to look into his particular circumstances. It was wonderful to visit south Wales last week, and I thank him for the work he does with the film, television and screen industries, which I also represent as a Minister.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Welsh are never knowingly undersold—two for the price of one.

Let me plead with the Minister: as she knows, communities along the M4 corridor still do not have the superfast broadband roll-out. That is not to do with delivery; it is about the companies saying that they are unable to install on streets within three miles of the M4 motorway. I have raised with the Minister many times, from the Dispatch Box and the Back Benches, the fact that communities in my Ogmore constituency have

some of the lowest speeds in the whole UK. I ask her to raise this issue again with the installers to get it fixed, and ensure that my communities have far better broadband connectivity.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area in his previous role. I would be grateful if he could write to me about the specific companies that are causing challenges in his area, particularly in relation to the M4 motorway, which I would be happy to look into.

Youth Services: Voluntary Sector

3. **Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support the voluntary sector in delivering youth services.

[902498]

Mr Speaker: Welcome back, Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

This Government know the importance of local youth services, and we have guaranteed that by 2025 every young person in England will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home and volunteering opportunities. That is a clear commitment based on feedback from 6,000 young people, supported by £560 million of funding.

Cat Smith: Last week I had the pleasure of spending my Wednesday evening with a group called the Squirrels, which is the new expanded offer from the Scouts, offering four and five-year-olds the opportunity to engage in new services. It was perhaps a refreshing change from this Chamber to spend time with 20 or so four and five-year-olds. More seriously, research by the Scouts has raised concerns about the rising cost of living, with parents unable to afford some of the fees for those services. In addition, the cost of delivering those services with rising rents and energy bills is putting pressure on organisations such as the Scouts. What support can the Government give to organisations such as the Scouts, which offer so many opportunities for young people, to help them meet that need?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is right to praise the work of many of our non-military uniformed youth groups. I am pleased to say that, in trying to tackle many of the waiting lists across England, we will be investing about £15 million in the area. I also recognise the additional cost of living pressure and am working with the sector to ensure that we feed in all the issues that it faces to the Departments that are looking at them for the long term.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Together with the former Member for Stretford and Urmston and the National Youth Agency, I am chairing a review into the benefits of linking youth work with schools. What discussions is the Minister having with the Department for Education about how we can bring in more youth workers, including voluntary youth groups working closely with schools, to help some of the kids who are not so good at keeping in schools? When we produce our report in the new year, will he agree to meet a delegation from that report?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. He is absolutely right that it is important that there is joint working across Departments. We are doing that with the Department for Education and, in particular, looking to offer the Duke of Edinburgh's award to every mainstream secondary school. I would welcome the opportunity to meet a delegation, listen to it and discuss the report's findings.

Grassroots Sport Participation

4. **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage grassroots participation in sport. [902499]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): Grassroots sports bind our communities together and make people happier as well as healthier. Since 2019, Sport England has invested over £200,000 in my hon. Friend's constituency, including £40,000 during the pandemic. In October, I announced £35 million of Commonwealth games physical activity legacy funding, opening up sporting opportunities across the west midlands. The Government are continuing to invest directly in grassroots sports facilities. I am sure that I can meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Gary Sambrook: I recently met Matt and Alan from Northfield Town football club, who have ambitious plans for a new all-weather football pitch and female facilities for changing rooms and toilets. How can we support Northfield Town football club to make the new facilities a reality?

Michelle Donelan: Government investment, along with that from the Football Association and the Premier League, is delivered through the Football Foundation. Since 2019, the foundation has invested about £8 million in more than 300 projects in the Birmingham area, targeted based on local football facility plans. I am sure that the foundation would be keen to hear from Northfield Town about its ambitions. We will facilitate that via my office.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As they say, you have to see it to be it, and it is well known that, when cricket disappeared from terrestrial TV and went on to paid-for satellite TV, participation levels at grassroots plummeted. A great many Scottish football fans cannot view the Scottish men's national team on free-to-air TV, and that has hit participation levels. The previous Sports Minister met me to discuss how we might improve the situation. Might the Secretary of State do me the same courtesy?

Michelle Donelan: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Member.

Football Governance: Fan-led Review

5. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Whether she plans to implement the recommendations of the fan-led review of football governance. [902500]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): The Government published their response to the recommendations of the independent

fan-led review of football governance in April 2022. We do recognise the need for football fans to be at the heart of the game and for the reforms to ensure that the game is successful and sustainable in the long term. Football clubs are at the core of local communities and, for too long, fans have been an afterthought for some club owners.

Christian Wakeford: Football's coming home, but it seems that a football regulator is not. Without a football regulator, there will be no say for fans and no financial or fit-and-proper assessment of new owners, with more clubs like Bury being at risk. Almost a year on from the fan-led review, the Government are no further on in implementing any of the changes. In that time, we have seen the sale of Chelsea and the near collapse of Derby. Why are the Government dragging their feet?

Michelle Donelan: It is important that I praise the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who got the fans' voice right at the heart of her report. I and the Minister responsible for sport have met multiple football supporters' groups and will continue to do so. The White Paper will be published imminently.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): At last week's annual general meeting of the Torquay United Supporters Trust, there was much debate about how the World cup in Qatar and the discussions around it have yet again focused attention on the governance of the game of football. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely vital that we make changes to ensure fans get a voice, that there is real engagement with their clubs, and that we do not see more of the incidents we have seen across this country, where clubs have been moved from their historic locations into other communities due to disputes over stadium ownership?

Michelle Donelan: We on the Government Benches understand how important it is to get this right, and we will get it right. We will put fans' voices right at the heart of what we do, and ensure that whatever we do has the teeth to ensure change.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): In the years since the fan-led review was published, Southend United faced a winding-up petition and a transfer embargo after financial failings; Derby County was in administration; Chelsea could only carry on because of special exemptions when its owner was sanctioned; and the Mayor of the West Midlands wrote to the Football League to express his worries that Birmingham City's future is in jeopardy under its current ownership. Which clubs will face trouble next year, the year after, or each year until the Government stop delaying the introduction of an independent regulator? The Prime Minister committed to implementing all the recommendations of the review, so why do they not just get on with it? After the next election, a Labour Government will.

Michelle Donelan: After the next election, a Conservative Government will continue to get on with the job, as we have always been doing. The Government recognise the importance of acting decisively, but also of getting this policy right; we have been considering it and consulting very carefully. Of course, in the meantime, those in

football can take forward some of the reforms themselves, including financial redistribution, which we continue to urge them to do. The report will be imminent.

Film and Television Industry

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the film and television industry. [902501]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): As set out in our broadcasting White Paper earlier this year and when I visited Pinewood and Shepperton studios last week, the Government are taking action to support British broadcasters and our world-leading film and television industries. That includes ensuring that public service content is easy to find on a wide range of TV platforms; delivering our £21 million UK global screen fund; and continuing to support our screen sector tax reliefs, which provide nearly £1 billion of support to more than 1,000 projects.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Given the sheer spunk of the contribution that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) has made to television, it would be churlish not to restore the Whip, wouldn't it?

Michelle Donelan: As my right hon. Friend knows, that is not a decision for me, but we can always depend on the right hon. Member for West Suffolk to attack a challenge with gusto, and I was not surprised at all to see him taking on all sorts of animal parts during the show. It has become a little bit of a thing for my predecessors to join that show, but I hope I can provide reassurance that I have no intention of ever doing so.

Mr Speaker: Never say never.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Of course, a very important part of our film and television industry is the music that goes with it and the composers who provide that music. At this juncture, it would be wrong of me to not recognise and send sympathy to the family of Christine McVie, one of Britain's greatest ever songwriters, who sadly passed away yesterday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

I was glad to hear what the Minister of State said about AI earlier, because that will affect film and TV composers, as well as other people within the industry. Will she ensure that in undertaking the AI review, the Government listen very carefully to the views of songwriters and composers who work in the film and television industry during their consultation?

Michelle Donelan: I echo the hon. Member's sympathies. Of course, we will listen to all relevant voices, and I am happy for the hon. Member to meet with either myself or the Minister of State, who is responsible for this.

Tourism Sector and Visitor Economy

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Ind): What steps she is taking to support the tourism sector and visitor economy. [902502]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The UK was one of the first countries to remove the barriers to both domestic and international visitors, and set out a post-covid tourism recovery plan in summer 2021. An inter-ministerial group for the visitor economy was formed this year, and will meet again in December to discuss cross-departmental policy priorities in support of this important sector.

Dr Huq: With the axe looming over the English National Opera and the Donmar Warehouse—both national attractions that have helped the tourism the Minister has described to be a multibillion-pound industry for so many years—and local newbies such as the Ealing Project venue and ActOne cinema facing a tough environment with the post-covid footfall downturn and looming bills, could the Government, now that they are in reset mode, reconsider the impact of Arts Council cuts on London so that we can get tourism flowing through our capital again, from centre to suburb?

Stuart Andrew: The Arts Council is an arm's length body; it makes the decisions and has done so very carefully. It is working with various organisations that will be leaving the funding. However, it is right that we share the funding around the rest of the country; I make no apology for that. I want people not just to come to London to visit our wonderful facilities here, but to go around the whole country and experience what a great country we have to offer for tourism.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I welcome what the Minister said about spreading the money around the country. I invite him to come to the Derwent valley mills world heritage site, which is key to the whole of the spine that goes through Derbyshire. It is in disrepair and we need to get tourism back on track for Belper in particular. I would also like him to come to adjacent sites where we have "the clusters", which are very ancient roads, to see how he can help with some funding.

Stuart Andrew: It would be great to go from Qatar to Derbyshire and I would be more than happy to accept my hon. Friend's invitation. She is right to talk about the many opportunities that we need to look at, including, particularly, the offer in the rest of the country for tourism from not just this country, but around the globe. One of my priorities is to get more people to come to London, of course, but then to visit other great counties such as Yorkshire, as I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker.

Arts Council England Funding Decisions

8. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of Arts Council England funding decisions on leading cultural institutions. [902503]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Decisions about which organisations to fund and at what level were taken by the Arts Council, an arm's length body from Government. The Arts Council remains committed to supporting the core cultural institutions. For example, three institutions that receive the most funding in the portfolio are the Royal Opera House, the National

Theatre and the Southbank Centre. Many high-profile, established organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and Opera North will continue to receive funding.

Sarah Green: I thank the Minister for his answer. Arts Council England's decision to stop funding English National Opera in London and to effectively demand that it relocates to Manchester will leave hundreds of talented artists and professionals either out of work or forced to uproot their lives. Some of them live in my constituency and are understandably devastated by the decision that they now face, but they also feel blindsided, given that they had very little warning. Will the Minister tell me whether the artists directly impacted by the removal of ENO funding were consulted in advance of the decision? If not, why not?

Stuart Andrew: I know that the Arts Council has taken a considerable amount of time to look at the unprecedented number of applications—more than 1,700—that were received and that it has assessed them very carefully. It is making sure that £12.6 million is available in transition funding for those that will be leaving. The time has been increased from three months to seven months, so that there is support for them for up to 12 months. We would certainly encourage the Arts Council and the English National Opera to continue the dialogue that they are having.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): On a similar theme, levelling up is undoubtedly a noble ambition, and the Arts Council funding has been too London-centric for too long partly due to the subsidies to the Royal Opera House, which, if the Minister ever visits there, he will see is a bit like the Starship Enterprise, in terms of facilities. In correcting the imbalance, however, does he agree that the Arts Council needs to be careful about not potentially wrecking established institutions such as English National Opera, which was given very little notice of funding cuts? As a result, it is threatening legal action. A soft landing is needed. Does he agree that he needs to speak to the Arts Council to ensure that, when it makes such decisions in future, it has a plan in place to ensure that those institutions are at least protected and have a way in which to cope with the decision?

Stuart Andrew: I reiterate that the Arts Council is an arm's length organisation. We have had several meetings to hear about the long processes that it has undertaken to consider each of the awards that it has made. We pushed it to increase the transition period of funding, recognising the difficulty that that may present to other people. We hope that both Arts Council England and English National Opera will work together—we certainly encourage them to—on the possibilities for the future of the organisation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): We all support the fairer distribution of arts funding and the principle that communities outside London should get a fairer share so that everybody everywhere can enjoy the arts, but levelling up should not be about pitting arts organisations against one another. What we

have seen is an attempt to address regional disparity by shifting some funding to the regions, but doing so from a funding pot that has been shrinking since 2010. Does the Minister agree that these very short timeframes and the lack of consultation on these cuts to funding could have a very damaging impact on the ecosystem of the arts?

Stuart Andrew: Well, I have to say that London will still be getting the lion's share of funding from the Arts Council. I make no apology for what we are seeing in areas such as Blackburn, which had never received any funding: four projects there are now receiving funding. Why cannot talented artists in Blackburn get the same access to those opportunities as artists in London? I do not understand the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, we have to move on.

Topical Questions

T1. [902514] **David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): Next week, the Online Safety Bill will return to the House. I have made a number of changes to the legislation to strengthen the protections for children and offer a triple shield of protection for adults, while also safeguarding free speech and consumer choice.

In the meantime, I am sure that colleagues across the House will join me in congratulating England on their win on Tuesday night and, of course, show their support for the decision of the Sports Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), to wear the OneLove armband while representing the Government out in Qatar. I am proud of my right hon. Friend for standing up in solidarity with the LGBT community.

David Simmonds: Northwood youth club in my constituency has served generations of young people, with access to activities including cooking, sports, arts and many other things, but it now needs investment. Can my right hon. Friend update me on the progress that the Government are making on the distribution of the youth investment fund?

Michelle Donelan: The Government know the importance of local youth services; that is why we launched the national youth guarantee. The youth investment fund is a £368 million investment to build up or refurbish 300 youth facilities in levelling-up priority areas. The fund opened for applications on 1 August, building on the £12 million that we distributed for minor capital projects earlier, and we expect to announce the first awards early in the new year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): There is a running theme here, with the fan-led review delayed, the gambling White Paper delayed, the data Bill delayed, the Online Safety Bill delayed, the media Bill delayed and, apparently, Channel 4 privatisation cancelled. It is a bit like getting an Avanti train, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: They never run at all.

Lucy Powell: Like on the trains, delays cost businesses. Take the media Bill: there is now a real risk to the very future of our public service broadcasters without it. Can the Secretary of State tell us: will this particular train ever leave the station?

Michelle Donelan: We are fully committed to the media Bill, as we have already said and as the hon. Member knows. It has not actually been delayed; it was announced in the Queen's Speech for this Session.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Government are making an absolute mess of the Online Safety Bill. After years of inaction, we now know that they plan once again to delay the Bill from progressing. Their approach will supposedly give adults greater choice online, but it does absolutely nothing to tackle the harmful content at its root. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the abhorrent yet legal extreme content that led a man to shoot and kill five people in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) would still be available to view and share freely online under the terms of the Bill?

Michelle Donelan: Not a single clause in this Bill is actually changing—in relation to children, it is being strengthened. In relation to illegal content, of course that content is still being taken down, as the hon. Member would know if she read the stuff that we have published. We are also introducing a triple shield of defence, which was lacking before, and we have made the promotion of self-harm and intimate image abuse an offence, while also protecting free speech and free choice. It is important that the Opposition remember that making a Bill stronger is not watering down.

T2. [902515] **Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con):** Social mobility—getting people out of poverty—is more important than income inequality, and access to culture and heritage play a vital role in it. I welcome the funding for the next three years for four organisations in beautiful Hastings and Rye. Hastings Contemporary, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Project Art Works and Home Live Art will all receive a share of nearly £2.5 million between 2023 and 2026. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating these organisations on the work that they do in bringing growth and creative opportunities to my constituents, and will she pay a visit to Hastings and Rye to enjoy the delights that it—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we have had this before. These are Topical Questions, and we need very short questions so that all the other Members can get in. Unfortunately we are struggling for time, and we cannot use other people's time: it is not fair.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Paul Scully): I entirely agree that social mobility is at the heart of what we want to do, and I congratulate those four institutions. If the Minister for Arts and Heritage or the Secretary of State will not come to Hastings and Rye, I certainly will.

T4. [902517] **Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** Why is there no right to appeal against decisions made by the executive complaints unit in the BBC? Does the

Minister agree that it would strengthen confidence in the BBC if there were an independent complaints process enabling people to appeal against those decisions?

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I know that this is a long-running issue of concern for the hon. Gentleman. The BBC announced some changes to its complaints process yesterday, but I appreciate that he does not think they are strong enough. We will be looking into this in the course of our reviews of the organisation.

T3. [902516] **Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con):** I recently received positive news from Leeds United football club: the area where I sit, as a season ticket holder, is being converted to rail seating. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for safe standing, may I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss how rail seating could be extended to other clubs? That would be financially viable for them, and would give their supporters a better viewing experience.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Clubs that are subject to the all-seater policy—such as the wonderful Leeds United—may now apply to offer licensed standing areas, provided that they observe stringent criteria set by the Sports Grounds Safety Authority. For instance, they must ensure that the density of spectators is no higher than it is in seated accommodation. I welcome the news that Leeds United wish to sign up for this opportunity, and I should be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend in the new year, after I have met the SGSA to discuss this very issue later in the month.

T6. [902519] **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Short-term holiday lets are taking over urban, rural and coastal communities, causing the housing crisis to escalate and undermining the hospitality sector. The consultation closed three months ago. On Friday, I will present a private Member's Bill proposing the licensing of such short-term lets. Will the Secretary of State support that Bill to regulate the industry?

Stuart Andrew: As I think the hon. Lady will know, in my previous role I fully understood the issues and challenges involved in this. We have received 4,000 responses to the call for evidence, which we are currently looking at. We are also working on the issue with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I recognise that we need to sort it out.

T5. [902518] **Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con):** Constituents of mine who work in London's tourism sector are extremely worried about footfall following the Mayor of London's decision to expand the ultra low emission zone. What discussions is the Department having with the sector to ensure that it is protected?

Paul Scully: Tourists, like residents, want to breathe clean air in London, but they also want good public transport as an alternative to driving. When I was Minister for London, my main concern in relation to tourism was for those working in the industry, at the lower-paid end. We need to have a sensible discussion, and we need a Mayor who remains accountable for the results of the consultation that is on the table.

T8. [902521] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): An audit conducted by Open Democracy found that think-tanks such as the TaxPayers' Alliance, the Institute of Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange—favourites of the Tory party—had raised more than £14 million from mystery donors in the past two years. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Charity Commission about ensuring that funding of this type is transparent and sourced from UK donors?

Michelle Donelan: We work closely with the Charity Commission, and of course all donors and charities have to work transparently. I shall be happy to meet the hon. Member for discuss this in detail.

T7. [902520] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I join others in congratulating England on qualifying for the knockout stage of the World Cup, and, indeed, congratulating my hon. Friend the Sports Minister for his demonstration at the event. At home, however, more than half our Premier League clubs are now owned to foreign owners. In some cases that has been very successful, although I think that in Manchester there may be different views on either side of the city. What action can the Minister take to ensure that foreign owners are appropriate for this country?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for those kind words. Foreign investment and ownership have benefited football, from elite to grassroots level, and we must be careful not to exclude good investment from the game. However, it is absolutely right that good custodians be permitted to own football clubs, and that skilled and experienced directors run them. We will publish our White Paper on the reform of football club governance in the coming weeks; it will set out our approach to improving that governance, and the owners and directors test.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The charity Women in Sport recently reported that 1.3 million teenage girls across the UK are dropping out of sport; 50% do not feel good enough to participate. What are the Government doing to smash those stereotypes and ensure that girls keep playing sport, as I did when I was a girl, and get stuck into it?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue. It is worrying that the progress made with women and girls has not gone back to pre-pandemic levels. This issue is a key priority for me; I will be working closely with the Department for Education on it. We are developing the sports strategy, which I hope will address many of the issues that she raised.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I was a teenage anorexic, and it is terrifying how many of our children are affected by anorexia today, so will the Secretary of State meet me to make sure that the Online Safety Bill protects children from content that glorifies all forms of self-harm, including anorexia, and that those measures are implemented swiftly?

Michelle Donelan: I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend. The Bill will ensure that children do not see content that promotes self-harm or glorifies eating disorders. Of course, the Bill will now be strengthened by a provision ensuring that adults will no longer see content promoting self-harm. I will invite the Minister

of State, Ministry of Justice, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who has responsibility for victims, to join that meeting, to explain the clauses that we have added.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister quite rightly wore the armband in Qatar. Does he agree that it is completely disgraceful that FIFA stopped Harry Kane and other captains from wearing the armband as a demonstration of solidarity? Will he encourage our Football Association to work with other, like-minded FAs to ensure that FIFA changes its approach to the awarding and running of World cups?

Stuart Andrew: That was one of the reasons why I wore the armband. It was totally unacceptable that both the Welsh and English teams, at the 11th hour, were faced with an impossible decision. I thank those teams for wanting to wear the armband; it means a lot to all of us. I have already spoken to the FA about where we go from here. We cannot, at the end of this tournament, just let the matter come to an end. We need to talk about the future.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement on Cumbria's gigabit roll-out, and thank her for her visit to Workington yesterday; she was very welcome. Does she agree that the announcement is a game-changer for places such as Workington, and a demonstration of real levelling-up by this Government?

Michelle Donelan: It is indeed a game-changer, and I thank my hon. Friend for all the lobbying that he has done on behalf of his constituents to ensure that Cumbria has better levels of connection. It is testament to his hard work that we have rolled out Building Digital UK's first regional contract in Cumbria.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Am I allowed to say, "Pinch, punch, first day of the month"? The Government should wake up to this opportunity; there are loads of young people coming out of university with media skills. We could put them in schools, and bring culture back to our school curriculum. Could we have a new programme now?

Julia Lopez: I met the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who has responsibility for skills, just this week to talk about how we get more creative skills in the economy to fill all the wonderful jobs being created in areas such as the film and television industry. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Christmas Celebrations and Services

1. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Church of England plans to take (a) nationally and (b) in Harrow East constituency to celebrate Christmas.

[902560]

4. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What steps the Church of England plans to take to encourage families and children to attend events and services at their local parish church at Christmas. [902563]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England's Christmas resources usually reach around 10 million people, and we hope for the same reach for this year's "Follow the Star" theme, details of which can be found on the A Church Near You website. Crib, Christingle and carol services will take place in most of our 16,000 parishes and 4,500 primary schools to spread the good news of Jesus's birth.

Bob Blackman: I was at one of our churches last night, and I was thanked for giving it work to help answer the question. From the census, we know Christianity is now a minority religion. What further action can the Church take to encourage more people to come back over Christmas, on such a joyous occasion?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for the support he gives to all the faith communities in his constituency. The answer to his question is in the work taking place in his local parishes. I know he will join me in commending, for example, the work of Rev. Jody Stowell at St Michael and All Angels in Harrow Weald, which is offering a warm welcome space and a special service for those who lost loved ones during the pandemic, and of Rev. Matthew Stone at St John the Evangelist in Great Stanmore, which is offering a united advent service with seven churches across the denominations and a Christmas afternoon tea with children from five local schools. That sort of work shows our churches are right at the heart of our communities.

Kevin Foster: Events such as the recent Christmas fair at St Luke's, Torquay and the forthcoming Christmas tree festival at Paignton parish church can provide lots of low-cost fun and support for families facing festive budget pressures. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the Church of England is giving appropriate effort to highlighting this side of parish life, which often leads to families becoming regular churchgoers?

Andrew Selous: Again, I commend my hon. Friend for the interest he shows in his local churches. He is absolutely right that these types of church event often attract families and children who then become regular attenders. I thank and commend Father Peter March at St Luke's, Torquay and Rev. Neil Knox at Paignton parish church for everything they do. It is important that they both know their work is noticed and appreciated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For the record to be factually correct, we should recognise that Christianity is the largest religious group in the United Kingdom, although it may not be the majority. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that children are taught the value of the Christmas message and the lesson of thanksgiving at the family events to which he refers?

Andrew Selous: Yes, I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. This is an important part of our cultural heritage, and the Church will continue to do that work.

Church Investments: Environmental, Social and Governance Leadership

2. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Whether the Church of England is taking steps to show environmental, social and governance leadership in its investments. [902561]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The transition pathway initiative, of which the national investing bodies of the Church of England are co-founders, has supporters representing a combined \$50 trillion under management, all committed to making the transition to a low-carbon economy. The Church Commissioners also co-chair the investors policy dialogue with Indonesia on reversing deforestation.

Alexander Stafford: My hon. Friend will, of course, be aware that a report on the UK's upcoming green taxonomy was published this morning by the all-party parliamentary group on environmental, social and governance, of which he is a valuable vice-chair. I thank him for his support and his endeavours. One of the report's key recommendations is that the Government should consult widely with stakeholders. What discussions have the Church Commissioners had with the Government, including the Treasury, about the UK's green taxonomy and its implications for the Church's ESG policy and investments?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for his brilliant work of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on environmental, social and governance, which are so important. I am pleased that Olga Hancock, of the Church Commissioners, chairs the policy committee of the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association, which is a member of the Government's green technical advisory group, so I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Church is right at the heart of this important work.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

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

Restoration and Renewal: Use of the River Thames

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the Sponsor Body is taking steps to ensure that construction related to restoration and renewal of the Parliamentary Estate will make use of the River Thames. [902562]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The restoration and renewal programme is considering a range of innovative methods to support future works on the Palace, including making use of the river access. No decisions have yet been taken, but consideration will be given to minimising impacts on the environment, the local area and those working in and visiting the Palace.

Mr Sheerman: I would never want to pinch or punch the right hon. Gentleman, but may I ask him to wake up to the real opportunity we have of giving the River Thames a renaissance, putting much more traffic on it

and bringing it back as the main concourse of London? This is a real opportunity, both for this place and the new holocaust memorial building.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. He is a formidable campaigner for making use of the river. Along with others on the Sponsor Body, I am putting pressure on that body, and on the new Committee that will be meeting from January, to make full use of the river. Indeed, the delivery authority is already undertaking full feasibility studies on how we can make much more use of the river. So I say to him, “Well done.”

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Political Finance Regulation and Electoral Law

5. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Whether the Committee has made a recent assessment of the effectiveness of the commission’s oversight of political finance regulation and electoral law in the UK. [902564]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Speaker’s Committee has not made a recent assessment of the matters raised. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee recently concluded an inquiry on the work of the Electoral Commission. It recognised the complexity of electoral law, recommending that it is rationalised and improved. It also noted a “strong record” of the Electoral Commission’s monitoring, investigation and enforcement work, and made a range of recommendations to support that.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for that answer. With the ongoing mystery funding of think tanks, the reluctance to regulate online campaigning and the introduction of voter ID, nobody trusts this Tory Government on regulating elections and the franchise. However, I wonder what the commission’s view is of the UK Government’s proposals for a strategy and policy statement?

Cat Smith: The commission’s view remains that a strategy and policy statement by which the Government can guide its work is inconsistent with the role of an independent Electoral Commission. It has published its response to the current consultation, highlighting where the draft departs from the existing plans for its work, which have been considered and approved by the UK’s Parliaments. The commission will continue to act in an independent and impartial way to help maintain public confidence in elections across the UK.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new position. In that role, may I ask her to use the offices of the Speaker’s Commission to push both Ministers and the Electoral Commission on the point about regulation for the forthcoming voter ID requirements in May’s local elections? She will know the concerns of electoral registration officers that they still have not got all the information they require from the Government.

Cat Smith: The Electoral Commission has been clear that major changes to electoral law should be made at least six months ahead of those elections, and the legislation has been a bit slow in coming forward. However, the commission is working hard to make sure that electoral administrators get that guidance as soon as possible.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Historic Cathedrals: Maintenance Costs

6. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Whether he has held recent discussions with the chair of the Association of English Cathedrals on the maintenance costs of historic cathedrals. [902565]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): My hon. Friend continues to be an exemplary advocate for Lichfield cathedral, and I gently encourage other colleagues with cathedrals and major churches in their constituencies to stick up for them in the way that he does. I have spoken at the annual general meeting of the Association of English Cathedrals and I have also asked the Government to respond to the independent review of the sustainability of church buildings, published by Bernard Taylor. This matters for many reasons, not least the £55 billion of social value—calculated using Treasury Green Book guidance—generated by cathedrals and churches in the UK, according to the “House of Good” report by the National Churches Trust.

Michael Fabricant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, particularly for his kind words about me, which were very decent of him. He will know that the chair of the Association of English Cathedrals was the Dean of Lichfield cathedral, Adrian Dorber. Sadly for the community in Lichfield, he is going to retire in March, after 17 and a half years’ service. Not only does he have theological skills, but he has raised millions of pounds, and his organisational and management skills are wonderful—many deans have those, but Adrian particularly does. Does my hon. Friend think that the Church of England could make more use of people when they retire and that they should not just disappear along with all their skills?

Andrew Selous: I, too, thank Adrian Dorber very much for everything he has done as a highly effective Dean of Lichfield, not just for Lichfield cathedral, but for the city and the wider Church. His chairmanship of the AEC has been outstanding. If he wants to continue to serve the Church after his retirement in March, I am sure that his wisdom will continue to be very much appreciated.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Road Investment Strategy 2

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What plans the commission has to consider the report from the National Audit Office on road investment strategy 2. [902568]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): The National Audit Office's report on road enhancements has recently been published and it is excellent. The Public Accounts Commission itself, in line with its statutory duty, has no plans to examine the report, but many of the NAO's reports are taken up by the Public Accounts Committee and while, of course, it is a matter for the PAC to determine its own programme, I will draw the interest of my hon. Friend to the Chair of the PAC.

Mr Hollobone: Delays to projects in road investment strategy 2 primarily because of development consent difficulties have meant that fewer road projects have been delivered than planned and at a higher cost. Should the commission study the report, may I urge my hon. Friend to examine the potential negative impact on the next road investment strategy—RIS 3—of future road projects being shelved because of hold-ups and cost pressures in RIS 2?

Mr Bacon: In its September 2020 delivery plan, National Highways expected that it would spend £5.5 billion in the third road strategy on projects approved since 2020. Since then, this has increased to £11.5 billion largely because of project and planning delays. Taxpayers may well feel scandalised that they are paying more money and getting fewer road enhancements. I know that my hon. Friend has a particular interest in the proposed junction 10a of the A14 east of Kettering and I urge him to consider pressing his case with Ministers as I know he was doing as recently as last week.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Voter ID: Turnout Levels

10. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether the Committee has held recent discussions with the commission on the potential impact of different forms of voter identification on levels of voter turnout. [902570]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Government piloted different models of voter ID at elections in 2018 and 2019. In its independent evaluations, the commission found no evidence that turnout was significantly affected by the models piloted. However, it was unable to draw definitive conclusions, particularly about the likely impact at a national poll with higher levels of turnout.

Mr Carmichael: Things have moved on since then. We now have the detailed proposals from the Government and we can see a number of concerns—in particular, the massive imbalance between the ID available for younger people as opposed to that available for older people. We also know from published correspondence that the commission has warned the Government that the introduction of voter ID will be neither secure nor workable by 2023. In all these circumstances, what more can the Committee and the commission do to ensure that good sense is heard in time and that the Government are not simply allowed to railroad this through?

Cat Smith: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the Committee has heard the points that he has made, but it is for the Government and not the commission to comment on the reasoning behind the inclusion or exclusion of any particular form of ID. The commission has emphasised that voting at polling stations must remain accessible for all voters regardless of age and for voters who do not already have acceptable photo ID.

Voter ID: Young People

11. **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): Whether the Committee has held discussions with the commission on the potential impact of the introduction of voter identification on young people's ability to vote. [902571]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Electoral Commission has not identified young people as a group that is more likely to need additional support to navigate the ID requirements. Its research found that 2% of 18 to 24-year-olds said that they do not have an acceptable photo ID, which is in line with the average for all age groups. In January, the commission will begin public awareness work to ensure that all voters are aware of the ID requirement, and that those without ID know how to apply for the free voter authority certificate.

Nadia Whittome: The regulations listing documents that will be accepted as voter ID were not in the Elections Bill, but, instead, were in secondary legislation. If MPs had had the opportunity to scrutinise that, many of us would have opposed the clear discrimination that sees a far more limited range of acceptable ID for younger voters compared with older voters. Has the Electoral Commission a view on whether such a limited range is appropriate and were its views sought in the process of compiling a final list?

Cat Smith: The list of acceptable ID was included in the Elections Bill. There is of course secondary legislation before the House on 12 December and I encourage my hon. Friend to take part in the debate on the Floor of the House. The commission did provide feedback on the Bill's content, including on the list of accepted ID, but it is for the Government to decide which forms of ID are on that list.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Obviously voter ID is an important topic, but can the commission ensure that nobody loses out and that this will not take a single penny out of the pockets of people who cannot afford to buy ID?

Cat Smith: The commission has consistently made the case before the roll-out of voter ID requirements that, should they be rolled out, there should be a free voter authority certificate available via local authorities. The legislation to make provision for that was laid before the House recently and will be debated on the Floor of the House on 12 December.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am terribly sorry, but the hon. Gentleman has lost his opportunity. Never mind—next time.

Rail Cancellations and Service Levels

10.30 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Rail Minister if he will make a statement on rail cancellations and services, in particular across the north and nationwide.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I thank the hon. Lady for her urgent question, which gives me the opportunity to set out the Government's disappointment with the experience of many passengers, not just across the north, but in other parts of the country. We recognise that current performance is not acceptable and is having a significant effect on passengers and the northern economy.

I will focus on two operators to set the scene. The first is TransPennine Express services. TPE services have been impacted by a number of factors, including higher than average sickness levels among train crew, the withdrawal of driver rest day working, which is the option for drivers to work their non-working days as overtime, the withdrawal of conductor rest day working and other overtime working, and strike action on Sundays and some Saturdays since mid-February under a formal RMT union dispute.

TransPennine Express had a formal rest day working agreement with ASLEF that was due to expire in December 2021. The rates of pay under that agreement were 1.75 times the basic pay with a minimum of 10 hours paid, the most generous such agreement in the industry. In December 2021, TPE approached ASLEF seeking to extend the existing agreement. Rest day working forms no part of the terms and conditions, so either side is free to refuse or enter into the agreement when it expires.

On this occasion, local ASLEF officials refused to extend the agreement and sought to negotiate different terms. In the absence of a new agreement, drivers withdrew their rest day working when the existing agreement ended, and further offers have not materialised into an agreement. TPE is undertaking an intensive programme of crew training to eliminate a backlog of pandemic-induced route knowledge loss and delayed traction training, and to prepare the business for timetable changes such as the Manchester recovery taskforce December 2022 change.

Turning briefly to Avanti, the primary cause of recent problems with Avanti train services has been a shortage of fully trained drivers. It is a long-standing practice for train companies to use a degree of overtime to run the timetable, to the mutual benefit of staff and the operators. Avanti was heavily reliant on drivers volunteering to work additional days because of delays in training during covid. When volunteering suddenly all but ceased, Avanti was no longer able to operate its timetable. However, nearly 100 additional drivers will have entered formal service this year between April and December, and Avanti West Coast has begun to restore services, focusing on its key Manchester and Birmingham routes.

I will end by saying that we need train services that are reliable and resilient to modern-day life. While the companies have taken positive steps to get more trains moving, they must do more to deliver certainty of service to their passengers. We will fully hold them to account for things that are within their control, and we look for others to be held to account on matters that are outside of the train operators' control.

Louise Haigh: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker for granting this important urgent question. Rail services across the north are once again in meltdown. Today, almost 40 services have been cancelled on TransPennine Express alone—and those are just the published figures, because they were cancelled overnight. People are cut off from jobs and opportunities, investors I spoke to this morning in Manchester are thinking twice about investing in the north, and businesses are unable to recruit because their potential employees simply cannot rely on the train to get to work. The damage that this fiasco is doing is enormous, and in just 11 days, major timetable changes are due to come into force. I do not say it lightly, but if this were happening elsewhere in the country, the Government would have taken far greater action by now. Instead, they have—not just for weeks, but for months and years—forced the north to settle for a sub-standard service and to accept delays, cancellations and overcrowding.

Not only did Ministers allow that, but they actually rewarded the abject failure of the operators. Six years ago, TransPennine Express had exactly the same issues it faces today. Then, as now, it blamed staff shortages and rest day working. It said six years ago that it would recruit drivers and improve resilience, but here we are again, in crisis—and the public are paying the price. Have the Government sanctioned operators or demanded improvement? No. They continue to reward failing operators such as Avanti West Coast by extending their contracts. Yesterday, it was revealed that they signed off a decision for Avanti to hand over £12 million in taxpayers' cash as dividends to its shareholders.

Enough is enough. We cannot continue like this. It is time for Ministers to take action. Will they put operators on a binding remedial plan to fully restore services or face penalties and withdrawal of the contract? Will they claw back the taxpayers' money that Ministers have allowed to flow out in dividends? Can the Minister confirm whether the Secretary of State is preventing an offer on rest day working between operators and unions? Enough is enough. We cannot continue like this.

Huw Merriman: I agree with the hon. Lady: we cannot continue like this. That is why we have set in place a series of talks and negotiations aimed at changing working practices so that train operators are not reliant on seeking the approval of workforce to run a seven-day operation. That just does not work for anyone—management, workforce or, indeed, passengers—because the train operators are then required to seek the voluntary assistance of workforce to work on certain days. The hon. Lady says that we cannot carry on like this and that enough is enough, so I hope that she will join me in pushing for reforms.

With regard to Network Rail reforms, a 4% plus 4% offer has been put on the table. That can be self-funded and allow workforce to move to better, more modern working jobs with more interaction with and assistance for passengers, and a better experience for workforce and the passenger. Yet we have been unable to reach an agreement. The hon. Lady refers to timetable changes. Those are vital for us to increase the number of Avanti services again, but if we have industrial action in December, it will be even more challenging to put them in place.

I join the hon. Lady in saying that enough is enough and that we need change. This Government are seeking to implement change, but as Opposition Members will

[*Huw Merriman*]

know, that cannot be dealt with unilaterally. It requires the agreement of the unions to modernise and change working practices. That will give train operators the ability to roster on a seven-day working basis and to see training go through on a much swifter basis. We will then have the workforce in place and the resilience. I call on the hon. Lady to not just talk about the fact that we need change, but to work with us and to influence the unions to get that change delivered.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): London North Eastern Railway seems to have been less affected than other services. Does that not underline that importance of the campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and me to get the through service from London via Market Rasen to Cleethorpes, so that we can take the pressure off TransPennine Express? Can we get on with the through train, which has been promised again and again? Action this day!

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend makes a great bid that is linked into this matter. I am happy to meet him and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) to discuss that further. He is absolutely right that we see a knock-on effect. Take Northern, for example. It has been less impacted by the matters I have referenced than TPE and Avanti, but the knock-on from those operators—particularly TPE—has caused it to fall in parts as well. He is absolutely right to point out that contagion can pass from one part of the network to another. I will happily meet him.

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

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Over the past two days, TransPennine Express has managed to run a total of 42% of its timetabled cross-border services from Glasgow Central. That is from a timetable that was already slashed, as TPE struggled to provide even a basic service to passengers. Add to that the Avanti shambles and cross-border services are a disaster. It simply is not good enough, and there are real implications for the cross-border economy.

Two separate industrial disputes involving ScotRail and the Scottish Government have been resolved this year, in contrast to the ongoing disputes across talks that have dragged on for months and are only now involving Government Ministers. The RMT's general secretary Mick Lynch said yesterday:

“In Scotland and Wales, RMT has settled similar disputes with the support of the governments there but where companies are controlled by the DfT, time is running out.”

Previous Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that disputes were for the talks and Network Rail to resolve, but clearly that stance is no longer fit for purpose. This Government are letting down Scotland and the north of England, and it is now well past time for rail to be fully devolved to Scotland. Will this welcome new and shiny team at the DfT meet me to discuss how we advance that?

Huw Merriman: This shiny rail Minister will always happily meet the hon. Member. I have always enjoyed working closely with him in our previous roles, so I am happy to discuss matters with him. He talks about the

ministerial approach, and I think it should be put on the record. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Transport travelled up to the north to meet the northern mayors to discuss these issues. We want to work collaboratively with all those who can influence change. The Secretary of State's trip yesterday demonstrates that we do not just talk about it—we actually want to deliver on it, as well. Both the Secretary of State and I have talked of the need to reach some form of agreement. We have not used the language that might have been expected or heard in the past. We want to work closely. We have both met Mick Lynch and his counter at the Transport Salaried Staffs Association. I am due to meet again with Mick Lynch, the trade unions, the train operators and Network Rail, so that will be the employers and the trade unions, with a Minister in the room, not to negotiate, but to try to facilitate some form of end and to allow this change to come through. I will happily meet the hon. Gentleman and all across the piece so that we can make a difference and get this settled.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): As someone who travels on the Avanti West Coast service on a weekly basis, I know that delays and cancellations are the norm. Customers are being charged unreasonable prices for a very poor service. Can my hon. Friend confirm that he is meeting Avanti regularly to discuss its performance, as well as giving it six months to roll out a recovery plan and deliver long overdue reliability for passengers?

Huw Merriman: I am sorry for the experiences that my hon. Friend and her constituents have experienced, and that goes to all Members of this House, too. With regard to Avanti, from December it plans to operate 264 daily train services on weekdays, which is a step up from the 180 daily services at present. That would also be greater than the number prior to the refusal on rest day working, which has triggered this issue over the past six months. Of course, that is all contingent on having that co-operation, which I am keen to seek to get into place. The Office of Rail and Road has looked at the plans and signed them off, and we and officials meet Avanti on a weekly basis to hold it to account. We will continue to do so. As my hon. Friend points out, a shorter-term contract is in place. We need performance improvements to go beyond that stage.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Yesterday, the West Midlands Mayor was late for that meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the problems on trains because her train was cancelled. You couldn't make it up. My constituents in south Manchester do not want to hear that the Government are disappointed with the problems; they want to hear that some action is being taken. What can I do to reassure my constituents that the Government will get a grip and get the train services sorted on the Avanti west coast main line and the cross-Pennine routes?

Huw Merriman: Again, I pass on my disappointment with the experience that the hon. Gentleman has outlined. I want to be clear: we have been going on like this for years because we have a railway that just does not operate on a seven-day basis. We have leisure that has grown to 115% over weekends, and we still cannot roster the workforce. We require an agreement. Can one imagine Tesco operating on that basis? It just would not

work. The tragedy when we look at the north is that we have a £96 billion infrastructure investment plan through the integrated rail plan, so we want to invest further in the north. However, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: if we cannot deliver the daily services right now, there is a danger that people will turn their back on rail. The only way to get long-term performance improvements is to reform the way we work the railways. We are trying to put those reforms in place, but it requires agreement from union and workforce, as well as Government willing.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I completely support the Rail Minister in his comments that something has to change and that we cannot go on as we are. Can he confirm that the pattern of performance and service levels is dramatically better for providers offering open access—in other words, competitive services—compared with some of the more traditional post-franchising ones such as Avanti? It is vital for passengers to have choice on the same track between different providers, so that if one of them is suffering from driver shortages or strikes, the others may be able to pick up the slack or at least provide a service when others fail.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend, a former Minister, who has great expertise in and policy knowledge of this matter. He is absolutely right to champion open access. When we can actually drive competition through the system, one tends to see better outcomes and choice for passengers as a result. Open access, as we have discussed before, has some constraints. He certainly believes there is more that can be done, and I agree with him. We are keen—and I have asked my officials to look further at how we can do this—to provide more access for open access, and I am very happy to discuss that with him further.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Minister has just said that it is not a seven-day-a-week service, but actually it is not an any-day-of-the-week service currently. We have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) at the Dispatch Box that almost 40 services have been cancelled on TransPennine Express in just the last 24 hours in the middle of the working week. There is nothing new at all about the driver shortages that have been crippling service provision in the north. Can he be very specific about what the Government are doing to ensure that driver provision is there so that we can unlock the potential of our towns and our cities in the north of England?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Member, and she is absolutely right. We cannot be in a situation where we are relying on good will; we need to make sure we have enough drivers in the system. The difficulty we have is that a driver contract for train operators is for 35 hours over four days, which leaves us with that block. We have struggled to get enough drivers through the training course due to covid and the restrictions in the cab, which is why there has been catch-up. This has been exacerbated by covid, but I want to move away from a situation in which we have to rely on good will. I want certainty, because that is certainty for the workforce, for the train operators and, most importantly, for the passengers that their train will arrive. However, it does require such an agreement to be in place for us to deliver the specific measures she has asked from me.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does the Minister agree with me that service levels across the country are just as important? There have been 10 negative stories in the last month about the c2c line, which hard-working commuters from Southend West and Leigh-on-Sea need, including signal failures, overrunning engineering works and rush-hour queues to buy tickets. Would the Secretary of State sit down with me to discuss this level of service, and in particular our long-awaited disabled access at Chalkwell station and the long-awaited contactless ticketing?

Huw Merriman: I had perhaps better not promise that the Secretary of State will sit down with my hon. Friend because that may be above my pay grade, but I certainly will, and I will certainly ask him if he would like to do so. We are very keen to work with all hon. Members across the House on the specific issues they may have, hers among them.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, while this urgent question is on cancellations in the north, we are conscious that there has been a knock-on effect across the country and the network is not performing as we would like it to. One of the issues, and I again recognise that this comes down to the morale of both the management and the workforce, is that there is a contagion effect after strikes. We want a modern railway in which all in the workforce feel they have a future, with their jobs changing as ours all change and evolve, where there is more interaction with passengers and more pride as a result and we therefore see more passengers enjoying the experience. That is the passion I have for what we can do with rail. We just need everybody to work together to deliver it.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): First and foremost, the train operators need to recruit and train more staff more quickly, and that would help to alleviate some of the strains we are working under. However, even when trains are working to timetable, travel times between cities and towns in the north of England are unacceptably slow—for instance, one hour and 20 minutes from Newcastle to Middlesbrough, which is 40 miles, and two hours from Newcastle to Carlisle, which is 60 miles. That is unacceptably slow due to antiquated infrastructure. When is something going to be done about this antiquated infrastructure in the north of England, so that we can travel as quickly as anyone anywhere else in the country?

Huw Merriman: We are about to enter the next five-year control period where we will look at renewal. Where we have assets that have become tired, we will look at replacing them and moving away from some of the older forms of working to, say, digital signalling, which would allow more trains to enter blocks. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further, as he may have indicated that he would like. He is right that trains are a lot slower in certain parts of the country than others; I experience that in the south-east. It takes two hours to get to London from Bexhill, but the exact same distance in miles to Milton Keynes takes 32 minutes. There are parts of the country that do not get the same deal as others and we need to work even harder for them to make sure that their trains arrive.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): If we are talking about service level, Taunton station is an example of what we have got wrong in this

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

country. We spent an enormous amount of money on redoing the station, but the parking is inadequate; cars queue back to the road to get in; people cannot get in if they are disabled or have heavy bags; and people have to walk 100 yards to get a bus to go anywhere. The service level of our stations is not right, so how on earth can the service level of our trains be right? If the first points of call for people—the ticket offices, the staff who work in the stations and the type of stations we have—are not there, we have a fundamental problem. Can we please look at the way that stations are run in this country?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that the entire experience attracts passengers and brings them back. It is about not just the service level, but the station experience. I travelled through Taunton station on Monday on my way to the reopened Okehampton line from Exeter. I am afraid that I did not stop off, so I was not able to experience what he has described, but I am happy to look at that further and discuss it with him. We have a station modernisation fund and the Access for All programme that is delivering more accessibility to passengers, which is vital. I will have a chat with him about it.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As well as being a global icon of the north-east, the Tyne bridge is a critical part of our transport infrastructure. We are all the more reliant on it given the atrocious levels of service on the railways and buses, and given the lack of investment in our northern infrastructure, such as Northern Powerhouse Rail. The much-needed restoration of the Tyne bridge from its current dilapidated state will lead to further disruption to our transport links, which really cannot get any worse. Will the Minister meet me urgently to see what can be done to mitigate the impact on our transport links of restoring our great Tyne bridge to its full glory in time for its 100th birthday?

Huw Merriman: As I said, I am keen to meet as many hon. Members as require it—no doubt my officials will be tearing their hair out—and I am happy to meet the hon. Lady. We certainly know that, because our railways were built by our pioneering Victorians, much of the infrastructure needs renewal, some of which can be particularly complex and expensive to deliver. Ownership can have an impact on that as well. I am keen to meet her to find out more and see what we can do.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): My hon. Friend might have seen the picture of me sitting on the floor of an Avanti train that was picked up by the media. Avanti's response was mealy mouthed and gave every excuse under the sun—unions, working practices, leaves on the line, engineering works—but there is no excuse for bad management. As well as inefficient services, the services do not run on time and the ticketing is shoddy. If someone gets on a train, they cannot have a cup of coffee because the machines do not work, and there is overcharging. Everything to do with the Avanti rail service is appalling and I urge the Government to look at it in the round, not just at the reasons it gives for not running an efficient service.

Huw Merriman: I assure my hon. Friend that I do not just take the assurances that, “This is very difficult for us for all these third-party reasons.” We look at what every part of the system can deliver, including the management and those responsible for the contract. I have also heard other experiences, not least of Mr Speaker on his Avanti services, that show that things are absolutely not good enough for passengers.

We need to get Avanti to do better and we need to help it to do better as well. Where matters are within its control, I assure my hon. Friend that we will hold it to account through the Office of Rail and Road and the regular meetings that I have. Where matters are not within its control, we require it to do even more to mitigate them. I am keen that we see an improvement to the tone that is given out, the customer service and the updates.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The other day, I read with amazement an article in *The Guardian* which said, with regard to cancellations on the TransPennine Express, that between the middle of October and the middle of November, the reported figures were between 5% and 12% a week, but actual cancellations were over 20% each week. The difference is that train operators do not count as a cancellation a train that is cancelled before 10 pm the night before. When train operators are penalised under their contracts for non-performance, are the cancellation figures used those that the train operators report, or those that passengers experience?

Huw Merriman: I will write to the hon. Gentleman and specify how those figures are calculated. I will also give him up-to-date figures from the methodology that we calculate. I am confident that those figures recognise the same experience that passengers have suffered and he has described, but I will write to him and set that out in full.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Minister comes to his position having been a very successful and, I think, very thoughtful Chair of the Transport Committee. He will know that there is a balance of blame—it is not just the trade unions, but also the operating companies. He will also know that lines such as London Northwestern had problems two years ago with a shortage of drivers, but it now seems to be working well. How long does he think it will take Avanti to get the number of drivers required for us to get a reliable service?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is very kind. I have always enjoyed working with him, and I know he has a great passion for rail projects within his constituency, as we discussed last night. Avanti's plan is to bring on 100 new drivers, and to change the timetable on 11 December so that those drivers can add more services. The concern is that that takes place at the same time as industrial action is scheduled, over the month of December and into January. Given all the hard work from the drivers and those training them, and from the management to try to get those services in place, it will be difficult if we see all that undermined by wider industrial action. The plan is for 11 December, but if we cannot get the strikes called off, my concern is about our ability to roll that out.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I accept the sincerity of the Minister, but “disappointment” from the Government frankly does not cut it. These

issues have long been known for at least the past six years or more. They are not new or particular to Avanti and the TransPennine Express, which are just manifestations of the problem right now. Last month we had more than 4,000 cancelled services, on top of 17,800 fewer services that had been pulled from the timetable. Why are Ministers not demanding a binding remedial plan urgently to restore the services that are desperately needed in communities, not just in the north of England but all over the country?

Huw Merriman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. For too long we have worked in a manner that does not allow us to plan ahead and give certainty to the passenger or the workforce. TransPennine Express had too much reliance on the rest-day agreement. It seemed to operate because it was at 1.75 wage, which is the highest. Two other train operators operate at 1.5, and the others are much lower or have just normal rates. That was a high rate, and we could not get ASLEF to continue to operate it, which exacerbated the issue. There is too much reliance on rest-day working. When it operates, it works well, because train operators do not have as many drivers in place, but the train drivers earn overtime from that. When industrial action comes in, that breaks down. We want to move, and our modernisation plans and reforms, which we are trying to get an agreement to put in place, would deliver a seven-day railway where we are not reliant on rest-day working. That is the kind of certainty we want brought in, and that is the only way we will ever be able to avoid such issues in the years to come.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It will not have escaped the Minister's attention that a number of MPs from Greater Manchester are in their places. The west coast main line is essential to our local economy, so we need three services to London an hour, but as far as I can tell, the schedule is currently designed using a tombola. I am convinced that the Minister is serious about getting modernisation in the way in which Avanti runs the service, but should there be no significant improvement at the end of the six-month period, will he outline the steps he will take to ensure that we have a functioning service? Greater Manchester cannot afford what is going on at the moment.

Huw Merriman: Our plan, as signed off by the Office of Rail and Road, was always to see Avanti deliver the extra 100 drivers, change the timetable and then bring services back. As I specified, that would have seen us operating more services than had been the case before the end of June, when arrangements saw drivers not taking up rest-day working. At the moment, we are contingent on the drivers to ensure that that new timetable is put in place. However, it is a two-way process—we cannot unilaterally force it, because we do not have the ability.

On my hon. Friend's question about the contract, it was renewed for six months, but we will not wait until the end of those six months—we will need to see improvements in place at the beginning of the year to make that decision. I make the point again that where matters are in the control of Avanti to deliver, we hold it to account. Where matters are outside of its control and in the control of the unions, we must take that into account as well.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The parent company of TransPennine Express is FirstGroup and Avanti West Coast is a joint venture with 70% ownership by FirstGroup. Does the Minister see the link? Gross mismanagement by FirstGroup is causing utter chaos in my constituency and damaging the economy of Stockport and the wider north-west region.

Huw Merriman: I am aware of that. I am also aware that the lead negotiator for the train operators is the chief executive of FirstGroup and that those two entities have had those specific issues targeted against them while other train operators perhaps have not. Again, my tone and my message is to try to bring all parties together so that we can improve the service for our passengers and give them more confidence. If we are not careful—this applies to everybody involved in rail, including me—people will give up on rail, and that will cause us even greater challenges in funding the timetable that we have. It is in the interests of management, shareholders—they continue to benefit if revenues grow—and absolutely the workforce and the passengers that we turn this around. We will do that only by working together.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): My constituents are fortunate to rely on both Northern and Avanti—it feels like they have won a ghastly lottery. Yesterday, I got an email from Steve, a constituent based in Ulverston, who travels from Kirkby to Whitehaven to work in Sellafield. He says that the trains are late and cancelled, that there are horrendous bus replacements and that, on return, there are direct trains that miss out the smaller stops. It is an unviable service. The service on Avanti is abysmal, but those who rely on smaller operators are also seeing a really bad service. With that in mind, will my hon. Friend confirm that he will do everything in his power to restore trains to a level of service that our constituents all deserve and expect?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is right. Of course, Northern is in the control of the operator of last resort, which is what would occur in the event that we took away a contract from one of the private train operators. Perhaps his point on Northern demonstrates that we can talk of stripping contracts away, but ultimately how the entire system operates needs to change; just changing the contracts does not change the passenger experience for the better. I am sorry to hear of his constituent Steve's experiences. Such experiences have been relayed to me by many colleagues on the Government side who have just had enough. With Northern, we see that, while it has a 6% cancellation rate, the knock-on from TPE is causing many of its challenges. That is another example of how one part of the system can knock over another part.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Another month, another urgent question to discuss how companies such as Avanti are taking not only our constituents, but all of us, for mugs. As I have mentioned to the Minister before, we keep on getting claims of progress and improvement, but we continue to reward failure. Just last week, the last direct train from Manchester to Euston was at 2.15 pm. The Beveridge report was released 80 years ago, and one of the five giant evils it identified was idleness; we are certainly seeing that with

[*Christian Wakeford*]

Avanti, and I would argue we saw it from the Government prior to this mess as well. When will the Department stop idling and sort out this mess?

Huw Merriman: The Department is certainly not idling; our officials work incredibly hard, and we hold train operators to account to ensure they do everything they can. As I mentioned, the Secretary of State was up in Leeds yesterday meeting the Mayors of Manchester, Leeds, and the other great northern cities. We are focused on not just putting the reforms in place, but seeking the agreement of all those who we require to do their part to ensure we get agreement—as I have said, it is not a unilateral process, but one that requires parties to come together. Tomorrow, I will be sitting down with the employers, trade union representatives and Network Rail to see what more we can do. There is certainly no idleness on our part.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I put on record the usually good service that we receive from Southeastern workers. However, rail use is still not where it needs to be, and there is no doubt that days—indeed, now months—of strike action are affecting rail use and confidence in the railways. Can my hon. Friend confirm that he and his ministerial colleagues are doing everything they can to urge the unions to get around the table, end these strikes, and stop damaging confidence in all our railways?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend. I know she is a passionate advocate for transport in Dover as a whole; I am a fellow Southeastern user, so I experience some of what she has talked to.

I am particularly concerned about the month of December and the impact it will have on the economy. A series of strikes will cover a four-week period over Christmas. Not just the strikes but the unofficial action can have the exact same ramifications. As someone who is passionate about rail, and always has been—as someone who believes that rail has a great future, and who sees the investment that this Government are putting into rail, not least in the north—my concern is that we will never really harness all those improvements if we cannot change the current working practices. I urge everybody to think about what more they can do in the spirit of compromise. It is Christmas; I would urge settlement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very concrete and helpful answers, as we would expect of him. As we approach the festive season, thousands of people—some of them my constituents—will be travelling from all over the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, visiting their loved ones and friends this Christmas. The announcement of further rail strikes has stoked fear of disruption for so many, and has introduced uncertainty in their travel arrangements. What immediate steps are being taken to find a solution and ensure the smooth running of public transport as we come into the busiest weeks of the year, so that my constituents will know that they can travel and get where they are going on time?

Huw Merriman: What the hon. Gentleman has described is a huge concern. Last December, there was uncertainty about the ability to travel; we thought we had moved

beyond that. As that uncertainty related to health, one could say that it was beyond control, but this action is within control: it is still possible for the unions to take the strike action down so that people can get to see their loved ones across the country, and so that businesses can reopen and recover after the terrible time they have had. For many companies, December is make-or-break time: if they do not get a December in, they may not see January. We all have to think about this in an altruistic manner and see what more we can do. We will certainly do so on our side of the fence; we need the trade unions—they, ultimately, can call off the strikes or action them—to take those strikes down.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The number of daily services from Carlisle and Penrith to Euston that my constituents use is significantly reduced from previous levels, and the services that are running are timetabled at a much longer length than they used to be. Despite that, the percentage of services that are running on time hardly hits double figures. It is not the fault of my fare-paying constituents that Avanti has chosen short-term cost savings over driver training. Why are we delaying the inevitable, and when will we strip Avanti of the contract?

Huw Merriman: Again, I am sorry for the experiences that my hon. Friend and his constituents have had to endure. It takes about 18 months to fully train a driver. A lot of hon. Members will find that extraordinary, but I sat in a cab on Monday and I saw that it is a technical and difficult job. However, there may be more improvements that we can make. During covid, there was a hold-up in what would have been the usual 18-month period, because it was not possible for the unions to have workforce next to workforce for health and safety reasons. However, I again make the point that we should not rely on rest-day working arrangements. We should have driver resilience in place so that we can fully run a seven-day train operation. That requires not only us to implement change, but the workforce, through the unions, to accept that change. I very much hope that they will and that all hon. Members will do everything they can to persuade them and make that case.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to point out the myriad issues that the railways face. Chiltern Railways serves a great many of my constituents, and delays, the use of shorter trains than expected and cancellations have crept in, when we never really saw that with Chiltern before. The difference seems to be Network Rail's ability to allow flexibility in the timetabling for Chiltern to run additional services or move its rolling stock around. What can we do, with Network Rail, to get greater flexibility to allow Chiltern to serve its consumers much better?

Huw Merriman: I know my hon. Friend's line well, because he represents my mum and my family. He is right that we need to ask not only the workforce, but Network Rail to modernise. For example, is it still the case that engineering works should take place at weekends, when we have seen the greatest growth at weekends and use has perhaps dropped off on other days of the week? I am not saying that we will change things in that way, but we will look at ensuring that we have the best possible case in relation to when Network Rail intervenes on the asset and takes it over. I absolutely give him that

assurance. I am sure that, as a member of the Transport Committee, he can give me much more guidance on how I should do that.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's work to facilitate the negotiations and encourage unions and rail providers to get to a deal that solves these issues. A month ago, however, the TUC paid fully for members of the shadow Cabinet to go to Madrid to get hints and tips from the Spanish unions on how to use hard-working union members to fulfil Labour's objectives to fully disrupt the railway. *[Interruption.]* Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on Labour to get off the picket line and condemn the official and unofficial strike action that we are seeing?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is another esteemed member of the Transport Committee and I thank him for what he does. I heard some responses from Opposition Members. Perhaps I can set the tone on this: I will work collaboratively with the trade unions, and I recognise that they have a role to play in representing their members, and that they can influence change, because they can deliver it. I want to do that and have always done that with the trade union leaders with whom I have worked. They have that pledge from me.

I will meet Mick Lynch tomorrow and I very much hope that we can have a good conversation. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. When push comes to shove, the train operators, Network Rail and the Government are not putting the strikes on; the trade unions are. They have the choice as to whether we go ahead with a really damaging December for the railway and the economy, or whether we lift that gloom and have a good, positive Christmas. It is in their hands and I very much hope that they take the opportunity to take down the strikes.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): This is not just about Avanti and Northern Rail. Commuters coming from Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and

Carshalton Beeches stations are also struggling because of morning commuter changes made by Govia Thameslink Railway. Will the Minister agree to another meeting with me and colleagues representing constituencies served by Southern and Thameslink to ensure that that issue can be tackled?

Huw Merriman: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. He talked about other colleagues in the GTR network and that includes me, because that is an operator in my constituency. We recognise that improvements are needed from GTR, and officials are working with GTR in that regard. That is important; I recognise that although this urgent question is about cancellations to the north, we should be talking about service improvements that need to be made to the entire network.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to the urgent question for almost 45 minutes.

Jeff Smith: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If it relates to the preceding business, I will take it.

Jeff Smith: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank those hon. Members who pointed out the slip of the tongue in my question to the Minister. Apparently, I said that the West Midlands Mayor was late for a meeting with the Secretary of State; I meant, of course, the West Yorkshire Mayor. I would not want to impugn Andy Street's timekeeping, so I am grateful for the opportunity to correct the record. I am not criticising Tracy Brabin's timekeeping either: the fault, as usual, lies with TransPennine Express.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much. That is now on the record.

Business of the House

11.15 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 5 December will include:

MONDAY 5 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Online Safety Bill (day 2), followed by consideration of a motion for recommittal.

TUESDAY 6 DECEMBER—Opposition day (9th allotted day): a debate in the name of the official Opposition on a subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 7 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

THURSDAY 8 DECEMBER—General debate on the 12th report of the Health and Social Care Committee, on cancer services, and the Government's response, followed by a general debate on the future of BBC radio. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee, with the first debate having been recommended by the Liaison Committee.

FRIDAY 9 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 December will include:

MONDAY 12 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Voter Identification Regulations 2022, followed by a motion relating to the first and third reports of the Committee on Standards, on a new code of conduct and a guide to the rules.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I am pleased to hear that the Standards Committee's recommendations to strengthen the code of conduct for MPs will come back to the House a week on Monday. I thank her for that, because I have been calling for it for months. I will study the motion carefully when it is published.

Perhaps the right hon. Lady can channel this apparent new-found momentum on standards in public life in the direction of the Prime Minister, who has still not appointed an ethics adviser. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said yesterday, "the Prime Minister...promised to appoint an independent ethics adviser as one of his first acts".—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 903.]

We are still waiting. The Prime Minister says, "Soon." The Leader of the House says, "Soon." What does "soon" actually mean? Can we have a timeframe for how "soon" an ethics adviser will be in place? Could we have that timeframe soon?

It seems that my plea last week for Departments to send Ministers who can actually provide answers to urgent questions went unheard. As well as being unable to define "soon", the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, who answered my right hon. Friend yesterday, could not say how many candidates have already turned down the ethics adviser role. There are rumours that it is as many as seven. Is it any wonder, when the last two postholders resigned in despair? An independent ethics adviser is only as strong as the powers that they have.

Labour's independent integrity and ethics commission will stamp out Tory sleaze and scandal, and restore trust in politics. Will the so-called independent ethics adviser, whenever they are appointed, have the power to launch their own investigations?

Ministers are meant to give reasonable notice, and actual copies, of ministerial statements to the Chair and to us. I am afraid to say that again this week—at least twice, to my knowledge—that has not happened. It is unacceptable. It is our job to hold the Government to account and they must give us the opportunity to do so properly. Their disregard for this House cannot continue. Will the Leader of the House please make that point to her Cabinet colleagues?

Last week, the Leader of the House completely failed to address my concerns about the Government's chaotic handling of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and the Online Safety Bill. She said that she would

"make an announcement...in the usual way."—[*Official Report*, 24 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 451.]

But there is nothing usual about this Government's handling of their flagship legislation. I notice that today she did not announce the return of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Dare I ask whether it will be coming back before Christmas—or will it also be "soon"?

The Online Safety Bill is another example. Never mind coming back "soon" with this one—the Tories are taking us back in time. By recommitting—sending back to Committee—a part of the Bill that we had already agreed, they are undoing the decisions of this House. While child sexual abuse and scams online skyrocket, along with content promoting self-harm and suicide, the Government are dragging their feet. Attempting to remove the crucial section that deals with legal but harmful content gives a green light to abusers, and takes away the framework that could deal with forms of harm that we do not yet know about. Why are the Government trying to do this? Last week the Leader of the House said that the Bill would

"be making progress through the House."—[*Official Report*, 24 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 451.]

Can she really look campaigners in the eye and say that the Government are not trying to kick the Bill into the long grass, perhaps in an attempt to prevent it from becoming law?

However, this is not just about legislation. Public strategies are a mess. There is confusion over whether the Government's plans to deal with health inequality, tobacco and obesity have been shelved. The gambling reform White Paper is up in the air, despite high levels of problem gambling, and related mental health effects and suicides. May we have ministerial statements on these important matters, so that Ministers can clarify what on earth the Government are up to?

Reports unpublished, consultations unanswered—Whitehall must have an enormous sofa, given how much the Government are losing down the back of it. They have still not responded to the consultation on flexible working after more than a year, and meanwhile there are 100,000 fewer women in employment than before the covid-19 pandemic. Labour has a plan to help those women who want to return to work but are being held back: our new deal for working people will make the right to flexible working the default from day one. What is the Government's plan? When will they be bothered even to respond? "Soon", presumably.

There is a pattern here. With the Tories, psychodrama and grubby backroom deals come before legislation to protect children online. With the Tories, handouts to oil and gas giants come before public health. With the Tories, we have a weak Prime Minister whose poor judgment puts party before country. A Government who are unable to govern should make way for one who can: a Labour Government cannot come “soon” enough.

Penny Mordaunt: Let me first put on record my praise for, and pride in the performance of, Wales and England. I know that many Members have already paid tribute to their performance to date in the World Cup.

I note that later today we will have a Backbench Business Committee debate on World Aids Day, and I am proud of the fact that the UK is one of the largest donors to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. I pay tribute to all the healthcare professionals who have done so much in recent years to reduce infections, as well as the organisations with which they work—in particular, the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John Aids Foundation.

The hon. Lady mentioned the debate on standards that will take place on Monday week. As well as supporting the bulk of the Standards Committee’s recommendations, the Government will take further action, which I hope the House will also welcome. We will publish the motion—soon? [*Laughter.*] Very swiftly.

The hon. Lady referred to urgent questions. We have just been given an excellent example of responses to urgent questions by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who was more than capable of answering the supplementary questions and whose approach to such challenges will, I think, have given Members a great deal of confidence.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Government’s record of supporting women, in particular, in the workplace. I am very proud of our record of getting 2 million more women into work since 2010, by means of a raft of measures, but there is more that we wish to do.

As I said in my statement, the Online Safety Bill will be returning to the House. This is a vital and world-leading piece of legislation. It focuses particularly on protecting children and stamping out illegal activity online, which are top priorities for the Government. It is groundbreaking legislation, and it delivers on our manifesto commitment to make the UK the safest place in the world in which to be online. We are tabling a recommittal motion, and the recommitted measures will come back to the whole House for a second Report stage. That will take place swiftly, allowing proper scrutiny. This is an established parliamentary procedure—it has been used before—and it will ensure that the Bill can be strengthened while also ensuring that Members have the opportunity to take part in a full debate on the changes to the Bill.

All other business will be announced in the usual way—soon—and I can tell the hon. Lady that that means 8 December.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I have made a series of freedom of information requests about the Government’s possession and use of Hikvision cameras, which security advisers have declared to be a security risk. I made an FOI

request of every Department, and then requested a revision of any decision to refuse to answer. All bar three Departments answered by invoking section 24 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which protects information on grounds of security; that is, Departments said that it would put national security at risk to let me know whether they had any such cameras, how many they had, and what they were doing about them. However, that cannot be the case when three Departments—the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Wales Office—answered completely openly, and talked of getting rid of the cameras.

How can the issue not be a security risk for three Departments, but be a security risk for the rest of them? Surely Departments are hiding behind section 24 because they are embarrassed about having an awful lot of Hikvision cameras. Will the Leader of the House remind No. 10 and the Cabinet Office that they have an obligation to answer genuine questions, and to declare the number of such cameras that they have? As a result of those cameras, all of us are at risk when we enter those Departments.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important matter. I know that he thinks deeply about such issues. Whatever the security policies of those Departments, I can see no reason why he, a Privy Counsellor, should not be briefed by the Departments on Privy Council terms. I will write on his behalf to the Cabinet Office to ask that that happens.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Leader of the House does not seem to like answering any of my constitutional questions directly. Right enough, they are a bit tricky for her Government, but God loves a trier, so let us see if she can answer this. In the Scottish Affairs Committee this week, the Secretary of State for Scotland revealed that the head of the UK civil service is looking into whether officials in Scotland will be allowed to do work related to our next independence referendum, following the Supreme Court’s ruling last week. The notion that it is unlawful for the Scottish Government to pursue independence as a policy goal has been dismissed by legal academics, including former Tory MSP Professor Adam Tomkins. Aileen McHarg, professor of public law and human rights at Durham University, described it as a “ludicrous position”. There seems to be a new measure of Scottish independence support as well: the duck test. I am sure that we all look forward to hearing distinguished constitutional academics’ views on that.

The Supreme Court’s decision has exposed the undemocratic lack of a legal mechanism by which the Scottish Parliament can hold an independence referendum. Surely the UK Government’s attention should be on addressing that, not on inhibiting the work of the civil service. I received a muddled response from Scotland Office Ministers. The first said that money allocated to Scotland by the UK Treasury came with “no strings attached”; then another stepped in to say that this was a matter for the civil service, and that we would need to see “how this plays out”. Can the Leader of the House offer any clarity? Perhaps there could be a statement on duck tests to establish exactly who decides whether support for Scottish independence passes the appropriate avian measurements.

[Deidre Brock]

Lastly, why will the Chancellor not follow the lead of the Scottish Government and introduce a UK equivalent of the Scottish child payment? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation described the increase to £25 a week per eligible child as a “watershed moment”. It also found that if the payment were extended to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a further 5.3 million children would be eligible for that crucial support. As we approach a very difficult winter, perhaps Labour will join the SNP in urging Ministers to hold a debate or make a statement on what more the Government will do to tackle this shameful poverty. The UK Government have far more tools at their disposal than the devolved Governments, and it is high time that they showed the same political will as them.

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Lady suggests, I am a simple girl. I read the evidence from the Committee sitting to which she referred, and I understand that Secretary of State for Scotland will clarify the matter that she mentioned. I can tell her that the Scottish Government’s spending the unrestricted funds that they get on their project of a further referendum is a colossal waste of money. The Scottish Government and Parliament is one of the most powerful devolved Administrations in the world, with huge authority that the SNP has done its best not to take up, with responsibilities that the SNP has done its best to shirk, and with the largest budget it has ever had that the SNP has done its best to squander.

The reason Scotland has low job creation is that it has the lowest PISA—programme for international student assessment—ranking since that measure was created. It has 700 fewer police officers than a year ago and the worst A&E wait times on record. That the hon. Lady’s constituency has the lowest funding settlement per person in Scotland is not because of the UK Government, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Supreme Court, the good people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Brexit or Britain, but because of her party, the SNP, and its obsession with issues that the Scottish people wish it would leave aside to focus on what matters to them.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend worries, as I do, about the cost to every family of filling their car. She will have seen media reports that, despite wholesale prices going down, the prices on garage forecourts remain stubbornly high. Will she allow Government time for a debate on FairFuelUK’s excellent idea for a new PumpWatch commissioner to monitor and stop bad practice on garage forecourts?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend will know the Competition and Markets Authority published its road fuel report in July, and it recommended that the Government consider a scheme to increase transparency on fuel prices. The Government are looking at this, and I join her in commending the work of FairFuelUK, which has done a huge amount to champion the rights of motorists and to remind us that holding down fuel duty, and cutting it where we can, is good for the economy.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business for Thursday 8 December.

If given the time, the Backbench Business Committee intends to table two debates for Thursday 15 December, the first on outlawing self-disconnection of prepayment meters and the second, following our exchanges on the urgent question, on rail transport services for communities served by Avanti West Coast. Many Members on both sides of the House will find that debate timely, particularly given that the new timetable will be published around that time.

May I ask the Government for a statement on the fitness and condition of accommodation in the private rented sector? That is a dangerous market and contains properties at both ends of the housing scale, but for many communities such as mine and those across the north-east of England, it is housing of last resort. Many properties are in poor condition, but they are still funded by housing benefit, which is public money. Can we have a Government statement on what has recently been happening in the sector?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful announcement of future Backbench Business. He is right to focus on the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector, on which the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is very focused. I will write to the Secretary of State on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf to ensure his concerns are heard.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Can we have a Government review, followed by a statement, on the desirability of abandoning the flawed annual ritual of putting our clocks back every autumn, plunging the nation into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon for several months? Is there not an overwhelming case for using summer time in winter, as it would boost tourism, cut the number of road accidents and reduce energy use? Why do we not try it?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this. There are many views on these matters on both sides of the House. Indeed, I remember that the opinion of the House was tested by the Daylight Saving Bill during the coalition Government. I encourage him to raise the matter at the relevant Question Time, but I will also write to the Cabinet Office, as it affects a number of Departments, to make sure it is aware of his concerns.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Last month, the retail union USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—marked Respect for Shopworkers Week, and I was pleased to visit the Co-op on Castle Street in my constituency to speak to branch staff about various issues. USDAW has surveyed almost 5,000 retail workers recently, revealing the high levels of abuse and violence faced by them: 71% experienced verbal abuse, 48% were threatened by a customer and 5% were assaulted. Yet a staggering 20% of assaulted shop workers do not report the incident. As such, will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on strengthening legislation to protect retail workers?

Penny Mordaunt: This important issue will be of relevance to all Members of this House, and it has been a continuing concern for convenience stores, newsagents and others. The hon. Member will be aware of the work that the high streets team at the Department for Levelling

Up, Housing and Communities has done in increasing security, and sharing best practice and what has worked in other places—warden schemes, for example. I will write to the Secretary of State, who is getting a lot of letters from me this week, to make sure that he is aware of the hon. Member's concerns.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My constituent Lizzie has a minor blood clotting disorder that means she needs a referral to a consultant before she can be prescribed hormone replacement therapy for menopausal symptoms. That appointment has come back for June 2024. We will all recognise in this House that menopausal symptoms can be transitory and it may well be that she is through the menopause before the appointment comes, but please can my right hon. Friend find time in this House for a debate as to how the women's health strategy is working, or in some cases not working, for women going through the menopause and what more we can do to make sure that the Department of Health and Social Care is taking these issues seriously?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that. As she will know, this issue is of huge concern to all Members across this House; we know that previous debates on such matters have been very well attended in the House. She will know that the Government are standing up new diagnostic centres to help to deal with that particular issue, which is taking up a lot of waiting list time. I will also flag this with the DHSC to make sure that it has heard her concerns.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My friend the shadow Leader of the House listed a number of areas that the Government are still sitting on—plans, documents and policies—but the one thing she did not mention was the round 2 bids for the levelling-up fund. We were promised that a decision would be taken by the end of the year. We are now in December and the recess is rolling near. Will the Leader of the House find time for a Minister to make a statement to the House to announce that Denton has got its levelling-up funding?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on continuing his lobbying campaign on behalf of his constituents, and I sincerely hope that they will be able to have that Christmas present this year. I understand that the round 2 fund is on track but, obviously, I will raise the matter with the Department on his behalf.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Can we have a debate on the old fish killer of Somerset, who at the moment is representing one of the foremost environmentalists in the world, on behalf of the good burghers of Somerset? He was operations director of Wessex Water until recently and the damage they have done has been incalculable. We have now finally made companies pay for the damage they are causing, but it is far too late and far too slow. So can we have a debate in this House, slightly quicker than soon, where Members can put forward what damage these water companies are doing to all our constituencies?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that this issue is of immense concern to my hon. Friend. He will know that some further announcements have been made this week by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

as to what water company fines will be spent on to help repair the damage that the companies have done. He will also know that from next year 100% of storm overflows will be monitored and that those companies are now locked into a timetable to produce infrastructure plans to address all these long-term issues, which are vital in terms of getting water quality, biodiversity and other matters that our constituents care about in the right place.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): On 5 August, the Prime Minister said that the UK should be a “beacon of talent” for the “best and brightest” and that access to talent was a “limiting factor” for companies looking to scale up here, and I agree entirely. But in my constituency, a business that was looking to recruit for a managerial post found a candidate in the United States, having been unable to recruit domestically for the best part of a year. That candidate, however, has been advised that the visa costs and the upfront health costs for him and his family will be north of £13,000. Can we have a debate in Government time on the real obstacles to coming to work in the UK, the bureaucracy and the outrageous costs, which of course are the real limiting factor in terms of access to talent and wholly the responsibility of the UK Government?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope the right hon. Gentleman will be supporting measures in trade deals or our memorandums of understanding with the states of the United States to improve all of this—the mutual recognition of qualifications and the slashing of bureaucracy. I look forward to him, when those matters are debated on the Floor of the House, supporting the measures that the Government bring forward. I remind him also that the Home Office is offering all colleagues one-to-one surgeries to crack through any difficult cases, issues or obstacles that are proving difficult to get over. I remind him of that service. I am sure the Home Office stands ready to assist in any way that it can.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is Great Union Day, when Romanians celebrate the unification of what we now call modern Romania at the end of the great war. Indeed, Romanian is now the third most spoken language in the UK. Can we have a debate in Government time where we could celebrate not only Great Union Day, but the massive contribution that Romanian citizens make to the economy of this country?

Penny Mordaunt: I say to my hon. Friend, “mulțumesc” —Romanian for thank you very much—for raising this important topic. He does a great service in reminding us of the importance of particular events. He has put that on record and I am sure that all Members would join him in the sentiments that he has expressed.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Leader of the House might remember that, just before bonfire night, I raised my concerns about potential disorder and asked at business questions for a debate. In just one ward in my constituency on bonfire night, there were 18 arrests of young men, and more followed. Really tragically, one young man, a 17-year-old, lost his life having been fatally injured that night. Can I now ask her, with almost a year to go, whether she will consider pulling together a Government taskforce to consider the regulation

[Holly Lynch]

of fireworks, protections for emergency service workers and our communities, and the proper resourcing of youth services, so that we can make sure that people enjoy bonfire night responsibly, and that we do not see these pockets of persistent and really quite violent disorder?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear of the disruption that was caused in the hon. Lady's constituency and also of that tragic death. I am sure the whole House would want to share those sentiments. She is right. I understand why, around bonfire night, Members will raise the issue, but clearly more work needs to be done. I hear this from many Members across the House, so I will raise the matter with the Home Office in particular to ensure that people are thinking about what further things could be put in place, especially in constituencies that are facing a disproportionate amount of difficulty around that time of year.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Last Saturday, Ukrainians in Mid Derbyshire, and those in Ukraine and around the world marked the 90th anniversary of the Ukrainian Holodomor—a manmade famine in Ukraine caused by Joseph Stalin, in which millions of Ukrainians died. The Holodomor has been recognised as a genocide against Ukrainian people by 16 countries, including Ireland, Australia and Canada. Please can we have a debate in Government time on official recognition by the United Kingdom of the Holodomor and its parallels with what is happening now in Ukraine and Russia?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. She may also wish to raise it at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 13 December. It was a horrific man-made disaster of unimaginable scale. We see parallels with what is happening today. I think my hon. Friend knows how to apply for a debate in the usual way. I am sure that, because of its relevance to what is happening in Ukraine at the moment, it would be a very well-attended debate.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My constituent Olly Stephens was just 13 years old when he was stabbed and brutally murdered. Legal but harmful pictures and videos were repeatedly watched by the boy who stabbed him. Eleven different social media platforms were used to share that legal but harmful content, and I am afraid not one of those platforms removed it. The Government plan to scrap measures to tackle legal but harmful content. How can I raise this matter urgently with Ministers?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Online Safety Bill is coming back to the House, as I announced in the business statement. The Home Secretary is keen to hear from all Members during the course of that debate, but her door is always open prior to that. Her focus is very much on protecting children. I am incredibly sorry to hear about the constituency case that hon. Gentleman raises. The purpose of the Bill is to make sure that these tragic events do not happen again and that we hold social media companies to account for the content that they publish. I will also flag what the hon. Gentleman said with her.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Since the tragic death of toddler Harper-Lee Fanthorpe in my constituency last year, I have been campaigning with her mother Stacy for greater awareness of button battery dangers. As we start the countdown to Christmas, shops everywhere will be selling products—not just toys but lighting and decorations—with button batteries in them. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging parents and grandparents to be aware of the dangers of button batteries if products are unsafe, and retailers not to sell them? Will she make parliamentary time for a debate on what we can do to raise awareness of button batteries and possibly to legislate for a minimum safety standard for all products?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has provided, in part, an answer to her question, because by raising this issue she has provided information to those listening and to news outlets that people need to be aware of the tragedies that can happen if children eat and swallow those batteries. I will ask the Cabinet Office if any communications are going out on public information channels about this issue. I thank her for the service she has done today.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Like other Members, I have several cases of energy suppliers—in my case, Ovo and SSE—without consultation paying the energy bill rebate directly to bank accounts rather than deducting it from account balances. That approach keeps already high direct debits artificially higher. For some, that approach might not make any material difference, but for others, particularly vulnerable and elderly people—including my mother-in-law—who rely on family to deal with bills and admin, it is far from ideal. Will the Chancellor, or a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister, make a statement setting out that the support should go directly to balances, not bank accounts?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I understand the BEIS Secretary of State made some announcements earlier this week and has met those companies to ensure that they are doing the right thing. I will ensure that he has heard the hon. Gentleman and that he will get in touch with him on the specifics of how we can ensure that those direct debits are not, through this means and others, being kept artificially high.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Many of my Telford constituents depend on Arriva buses to get to work, college or important appointments, and they are frequently let down. Hundreds of residents have contacted me to tell me about cancellations, delays, being left standing in the rain, being late for work, missing appointments and having to take taxis at their own expense, something they cannot afford. The bus service in Telford is not fit for purpose and we need urgent action. I am meeting Arriva on Monday, but I ask the Leader of the House for an urgent debate on the performance of Arriva buses to ensure that everything is done to improve the situation, which is making the day-to-day lives of my constituents and people across the country so difficult.

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear again about this ongoing issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. We recognise how important bus services are to people,

which is why we have provided more than £1 billion in support to local authorities to help deliver bus service improvement plans. The next questions to the Department is not until 19 January, so I will write to the Secretary of State on her behalf and ask the Department to check in with her following her meeting with the bus company. I thank her for her tenacity and her determination to ensure that her constituents have a decent bus service.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Today we have a debate in Westminster Hall, as hon. Members will know, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. To quote one example, women in Colombia are at the forefront of protecting human rights and fighting for justice, which we all welcome. However, they are experiencing an unprecedented wave of violence: in the first 10 months of this year, 156 women have been killed. Will the Leader of the House, and this House as a whole, join me in condemning these horrendous attacks and praising the incredible courage of these women, who are truly an inspiration to us all?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention both to the plight of those women and to the very brave women and organisations trying to alleviate that suffering. He will know that we recently hosted an international conference on preventing sexual violence against women, particularly in conflict situations. There is a further Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions before the Christmas recess, and I encourage him to raise the issue there too.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Today we mark World AIDS Day. I appreciate that we have a debate on that later today in this Chamber, but, given the huge success of the opt-out HIV testing scheme around the country, can we have a debate during National HIV Testing Week about the success of the programme and how we can expand it further?

Penny Mordaunt: I am proud that the UK was the first to pledge to end new HIV cases by 2030, and we are determined to be the first country to deliver on that. In just 100 days of this particular service being stood up in 33 hospital A&E departments, it diagnosed 102 people with HIV, as well as finding a further 60 people who knew they were HIV positive but were not engaged with services. We need to ensure that that is standard practice and I put on record my thanks to the healthcare professionals who have made it happen.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I too urge a debate on various issues around the Government's support schemes for fuel payments. Many of my constituents have problems with not receiving their payment if they are not on direct debit and on the alternative fuel payment scheme. Many sports clubs have also written to me saying they are really concerned they will not survive, as they rely on their clubhouse to support their activities. Please can we have a debate in Government time to look at all these issues?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point. I will ensure that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has heard what she has said about sports clubs. I know that there are a plethora of complex schemes and I will encourage BEIS to ensure

that it has surgeries and surgery time available for Members who have cases or difficult situations that they are trying to find an answer to. I will write to the Department on her behalf.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Lib Dem-controlled Eastleigh Borough Council is meeting tonight with a proposal to scrap the 30 minutes' free parking in the small village of Hamble, which has happened elsewhere in the borough of Eastleigh. The move will stop footfall in that important village and harm small businesses that have already faced a tough time over the last year. Can we have a debate about the future of small village centres, so that I and other Members can highlight how such retrograde steps by local authorities will drive people away from our vital village centres?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. I urge all those Liberal Democrat councillors to take a look down the road at Portsmouth—particularly North End in my constituency—where the Liberal Democrat council did exactly what they propose to do to his local high street. It devastated North End and the council had to reverse the policy. That was deeply embarrassing and the Lib Dems lost control of the council. They might like to start thinking about small businesses as we approach Small Business Saturday, and about the services that high streets provide and their contribution to the economy and to quality of life.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): As the Leader of the House well knows, the Supreme Court has ruled that the Scottish Parliament was established without powers to hold an independence referendum, under the powers of the Scotland Act 1998. In the wake of the UK Government's intransigent and inflexible response to that ruling, she may be interested to know that support for independence—[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members can laugh if they like. Support for independence has soared in Scotland, with a majority in every single age group—save for the over-65s—in favour of Scottish independence. Will she make a statement setting out why she thinks that is?

Penny Mordaunt: I say to the hon. Lady that the Government's position on the Supreme Court ruling is exactly the same as the SNP's, which is that we accept it. What she and her colleagues have been saying with regard to the ability to hold a referendum is not true. The proof is that we had one on those terms. The difficulty that SNP Members have is that they do not wish to honour the result.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The Bill of Rights will be an important addition to the toolbox for tackling illegal immigration and the small boats crisis. I have met the Justice Secretary and I understand that the Bill is ready to move forward. Will that be before Christmas? The Bill contains important measures, and it would be good to get it in statute. Will my right hon. Friend also consider how we can make progress on the Seafarers' Wages Bill, which is so important to the cross-channel operations in my constituency?

Penny Mordaunt: As Leader of the House, I must be fiercely neutral and not favour one Bill over another, but I am particularly keen for the Bill of Rights to come

[Penny Mordaunt]

back swiftly to the Floor of the House. A huge amount of work has been done on it, and it will—among many other things—clearly enhance our ability to remove dangerous foreign-national offenders from the UK and better protect the public. I will announce business in the usual way. I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister will be pleased that my hon. Friend has raised the importance of the Bill of Rights.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The National Lottery Community Fund has allocated grants of up to £5.9 million over the last five years to a number of excellent community groups in my constituency, including Overton Tenants and Residents Association; Chatty Crafters; Project 31; People's Past, People's Future, and Whitlawburn Community Resource Centre, to name just a few. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time on the need for funding streams for such essential community projects in our communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I extend my congratulations to all those organisations on their successful bids to the lottery and wish them well in spending that funding—it sounds as if they provide some amazing services. I thank the hon. Lady for raising the importance of those vital funding streams.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): As the House and my Wrexham constituents will know, I have been running a campaign against unscrupulous parking companies, which reap billions from unfair fines. The Government were to lodge a code of conduct, but the firms challenged the Government, it has now been shelved and all has gone quiet. Can my right hon. Friend advise me on how to keep the issue at the forefront of Ministers' minds?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which is clearly a priority for the Government. Early in the Administration, we brought through rules to end clamping on private land. We have continued to ensure that people are not abusing the rules that govern parking. I understand that the Department will be bringing forward measures, but because the next questions are not until the new year, I will write to the Department and ask it to contact my hon. Friend to give her some reassurance that her constituents will be able to park with confidence, especially over the Christmas period.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): It has been reported that, for all its military prowess, the billions it spends and its track record on human rights, China is to receive nearly £52 million of British taxpayer money in the form of foreign aid. How do I justify that to my constituents who have to sofa surf? How do I justify it to my pensioners who will only be receiving £700 a month, or to my homeless veterans? In fact, in the current cost of living crisis, how can I even justify much of the foreign aid budget at all? Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate to explore how this aid to China specifically was approved, the suitability of aid to all other countries we support, Government intentions moving forward and specifically whether they still intend to spend £11 billion on such programmes while we have taxed people in this country to levels we have not seen in several generations?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and I will write to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and ask it to send him in detail what the overseas development assistance spend in China is doing. From memory, a lot of it is used on things that are of direct benefit to the United Kingdom, such as protecting the intellectual property of UK companies. I am sure there are things that the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues will be able to give my hon. Friend that would give him some comfort and reassurance. I would also say to him that we very much understand the pressures at home and the cost of living issues that people are grappling with. I always used to have a mantra when I was at the Department for International Development that it was not about the best way that the Department could spend the money; for every grant that we gave, we had to test that against what another Department could do with that money, and I am sure that is still the test.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has alluded to, it is the 10th anniversary of Small Business Saturday this weekend. Can we have a debate please on what more the Government can do to support small and family businesses? In Leigh-on-Sea, we have the brilliant independent Fives Record shop, where this weekend I hope to buy the first copy of the Music Man and Royal Marines Band Christmas single. Will the Leader of the House use her super skills to get this dynamic duo to Christmas No. 1, raising essential funds for musicians with disabilities and honouring my amazing predecessor Sir David Amess?

Penny Mordaunt: Small Business Saturday is an opportunity for us to celebrate the good that small businesses do and how much we value them. If you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a plug for the Music Man's first ever Christmas single, "Music Is Magic", which will be available for pre-save from tomorrow on all major music streaming platforms. The single will be released on 16 December for download and on streaming services. The music video will be released tomorrow in support of International Day of Disabled Persons 2022, on 3 December. I thank my hon. Friend for the support for the Music Man, and to update the House, they want to play Broadway. In the new year, they will be playing their first US gig, hopefully with their Christmas hit, on the USS Midway in San Diego bay. I am sure the whole House wishes them luck.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That is the first time we have had a commercial break in business questions.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): As we have heard, small businesses are the lifeblood of our nation and our economy, but one of the challenges they often face is red tape, particularly with procurement when there is an opportunity to grow their business. In the light of Small Business Saturday this weekend and with the Procurement Bill currently making its way through the other place, will my right hon. Friend please consider making time for us to discuss small and medium-sized businesses and entrepreneurs, who are the people who make this country what it is? It would provide an opportunity to see how we can support them through the procurement process, make sure the Government are hiring small businesses to deliver local government and Government needs, and ensure they can focus their time on transforming their business, not just filling out forms for their business.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as the work we are doing on trade deals and memorandums of understanding, which I spoke about earlier, the Procurement Bill will slash red tape, replacing 350 EU regulations with one simple, flexible framework for our SMEs. Just over the past year, they have won a record £19.3 billion in Government procurement spending. We want them to be able to do more, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): A few weeks ago, I asked the Leader of the House whether it would be possible to extend the time allocated for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, so that we can talk about food, farming, agriculture, fisheries, the environment and our rural communities. Could this possibly happen immediately—or sooner?

Penny Mordaunt: I would have said that I hope it will happen soon, but I can actually tell my hon. Friend that it will happen on 12 January 2023, because we are extending EFRA questions to a full hour. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign for that to happen, and I hope his farming community and others' are pleased about that.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Leader of the House knows how cruel and debilitating the condition of motor neurone disease is. I remind the House both of the recent diagnosis of MND for Gloucester rugby player Ed Slater and of the recent sad death from MND of Scottish rugby giant Doddie Weir. My right hon. Friend will recall that the Health Secretary committed to secure the first ever ringfenced pot of £50 million of funding for MND research, with a virtual institute. Many of us share his concern, and to highlight the cause and to secure the funding, can I ask my right hon. Friend to find time for a debate on MND, which—better still, with a funding announcement—would make a wonderful Christmas present both for Ed and his family, and for the huge MND family around the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I want to associate myself with the remarks that my hon. Friend has made about Ed and others. He will know that there is Health questions next week, and I encourage him to raise this with the Secretary of State in that session.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for responding to business questions for just short of an hour.

COUNSELLORS OF STATE BILL [LORDS] (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Counsellors of State Bill [Lords]:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (13)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Messages from the Lords

(8) (a) Any Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(11) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(12) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(13) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(14) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(15) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Counsellors of State Bill [*Lords*]*Second Reading*

12.8 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a great pleasure to be before the House following His Majesty the King's message to both Houses and the Humble Address. Parliament has affirmed its willingness to bring forward this Bill and deal with it expeditiously, and the Government are responding in kind. We recognise that it is pivotal to the smooth working of Parliament and Government that royal authority is always available, which includes granting the final, formal legal approval to the decisions that are made here in this House.

The Counsellors of State Bill is designed to ensure continuity in how the monarchy fulfils its core constitutional role. As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, the sovereign performs a significant number of royal functions that are key to the day-to-day machinery of government of the United Kingdom. These vary from assenting to legislation, granting charters, and appointing bishops, judges and King's counsel, to convening the Privy Council. Many of these functions require the monarch to act in person. If the monarch is temporarily unavailable, these vital constitutional and legal roles must still be performed.

This place has previously identified and resolved the issue. We have a tradition of legislating for such contingencies and adapting to historical context and requirements. Indeed, this Bill is a modification of the existing Regency Acts 1937 to 1953. Section 6 of the Regency Act 1937 provides for Counsellors of State to whom royal functions can be delegated when the sovereign is temporarily unavailable.

I will briefly set out the functioning of the Acts, specifically with regard to Counsellors of State. The delegation of royal functions is made by the sovereign through letters patent for the period of their absence. These set out the statutory limitations of the delegation; usually, they also specify what the functions are and which functions are not delegated. The sovereign may revoke or vary the delegation by letters patent.

In practice, this creates a pool of all the Counsellors of State who can carry out such delegated functions. Counsellors of State exercise royal functions jointly or by such number of them as may be specified. It is important to note that, generally, Counsellors of State have tended to act in pairs. Those who are absent from the United Kingdom during the period of the delegation may be excepted as per section 6(2) of the 1937 Act. Under the current arrangements, the Counsellors of State are the spouse of the sovereign and the four persons who are next in the line of succession to the Crown, excluding those who are disqualified under the Act—for example, due to age.

During the reign of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth, Counsellors of State were routinely appointed when she travelled abroad. This occurred more than 30 times over the last few decades. Indeed, hon. Members may recall that earlier this year, during the state opening of Parliament, this power was used when Her late Majesty was unable to attend.

The Bill follows precedent in legislating for additional Counsellors of State. Shortly after her accession in 1953, Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth asked Parliament to legislate for Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother to be a Counsellor of State. In accordance with that request, Parliament passed the Regency Act 1953, which added the Queen Mother as a Counsellor of State for her lifetime, to deliver on Her late Majesty's wishes. Today, as we bring the Bill before the House, we are guided by that precedent in the substantive approach and the procedure.

The Bill proposes a precise and limited modification to the provisions in the Regency Act in respect of Counsellors of State. In line with the King's message to both Houses of Parliament, the Bill will add His Royal Highness the Earl of Wessex and Forfar and Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal to the list of Counsellors of State for the duration of their lifetimes. In turn, they bring more than 50 years of extensive experience to the role. I trust that all hon. Members will agree that few individuals are better qualified to undertake these vital constitutional duties should the need arise.

Furthermore, the royal family has confirmed that in practice it will be working members of the royal family who are called on to act as Counsellors of State, and that their diaries will be arranged to ensure that that is the case. The Bill supports the monarch, our Head of State, in discharging his constitutional duties. It guarantees the continuity that we in Government and Parliament depend on to serve the British people. At this time of heightened sporting interest, as one noble Lord succinctly put it in the other place, the Bill

“will give much-needed strength and depth to the bench”,—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 November 2022; Vol. 825, c. 1184]

which always a wise strategy. For all those reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

12.14 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to his place in our first formal debate in the House. I hope that it will be a constructive one. Although there are a great many things that we often disagree about, this Bill is not one of them. It is a simple, straightforward piece of legislation that provides a solution for a specific issue, as he said in his opening remarks.

By expanding the number of Counsellors of State who can formally deputise for His Majesty the King in his absence, the Bill addresses a potential constitutional problem. It is a fact that some aspects of our government machinery rely on the sovereign's authority. It follows that a form of that authority must always be available to grant formal legal approval to a range of decisions by the Government and Parliament.

Counsellors of State may also perform a number of necessary functions, such as attending Privy Council meetings and receiving the credentials of new ambassadors to the country. Although the Regency Act 1937 sets out the list of Counsellors of State, it is for the King to delegate functions and decide who acts in the role. The Bill is intended to ensure that he can do so from a group of working royals by adding two further Counsellors of State, both of whom are already experienced and well respected in the role, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said. This is not a broader debate about our

constitution; it is about the narrow purpose of providing His Majesty with flexibility in who can formally represent him.

The Opposition do not oppose this practical measure. Although the Bill has a narrow focus, I know that hon. Members in this House and the other place have raised concerns about the wider issue of the Regency Act. I welcome assurances from Government Ministers in the other place that only working royals can act as Counsellors of State. That is an important assurance that will go alongside the Bill.

As I have said, the substance of the Bill is simple. It is clear that the existing legislation does not provide a mechanism to expand the number of Counsellors of State, which is now needed due to circumstances that Parliament could not have foreseen when the current Act was passed, so I and my hon. Friends will be supporting the Bill today.

12.17 pm

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I rise to strongly support the Bill. It is clearly a non-political piece of legislation, as the royal message from His Majesty the King to Parliament made clear, and will ensure that he is ably supported in the discharge of his constitutional duties. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said, the Bill follows long-established precedent. Her late Majesty the Queen, of blessed and glorious memory, asked her Parliament to do the same thing after her accession to the throne, and thus Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother was added to the list of Counsellors of State in 1953.

The daily workload of the sovereign is, of course, significant. His Majesty is extremely industrious and absolutely passionate about his work, as we all know, and always has been. In that way, as in many others, the King takes after the late Queen, if I may say so. We are lucky to have him and we should support him in this endeavour.

In rare circumstances—for example, when overseas or when indisposed—it might occasionally be necessary to appoint Counsellors of State. As we heard, that happened 30 times in the last reign. The Bill will broaden the pool of options available to His Majesty. The presence of the sovereign is sometimes required by law, or in the alternative, the formal approval of a Counsellor of State or a royal sign manual. The Bill will allow options to be deployed if His Majesty wishes. It will also prevent delay to the business of the Government of the day, as the noble Lord Janvrin, a former private secretary to the late Queen, said from the Cross Benches in the other place last week.

His Royal Highness the Earl of Wessex and Forfar, and Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal command the confidence of the King, and the approval and respect of the people of this country, and for good reason. Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal is well known and highly respected for her work ethic, her drive, and her pragmatic approach. As we know, she carries out hundreds of engagements annually, and quietly and assiduously undertakes her duties with enormous skill. Like the Princess, His Royal Highness the Earl of Wessex has been a trusted Counsellor of State before, and he will likewise be a welcome addition to the pool of options available to the King.

[Michael Ellis]

Even in the current world of online contracts, virtual meetings and automated signatures there is still, I am sure the House will agree, a practical need for Counsellors of State. Not everything can or should be done via online media platforms. The functions of the monarchy sometimes require physical presence—indeed, they often do, either for important legal reasons of state or for ceremonial reasons. As I said, not everything can or should be done via email. Parliament has set those requirements, and for good reason.

This is not a political Bill. It has nothing to do with royal or public finances or engagements. It is about allowing the sovereign expeditiously to clear his work every day. I read that His Majesty has a new red box, and as a former long-standing Minister of the Crown I recognise how important it is that such business is cleared efficiently. It is in the interests of good order and the administration of government that Parliament facilitates that. I support the way that His Majesty's Government are proceeding with this matter, and I strongly support this Bill.

12.21 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I will not detain the House for too long. The Bill is what it is, and it does what it says it will do. It is a pragmatic solution to a problem that has arisen, and it is by and large uncontroversial and uncontroversial. For as long as the United Kingdom chooses to have a constitutional monarch, whose role includes the granting of Royal Assent to legislation, the appointment of judges and Ministers, as well as a host of other engagements and functions both at home and abroad, there is an identifiable need to extend the number of people who can deputise for the monarch when he or she is overseas, is unwell, or is for whatever reason unable to conduct those duties.

Given that two current Counsellors of State are, for different reasons, non-working royals and have withdrawn from public life, the proposed appointment of two new Counsellors of State who can exercise those royal functions when needs be makes sense. The Bill is a reasonable workaround that provides temporary solutions to the constraints of the Regency Acts, which state that Counsellors of State are the spouse of the monarch and the first four in the line of succession. Although the Bill gets us over that inconvenient hurdle, I suggest that the Government should find a more robust and enduring way of dealing with such situations, which will undoubtedly arise in the future.

I understand why the King would want to make his brother, the Earl of Wessex, and his sister, the Princess Royal, Counsellors of State, as both have previously performed that duty for the late Queen. As an aside, will the Minister explain why on the Bill as printed the Earl of Wessex seems to be given prominence ahead of the Princess Royal? I find it a strange order in which to put them. As a wider point, rather than having to revert once again to the Regency Act 1937, using the 1953 precedent that made the Queen Mother the additional Counsellor, as if she had been appointed at the same time as others, it would probably be better to find a more formalised way to appoint people to those positions. The Bill is a quick-fix solution to an immediate problem, but it does not get over the structural issues latent in the Regency Acts. I point the Minister to a well informed

post by Dr Craig Prescott of Bangor University, writing for the University of London's Constitution Unit. He says that this question will arise time and again until it is formally sorted, and that if there is to be, as we believe there will be, a more slimmed down royal family that focuses more on the direct line of succession, such issues will need to be addressed.

I have no doubt that the Bill will pass, but I suggest that the Government should eventually get round to looking at how Counsellors of State are appointed. That said, given the current state of the United Kingdom, I sincerely hope that this issue is somewhere around No. 101 in the Government's list of 100 things they need to do. If it is not No. 101, I suggest it should be. At some point, however, it may be worth considering the issue again.

Everyone understands that, for a whole host of reasons, the monarch cannot always be available to perform their duties. That is why over the centuries, Counsellors of State have been appointed to assist the sovereign. The current Regency Acts provide for Counsellors of State because they are important to ensure that Government business can continue to run smoothly. As the 1937 Act states, Counsellors of State should be in place to

“prevent delay or difficulty in the despatch of public business.”

Much has changed since 1937, and I hope that when the Government get round to looking at this issue again, they will consider the revolution in communication and technology, which I understand the late Queen herself embraced to great effect during the covid lockdown. If the Bill is about improving procedures and ensuring good administrative practice, we should be looking to the future, embracing that technology, and finding a better solution, rather than simply looking back to 1937 and a time when the telegram was the fastest means of communication, and the ocean liner the quickest means of international travel. Is there a barrier to stop the King signing documents by means of an electronic signature? What is there to prevent formal royal correspondence from being done via email? Is there any legal impediment to the monarch appearing via a video link to join a meeting of the Privy Council? I do not see why any of that should be controversial, so perhaps the Minister could tell me whether or not such things are possible.

Finally, on the theme of modernisation, I suspect that many people will be asking what is the point of us examining how we can help the monarchy to modernise when certain parts of the institution seem stuck in the past. The treatment last week of Ngozi Fulani at Buckingham Palace was appalling, and I am delighted that—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The Bill before the House has a very narrow scope, so perhaps the hon. Gentleman could focus on that.

Brendan O'Hara: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Modernisation is vital, but the institution must help itself to modernise. This Bill is part of that. We will support the Bill today, and I thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker.

12.27 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I rise briefly to add my support to the Bill, and to congratulate the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on his new role. The Bill has

been brought in promptly, following a request from His Majesty the King in the royal message, and entirely appropriately, given that it is within a few weeks of his accession to the throne. It is therefore appropriate to ensure that sufficient Counsellors of State are available as may be required during the course of his reign. It is also entirely appropriate that the Government should put forward His Majesty's brother and sister, both of whom, as was said earlier, have undertaken this role earlier in their lives. His Royal Highness the Earl of Wessex and Forfar was a Counsellor of State for 20 years from his 21st birthday, and Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal was Counsellor of State for 32 years, from her 21st birthday. They are both experienced in this role, and they clearly have the full confidence of His Majesty.

The important point for this House, which has been referenced by all speakers, is that His Majesty needs a sufficient pool of experienced individuals who are working members of the royal family. There is no doubt whatsoever about the extent to which both their Royal Highnesses are committed to the royal family. They have spent their entire working lives in public service, and during the course of last year—a year affected by the covid pandemic—the Princess Royal undertook more royal engagements than any other member of the royal family, and I think two more than His Majesty, then Prince of Wales. The Earl of Wessex undertook more than 200 engagements during the course of that year. There is no doubt that they are entirely suited for the role, or that there is considerable public respect for both their Royal Highnesses, and I commend the Bill to the House.

12.29 pm

Angela Rayner: With the leave of the House, I will keep my closing remarks short. We have been debating a Bill that serves one narrow purpose: to ensure that Counsellors of State are available when His Majesty requires one to deputise in his essential duties. I want to mention—I hope I can call him a friend—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis). I absolutely miss him and our exchanges, and I absolutely agree with his comments—*[Interruption.]* That is not to discourage Members currently on the Government Front Bench!

Michael Ellis: May I say that I miss her, too?

Hon. Members: Ah.

Angela Rayner: I live for days like this in Parliament. Never did I think when I was young that I would be debating such Bills with such hon. and distinguished Members. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member that online is great, but it is nice to keep some traditions and meet in person. We all recognise that.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) reminded me of my wonderful experience with Her late Majesty the Queen when I went on to the Privy Council, and we met via Zoom. That was nice. He also mentioned the practicalities of the Regency Act. I hope that one day, when time allows, we can sharpen some of that, but that is not before us today.

As hon. Members in all parties have recognised, the Bill makes a simple and straightforward change to existing law. It will help to prevent a possible future constitutional problem arising and provide the sovereign with sufficient options and flexibility. Labour Members believe that that is proportionate and reasonable, so we support the Bill's Second Reading.

I also acknowledge the assurances given by Ministers on some of the wider issues that have arisen and thank them and the Palace for the extra clarity that they have provided. I would like to place on record my thanks for their engagement with me on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. Of course, we will continue to work constructively in the national interest wherever we can.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I did love the intervention and the response, which was like something from "Love Actually". *[Laughter.]* Well, it is Christmas.

12.32 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a genuine pleasure to close a Second Reading debate in which there has been such consensus, and concise consensus at that. At times, as we have seen, that consensus has lapsed into adoration.

Angela Rayner: You'll feel it one day!

Alex Burghart: One day, maybe—who knows?

As several hon. Members pointed out, the Bill is a necessary short piece of legislation that brings resilience to our constitutional arrangements and does so at speed. It was necessary that we brought a short Bill before Parliament to get the measures through quickly. The reason for that is, as we all know, His Majesty will soon start to travel in the fulfilment of his duties to the country, so we wanted to have things in place as quickly as possible. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for recognising that and paying tribute to the two new Counsellors of State whom we are appointing today and to how respected they already are. She is right to point to the Regency Act and the fact that the royal household has confirmed that Counsellors of State will only be working royals.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis). Little can be added to his speech, because there is little that anyone can teach him about the workings of our constitution. He was an illustrious member of the Front-Bench team and an extremely well informed Minister in the Cabinet Office. I know that some of his expertise was brought to bear in the design and drafting of the legislation, and I am grateful to him for that.

I also thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who spoke from the SNP Front Bench. He raised a point about the order of precedence. Obviously, the law of succession was changed a few years ago to enable girls born to the sovereign to inherit, but that did not change the existing order of succession. That is why the Princess Royal and the Earl of Wessex feature in the order in which they do. In addition, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for his remarks and concur with what he said.

I am delighted that we have heard in the debate how the Bill commands considerable support in the House, as it did in the other place. I know that this Parliament will wish to be of assistance and support to our sovereign as he goes about his duties.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Counsellors of State Bill [*Lords*]

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

ADDITIONAL COUNSELLORS OF STATE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 2 stand part.

Alex Burghart: The clause provides that His Royal Highness the Earl of Wessex and Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal can be delegated royal functions as Counsellors of State during his or her lifetime respectively. Subsection (2) provides that Their Royal Highnesses are subject to the proviso and disqualification from acting as a Counsellor of State as set out in the 1937 Act.

Clause 2 establishes the short title and provides that the Bill will come into force on the day after it receives Royal Assent.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

12.37 pm

Alex Burghart: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

These are slightly unusual proceedings; the House is not accustomed to such agreement. It has been an honour to be part of these rare proceedings—and rare they are, as our House has not had to debate such matters for nearly 70 years, since 1953. It is therefore right that I take a few moments to thank all of those who have been responsible for drawing up such important legislation so quickly. I thank particularly our excellent officials in the Cabinet Office, who in many ways are the guardians of the constitution, and the Cabinet Secretary for his particular knowledge of these matters. I also thank the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), his Majesty's loyal Opposition and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) from the SNP Front Bench for their genuinely constructive and supportive position on these matters.

It is perhaps fitting that we are touching lightly on these matters this year, in which we have been reminded of how the monarchy remains a fundamental part of

our living and breathing constitution, as it has been since the formation of our kingdom in the 10th century. It also remains an enormous asset to our country and an intrinsic part of who we are. I am delighted that the Bill has commanded such clear support and commend it to the House. God save the King.

12.39 pm

Angela Rayner: I follow the Parliamentary Secretary in thanking those who have spoken in the debates on this Bill, both in this House and in the other place, especially my noble Friend Baroness Smith of Basildon, who spoke for the Opposition. Thanks are also due to all those who have worked on the legislation before us during its passage through the House. I join the Minister in thanking his officials, and so many others.

As the Minister said, Bills do not often go through the House like this. It is testament not only to the affection that the British people and this House feel in recognition of all the royals do for us, but to how we are able to work with our officials to get things through speedily. If anybody wants to study what happens in this House, this would be a really nice way of looking at how Bills go through Parliament—it would be a shorter lesson than some of the other Bills that many hon. Members have been through.

As we know, the passage of legislation through this House is not always simple—and very often, we would say that that is quite right—but I hope we have shown today that where there is consensual and necessary legislation that we need to bring forward, we can act quickly and responsibly. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and God save the King.

12.41 pm

Brendan O'Hara: I add my voice to those who have thanked everyone who was involved in bringing this Bill quickly and speedily to the Floor of the House, and to everyone who helped get it passed with such unanimity and good humour. On the subject of good humour, I have a quick history lesson for the Minister: the kingdom that he referred to as beginning in the 10th century actually began in 1603 with the Union of Crowns, when the King of Scots took the throne of the United Kingdom. That is just a brief history lesson for everyone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have all learned something today; we have also learned how speedily legislation can go through the House when everybody is agreed. It has been my honour and privilege to have been in the Chair through all those stages.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Backbench Business

World AIDS Day

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is my honour and privilege to be in the Chair for at least the opening of this particular debate. I call Lloyd Russell-Moyle to move the motion.

12.42 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World AIDS Day.

I declare an interest as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS and honorary patron of the British HIV Association, and of course as someone who is personally affected by these issues.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate to mark World AIDS Day. Every year, on 1 December, the world commemorates World AIDS Day. People from around the world unite to show support for people living with and affected by HIV, and remember those who lost their lives to AIDS. At 5.30 pm, I, among the community in Brighton, will read out the names of all the people who have died of AIDS in Brighton in the 40 years since the first death, as we do every year. Vigils such as that will be happening up and down the country: in London, in Birmingham, in Manchester, in Oxford, and in other places.

This year's theme is "equalise". It is a recognition of the health inequalities that still affect far too many children, men that sleep with men, transgender people, drug users, sex workers and people in prison. Those are the populations most affected by HIV and AIDS in their respective countries; different countries might have different, more focused populations, but those are the groups. Fundamentally, however, the groups that are most at risk are people who are marginalised from healthcare, and that is what we need to equalise—that is what we need to sort out.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the death of the former *Hansard* reporter Terry Higgins, who died of an AIDS-related illness on 4 July 1982, and the creation of the now well-known Terrence Higgins Trust. On behalf of the APPG, I thank the Terrence Higgins Trust, not only for the work it has done over the past 40 years but for the work it keeps doing, pushing for us to have no new transmissions of HIV by 2030. That seems a remarkable target, but it is within our reach; it will help the estimated 106,000 people living with HIV in England that we know of. The work of the Terrence Higgins Trust, along with the National AIDS Trust and others, continues to lead the way, and I am delighted that the two organisations are working closer together. I hope that collaboration continues.

Ahead of World AIDS Day in 2018, four years ago now, I spoke in this Chamber about my own diagnosis. I said then that World AIDS Day was

"deeply personal to me, because next year I will be marking an anniversary of my own".—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 492.]

Now, of course, it is 14 years since I became HIV-positive. It has been a long journey, from fear to acceptance and to today, where I now play a role of advocacy, knowing

that my treatment keeps me healthy and protects any partner that I might have, preventing me from passing on the disease. Since then, further developments have taken place in the fight against HIV/AIDS—many of them positive, but there have been some setbacks, which I wish to talk about in a bit.

We have, of course, a HIV action plan in England, setting clear goals and milestones for achieving our target. Similar plans are set to be launched in Scotland and Wales—we hope they will come quickly. Last year's HIV action plan for England sets out how we will achieve an 80% reduction in HIV infections by 2025, building to the end of transmissions by 2030. First, that plan will prevent new infections by expanding and improving HIV prevention activities, investing £3.5 million in a national HIV prevention programme up to 2024, and ensure that PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—is expanded to all key groups. Secondly, it will scale up HIV testing in high-risk populations where uptake is low, and ensure that new infections are identified rapidly, including through the expansion of opt-out testing in A&E departments in areas of very high prevalence of HIV. That testing will be backed by £20 million over the next three years.

Thirdly, the plan will ensure that, once diagnosed, people rapidly receive treatment. When I was first diagnosed, you waited until your CD4 count was below 200, which is when you can start to get infections and AIDS can start to be diagnosed. At that time, we did not know whether the drugs would cause continuing side effects; now, as soon as someone is diagnosed, they go on the drugs, because we know that they have very few side effects. Of course, each person has to get the combination that is right for them, because everyone reacts differently, but we have a good array of drugs with which to do that. That means that very quickly—within a matter of months—new people who are diagnosed can be undetectable, and can effectively go about their life without fear or favour. That is a remarkable change in those 14 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, and commend him for his stance and leadership in this House—and, indeed, outside of this House—when it comes to HIV/AIDS and how to live with it, as he does. In Northern Ireland, which he did not refer to, the Public Health Agency has responsibility for this area. Its hope and ambition is to reach the target of eliminating HIV transmission by 2030, and it seems confident that it can do so, because of the PrEP that he has referred to. It is good sometimes to mark and record the things that are going well.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is remarkable. If we achieve that 2030 target in this country, and if we then achieve a roll-out of it globally—that is a lot of ifs—HIV will be the first disease that we have rolled back via treatment and prevention, rather than vaccines. It would be a world leader, and hopefully a pioneer in how we can treat and test other diseases, particularly with mass testing, which I will come on to in a second.

If all that happens, we will meet the 2030 target, but—as we always say—the Government need to do more. To start with, they need to expand opt-out testing. That has been trialled in areas with very high prevalence—that is, Brighton, London, Manchester and Blackpool. Not all of London was originally included in the opt-out

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

testing, but it took the decision to expand that to all hospitals in London, sharing out the money. Remarkably, that has shown that, in non-high prevalence areas, the percentage of people coming back with an HIV-positive test is still significant. The argument, therefore, is to roll that out to all areas.

Over the past 12 months, we have seen real successes in opt-out testing in England. That happens when somebody is already having their blood taken in A&E and the vial is sent off for an additional test. We are testing for HIV and hepatitis B, unless someone opts out. No one is forced to do this, but I understand that very few people opt out.

The pilot's results have been astonishing. In just three months, 102 people were newly identified, and 70 people were identified as having dropped out of treatment. If someone drops out of treatment, they are a risk not only to themselves, but to the wider community. Those people have been brought back into treatment and that has saved lives. The results are clear: opt-out testing is working.

On a side note, it is also possible to test for syphilis with the same vial. However, it was not possible to expand this to syphilis, because syphilis testing is paid for by local authorities, not by NHS England, and the local authorities were unable to identify where people were from, because hospitals are not coterminous with local authorities and it was too complicated. That seems ridiculous. We need the Government to sit down with local authorities or to provide for that through central funding. If we are taking the vial, we can run it through the same machine. If the only reason stopping us is bureaucratic, I do not see why we cannot do this. We should test people routinely for as many things as we can, if we know that it will help people's lives. We know that there is a spike in syphilis in certain key populations.

If this vital programme is eventually expanded to all towns and cities with high prevalence, it will be a game-changer. Where London has expanded the programme, it has already been worthwhile financially in areas that do not have very high prevalence. The programme should also be expanded to sexual health clinics to ensure that everyone going to one is tested for HIV. This may be a surprise to many, but that is not always done routinely and it is not an opt-out system. Actually, an HIV test is becoming less, not more common, because more sexual health clinics are moving to online services. Online services have some great advantages, but one downside is that they require people to collect a vial of their blood, which often does not happen, or does not happen effectively, so HIV test rates are lower. We need to ensure that, when people attend a clinic, it is routine and there is an opt-out system. Some clinics do this already, but it is not universal.

I spoke about the HIV prevention drug, PrEP, in 2018. We have come a long way since the PrEP impact trial. To remind colleagues, PrEP, which is a pill that people take daily, contains two of the three drugs that someone with HIV would have. In fact, I have now been reduced to two because the latest evidence shows that, when someone gets to "undetectable", the drug load for people who have HIV can be reduced to, effectively, just the PrEP load. The drugs will not be exactly the same as I take for PrEP, but some people can maintain on those

as well. So this is also about new interventions that can reduce the costs and the amount of drugs that we are providing.

PrEP prevents HIV and the pill is covered by NHS England, but thousands are still missing out. They are struggling to get PrEP appointments because of under-resourced sexual health services. That is laid bare in the latest report from the National AIDS Trust, the Terrence Higgins Trust, PrEPster, Sophia Forum and One Voice Network. Due to the fragmentation of services in England, the drug PrEP is paid for by NHS England. That is a real milestone for the NHS, and I congratulate the Government on getting that out eventually, after our interventions.

Anyone who is currently sexually active should be tested by sexual health services every three months, and anyone on PrEP should be tested every three months. In theory, therefore, there is no additional resource for sexual health services for someone on PrEP, because the only people on PrEP should be those who are sexually active, or drug-injecting users who should also be tested, and so on—we should not give it to people who do not need it. But our sexual health services in this country rely on balancing the budget through the fact that people do not attend as regularly as they should. Therefore, that limits the places for PrEP appointments and limits the people who can get access to the drug that the NHS is paying for, even though they are entitled to it and should be offered that level of service.

Awareness of PrEP is far too low and it cannot be given out by GPs, pharmacies, community or maternity services. That means that the burden is solely on local government-funded sexual health services. We all know what is happening with local government and probably do not need to go there today—that is a whole other debate.

If we are going to meet our 2030 target, it is vital that everyone who is at risk of acquiring HIV and who wishes to access PrEP can do so as a key tool in completely and effectively preventing new HIV transmissions when it is taken as directed. Over the past two years, the all-party group on HIV and AIDS has published three important reports. We published "Increasing and normalising HIV testing across the UK"—which I just touched on—and "Nothing about us without us", which addresses the needs of black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the UK. Those communities are some of the hardest-hit by HIV in this country and are the least likely to have HIV testing done routinely. The roll-out and trial of the saliva HIV testing, which the Terrence Higgins Trust did two years ago and last year, was particularly effective in those communities. It was seen as less invasive, more private, easier to get hold of and possible to do through online and postal services. The Government should consider whether that process should be normalised nationally or provided cheaply and accessibly.

Our other report, "HIV and Quality of Life—What do we mean? How do we achieve it?", was published today, and my colleagues have been launching that in Brussels with our partners in Europe. Those reports have been made possible only through the evidence provided by the strong HIV sector that we have in the UK. Its continued insights and hard work are appreciated.

The latest data, however, is not quite as positive. There were 2,692 people diagnosed across England in 2021. That is up 0.7%, from 2,673 in 2020. Some might say that is a small amount but, in 2022, there was a fall

of 0.2% and, in 2019, there was a fall of 33%. We are clearly plateauing and there is a danger that we are starting to get more diagnoses. That might be positive because we are delving down to the hardest-to-reach areas, but we need more evidence on why that has plateaued and why it is creeping up before we can be sure that that is something to celebrate, rather than to be worried about.

To keep on track, it is vital that we use every lever available to end HIV transmission and to ensure that we do not plateau, as the numbers show. As I said, we can end transmission by 2030 and I strongly believe that the UK will be one of the first countries to do so. We are a world leader. At the beginning of the week, I spoke to our London NHS colleagues, who said that it is the first time in their career that people have been phoning up from around the world to say, “How are you doing the opt-out testing? How are you doing the PrEP roll-out? We want to learn from you.” That is remarkable and we should be deeply proud of that. The head of UNAIDS came to London and Brighton and we showed her the HIV testing vending machines that we have in Brighton. She said, “I thought that I would never learn anything for the developing world from a rich country. I was here as a courtesy visit, but I have seen what you are doing and how we can roll that out to parts of Kenya and Uganda, and community settings around the world, with HIV testing vending machines that run using solar panels”.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on all his work on the issue. Global leadership is incredibly important. He might be coming on to this point, but does he share the disappointment felt by a lot of people in the sector and the wider international development sector—perhaps even the head of UNAIDS—about the cut in the UK Government’s funding for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria? That risks exactly the kind of backsliding that the hon. Member warns us about.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I agree exactly. I will come on to the Global Fund at the very end of my speech, but let me move on now to the picture globally, which I am afraid is totally different.

Back in 2018, I said that

“one young person every day is still diagnosed with HIV and young people continue to suffer some of the worst sexual health outcomes.”—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 496.]

The situation globally has become bleaker. Last year, an adolescent girl or young woman was newly infected with HIV every two minutes. In the past year alone, 650,000 people have died of AIDS-related illnesses and 1.5 million people became infected with HIV. Only half of children living with HIV have access to life-saving medication. Inequality between children and adults in HIV treatment coverage is increasing rather than narrowing.

Why are people still dying unnecessarily of AIDS? Why are there so many new HIV infections year after year, globally? It is too easy to put the blame on current crises such as covid and war; the reality is that we were already off target before many of those crises hit. The lack of a comprehensive healthcare system, a lack of education and the growing influence of evangelical Christian churches in Africa—often American-backed—have led to an environment that is hostile to an effective HIV response.

Uganda was the first country to host the world AIDS summit—it was a revolutionary leader. The same President is in power now, but has completely rolled things back. When Uganda hosted the world AIDS conference almost 30 years ago, condoms were given to every delegate and given out into community settings. When I went to Uganda only a few years ago to visit aid projects that we were paying for, I sat at the back of a classroom with Stephen Twigg, the then Chair of the Select Committee on International Development. We heard a teacher tell children that they could prevent AIDS if they washed the toilet seat and observed “sex only after marriage”. I am afraid that things have gone backwards because of the influence of some malign groups. It is concerning.

One of the inequalities standing in the way of ending AIDS is access to education, particularly for young girls. Six in seven new HIV infections among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa occur among girls who are outside formal education. Enabling girls to stay in school until they complete secondary education reduces their vulnerability to HIV by more than 50%. All children, including those who have dropped out because of covid and those who were out of school anyway, should get a complete secondary education, including comprehensive sex education.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes such an important point. Does he agree that we cannot shy away from talking about sexual and reproductive health in the developing world, because that is the single most effective way to ensure that girls stay in school, stay not pregnant and stay free from diseases that will affect them in future? It is crucial that in our role as providers of international aid we do not step back from programmes that talk about contraception.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. As dark forces around the world try, I am afraid, to withdraw money from programmes that talk in a rational and evidence-based way about sex and reproductive rights, we have a greater responsibility. We must step up, because if we do not, others will not. As the right hon. Lady points out, there are two sides to the coin: providing better sexual health education means that girls stay in school, and staying in school allows them to get better education about their health. Those are both positive things. Both issues need to be tackled together.

Another inequality standing in the way of ending AIDS is the inequality in the realisation of human rights. Some 68 countries still criminalise gay men. As well as contravening the human rights of LGBT+ people, laws that punish same-sex relations help to sustain stigma and discrimination. Such laws are barriers preventing people from seeking and receiving healthcare for fear of being punished or detained. Repealing them worldwide is vital to the task of working against AIDS.

Of the 68 countries that outlaw homosexuality, 36 are Commonwealth countries. The majority of Commonwealth countries are still upholding laws that we imposed and that never originated in the countries themselves. In fact, before British colonialism—British imperialism, I should say—many of those countries had better customs and practices around homosexuality than they do now. These customs and practices are not native to people’s home countries; they were imposed. They should be

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discarded with the shackles of imperialism, which we all now recognise was wrong. One in four men in Caribbean countries where homosexuality is criminalised have HIV. Globally, 60% of people with HIV live in Commonwealth countries. Collectively, we have a responsibility to tackle that in the Commonwealth. Barriers undermine the right to health: a right that all people should enjoy.

Beyond the human rights implications, the laws criminalising homosexuality also have an impact on public health. LGBT+ people end up not seeking health services for fear of being prosecuted. Those who do seek health services often have to lie about how they were infected. Astronomically high numbers of people with HIV in Russia say that they were infected because they were drug-injecting users; that is widely believed to be partly because of the attitude in Russia that it is better to be a drug-injecting user than an LGBTQ person. Without accurately knowing the source of infections, we cannot accurately run public health programmes to save people. Putting people undercover in the dark, hidden in corners, means that the virus lives on. That is a danger for us all.

In some countries, people living with HIV are at risk of being criminalised even when they take precautions with their sexual partners. That opens them up to blackmail and fraudulent claims from former partners. People with HIV in the UK are not immune to that either, as we have seen in some high-profile cases. We have known for at least 20 years that antiretroviral therapy reduces HIV transmission, and for the past few years we have known that it stops it completely, so there should be no doubt that a person with sustained undetectable levels of HIV in their blood cannot transmit HIV to their sexual partner, and laws should not punish them. However, under Canadian criminal law, for example, people living with HIV can be charged and prosecuted if they do not inform their partner about their HIV-positive status before having sex. The law does not follow the science, and it puts people at risk.

Laws requiring disclosure perpetuate the stigma against HIV-positive people. With the advent of PrEP and with “Undetectable = untransmittable”, the law should now reflect the fact that everyone has a role in protecting themselves against HIV and everyone must step up. The criminalisation of drug-injecting users and sex workers has an equally negative effect on HIV prevention and treatment, as I have outlined, in LGBT communities. In all these areas, a health and human rights-based approach must be taken if we truly want to see the end of HIV.

Beating pandemics is a political challenge. We can end HIV and AIDS by 2030 in this country, but only if we are bold in our actions and our investments. We need courageous leadership. We need people worldwide to insist that their leaders be courageous. That is why last month it was so disappointing not to see courageous leadership from this Government. The UK Government were the only donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to cut their financial settlement—by £400 million. The fund asked donors to raise their pledges by 30% this year, and almost all the G7 nations—which are suffering economic problems that are, in many respects, similar to ours; as the Government often remind us, this is a global crisis, not a crisis of their own making, although in our view it is a

bit of both—increased their amounts. For decades the UK was the leader in the global response to these infections and diseases, but that is no longer the case. When our allies met the fund’s request for a 30% increase, the UK went for a 30% cut from their 2019 pledge.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman—my friend—for making this speech; he is an extraordinary advocate in this area. However, I want to put on record the fact that the UK is the third biggest funder of the Global Fund. We have, to date, contributed just under £4.5 billion.

The hon. Gentleman has said that we are leading the way in respect of our health and our treatment, and that other countries are following. This, too, is a commodity that can be traded and given to other countries. It is not always a question of the value of the money that we give, because we can trade skills, research and development as well. The hon. Gentleman knows where I stand on the development issue, but I think it is worth making that point.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Gentleman has been very good on development issues in the past, and I think he is right. He has also touched on the discussion about patents and patent waivers. There is a live discussion about how we can ensure that the poorest countries in the world can gain access to some of the frontline drugs. Long-lasting drugs are one of the latest innovations, with the possibility of either an injection or a set of, effectively, implants—I cannot think of the exact term off the top of my head—which would last for up to a month and a half. That is revolutionary, especially for those who have irregular access to health systems. The problem is that these are the most expensive drugs because of the way our patent system works; but they are also the most useful in the parts of the world that are hardest to reach. In the UK, most people have regular access to medical settings and can receive daily pill medication. The UK has not always been the very best when it comes to seeking patent waivers. We have done it in the case of many HIV drugs, but we should consider doing it more widely. That might be a good compromise, but we will then need to step it up.

The UK’s decision on the 30% cut is, in my view, a disastrous decision, which stems from the Conservatives’ 0.5% cap on international development. Rather than considering that amount to be a floor and saying that it is the bottom of our ambition, the Government have said that it is the top of our ambition. Moreover, as a result of their insistence on including the Homes for Ukraine scheme, whereby we are housing Ukrainian people here in the UK, in that 0.5% cap, money is flowing out of the international development Department. International development—internationally spent money—should be 0.5%; that would enable us to fulfil many of our commitments quite easily. The additional aid and charity that we provide should be celebrated, but it should not be detrimental to others. This cut will result in the preventable deaths of up to 1.5 million people, and risk over 34.5 million new transmissions of HIV, TB and malaria. It will no doubt harm our credibility, and I hope we will reverse it as soon as we can.

We in the APPG have the political will to meet the targets set by UNAIDS and the action plans for Wales, Scotland, England and, I was pleased to hear, Northern

Ireland. We will continue to work with and challenge the Government in ensuring that they do the same, because it is time we stepped up and pushed for that final mile. When you are at the end of the race, you do not slow down; you speed up. This is a prize that we can win, so let us not allow it to slip through our hands. In the words of the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, let us end the “dither and delay”. Let us end HIV/AIDS today.

1.14 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who speaks with such passion, knowledge and indeed experience. I vividly remember being in the Chamber four years ago when he spoke of his own diagnosis, and of how he had coped with the emotional stress and trauma and the physical challenges. Of course it is always a privilege to follow any Member who speaks with such a depth of knowledge.

I apologise for the fact that my speech will focus almost exclusively on women. As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I am very conscious that some of the people who are diagnosed at the latest stage, and some of those who are afraid of going for a test, are women. It has always been a humbling experience for me, in my role as Chair of the Committee, to meet those women living with HIV who have spoken of the barriers that they felt prevented them from taking a test. That is why I commend the work done by organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust and, indeed, the all-party parliamentary group, which has always led the way in trying to break down the stigma associated with testing.

There should be no such stigma. After all, there has been no stigma attached to covid tests over the past two years; and making oneself aware of one's own HIV status is actually one of the most empowering actions that an individual can take. That is why, as Chair of the Select Committee and indeed before that—I was about to say, “I have never been afraid”, but that is the wrong term to use. I have always been keen to ensure that I use my role to emphasise to others that it is perfectly okay to go and get a test, and it is also much easier to do so nowadays than it used to be.

I was going to say that I had never been afraid, but I vividly recall that Simon Kirby, the hon. Gentleman's predecessor as Member of Parliament for Brighton, Kemptown, used to arrange in this place, every year, a testing session for Members. I remember Simon telling me, years ago, “Nokesy, you have to go along and get a test”, and I remember rolling my eyes and saying, “I don't really fancy that.” I was rather terrified of the prospect of going. However, I also remember coming away after the test and thinking, “That was the right thing to do. I now know that I don't have HIV, so I can relax about that, but I also know how important it is to talk about it.”

I remember, too, the grief that I was given on social media from the ill-educated, ignorant and—to be frank—bigoted people who used that as a stick with which to beat me: “Ooh—why did she need an HIV test?” Why did I need one? First, to know, and secondly, to be a voice for everyone else who felt anxious about getting an HIV test. I wanted to tell them, “There is nothing wrong with it; there is no stigma attached to it; you are

doing it for your own wellbeing.” That is why I now act as a champion for all women, telling them how important it is to go and get a test.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown made a very important point—I dwelt on it a little when I was thinking about what I wanted to say—about the prevalence of online and postal tests. I think that they are great innovations. Earlier this year, however, I received a little package through the post with the message “Give HIV the finger”—which was a wonderful message, but it was hard to get the required amount of blood out of my finger, and I felt slightly concerned about whether it was enough. I thought, “Will this be effective? Who knows?” For me, much of that process was about being photographed proudly holding up the box, having taken an HIV test. However, another part of it was to do with the fact that we need these testing programmes to be effective, we need people to be confident enough to use them, and we need them to be available in all sorts of locations.

That brings me to my next point. We need people to be culturally competent and aware. We know from statistics that a third of the people living with HIV are women, and we know that 25% of the new diagnoses are in women, but we also know of the prevalence of HIV in black African communities. Covid taught us—and I am an absolute advocate of this—that we must learn the lessons of really difficult experiences. We learnt through covid about the importance of speaking to people in languages that they understand, in a way that they can relate to, on the media channels that they instinctively use. It is no good broadcasting our public health messages exclusively on the BBC; we have to find different channels in order to communicate with the audiences who are most at risk, where the prevalence is highest, and where people might not be engaging with the traditional forms of media that you and I, Madam Deputy Speaker, might use. That is a really important message that I would like to give to NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care. We must keep up the pressure, and talk to communities in which there is high prevalence and where there might be barriers, cultural or otherwise, to getting a test.

I have an important wider point on research. It was crucial that a great deal of the research on HIV and AIDS be done on those who were most likely to be affected by them, so of course, a massive wealth of research has been done on men. I absolutely acknowledge that that was right, but there are knowledge gaps when it comes to women with HIV and which drugs might be most effective for them. There is certainly still a barrier to women accessing PrEP; that is borne out by the numbers. They are simply not using it. We have to understand why that is, and how effective that drug and indeed other HIV drugs may be on women. We have to make sure that the DHSC and NHS England not only have sufficient data, but disaggregate it, so that it can be broken down by gender and ethnicity. Often when I talk about health, I find myself complaining and browbeating others about the lack of data that is relevant exclusively to women, the lack of women coming forward in drug trials, and the lack of research done on women. Those things are true when it comes to HIV.

I turn to what we have been good at. The action plan for HIV talks about the successes on vertical transmission; a tiny number of children are now born with HIV in this country. A big part of that is down to opt-out testing of pregnant women; the take-up has been absolutely

[Caroline Nokes]

enormous. The figures show the result: of the 60 people diagnosed in 2019 who acquired HIV through vertical transmission, only five were born in the UK. That is a huge step forward, and we have done brilliantly on vertical transmission, but it is crucial that we never let up on that, and that we get the message out that effective drugs taken during pregnancy can prevent HIV transmission to a baby. The mother has to be mindful of risks to do with the method of birth, be that natural delivery or via caesarean, and there is a risk factor involved in breastfeeding. All those pieces of information can effectively and easily be communicated to expectant mothers, and they absolutely should and must be.

I am conscious that my knowledge is not as great as that of other Members in the Chamber, so I have deliberately kept my comments relatively brief. We need to keep up the pressure. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown referred to approaching the finish line. When I do anything that involves running, there is definitely a slowdown, usually due to exhaustion, as I approach the finish line, but we cannot afford a slowdown here. We must accelerate to the finish. We can now see a UK without HIV. He made important points about the developing world and the efforts that still need to be made there, but the end is in sight, and it is absolutely crucial that we reach it and see a world that is free of HIV.

1.22 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and to follow the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). She and I seem on many occasions to be on the same side in debates in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall. I commend her on her work to promote the values, aspirations and concerns of women in this House, this country, and the world.

I also commend the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on setting the scene so well. I do not think that I have ever missed a debate on HIV/AIDS in the Chamber or Westminster Hall, and I came along to contribute, and to support him. I commend him, as I said in my intervention; he has been a shining light to many who suffer from AIDS across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and he has contributed in an exceptional way today. Well done to him.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the global theme for this World AIDS day is “Equalise”. I thought to myself, “That is exactly what we should try to do.” We should not only make sure that everyone in this great United Kingdom has access to PrEP, which he referred to, but ensure the same access to medication and treatment across the world. He outlined that point very well, and I fully support it. Let us replicate what we do here across the world.

On World AIDS Day, UNAIDS asks that we take four actions. The first is to increase the availability, quality and sustainability of services for HIV treatment, testing and prevention, so that everyone is well served. The second is to reform laws, policies and practices in order to tackle the stigma and exclusion faced by people living with HIV and by key and marginalised populations, so that everyone is shown respect and is welcome. The

hon. Gentleman addressed that very well. The third action is to ensure the sharing of technology, so that communities in the global south and the north have equal access to the best HIV science. Lastly, communities should be able to make use of and adapt the “Equalise” message to highlight particular inequalities that they face, and should be able to press for the action needed to address those inequalities.

STOPAIDS got in contact with my office before the debate. It informed me that the UK, which has provided some £15 million a year to UNAIDS for the last five years, has cut its funding by more than 80% to just £2.5 million this year. I concur with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown that that is a worry, and I think that concern will be expressed by others in the Chamber, too. Even though the Minister does not have direct responsibility for the issue, perhaps he will speak about that. The cut jeopardises work that supports some of the most marginalised. The Government and our Ministers should uplift that funding, even if just slightly, to ensure that charitable organisations are fully funded to do their work.

I want to outline what we are doing in Northern Ireland through the Public Health Agency, which I mentioned in an intervention on the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown. I want to mention its achievements, even though there may have been a slight increase in the number of those with HIV; the issue is how we combat that. I think that what it has done is excellent. Its 2022 annual surveillance report on sexually transmitted infections, which is based on data from '21, showed that there were 76 newly diagnosed cases of HIV in Northern Ireland in 2021. That is a 12% increase from 68 diagnoses in 2020, but—this is the key—more HIV testing was being done. Almost 80,000 HIV tests were carried out in Northern Ireland in '21, which is a 21% increase on the approximately 66,000 done in 2020. The PHA said:

“We are making great progress towards eliminating HIV transmission by 2030. Frequent HIV testing, the offer of PrEP to those most at risk of HIV, together with prompt treatment among those diagnosed, remains key to achieving this.”

So there is more testing, more contact, and fewer people getting AIDS. That is an example of what we are doing in Northern Ireland, and I commend the PHA for doing that so very well.

In 2019 in Northern Ireland, 40% of those newly diagnosed with HIV were gay and bisexual men. In comparison, 52% of cases involved heterosexual contact. There is a stereotype and an assumption that all people with HIV or AIDS are gay or bisexual, but the stats clearly dispute that. As the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North said—this applies to Northern Ireland as well—there must be greater awareness that not only gay men get AIDS. It has impacted the lives of many women, too. Unfortunately, many of the people represented by those 52% of cases in Northern Ireland are ladies. The right hon. Lady outlined the point exceptionally well. It is good that we have it on record that the disease needs to be tackled head-on, always. The HIV strategy must reflect the fact that more heterosexual people get HIV than gay or bisexual people. A new strategy is clearly needed—one that takes on board the figures, and helps us to understand the issues even better.

In Newtonards in my constituency, the Elim church, which is very active, has had an incredible strategy for Swaziland in southern Africa. It has helped to build

hospitals, health clinics, schools and other buildings, which has provided jobs. It has also actively helped to address the AIDS epidemic in Swaziland. Those things need to be done proactively and positively. I commend the Elim church and mission in Newtownards as an example of what can be done where there is the will and understanding, not through their own efforts alone but working collectively with others to reduce the number of people in Swaziland who have AIDS.

There are many orphans in Swaziland whose parents died due to AIDS, and some of them were born with AIDS through no fault of their own, and the Elim church and mission actively works with them. They come to my constituency every year as part of the church's missionary work, and I have never failed to be moved by their singing and joy. They are receiving treatment and medication, too.

Northern Ireland has only one HIV charity, Positive Life, which I commend for how well it does for us in Northern Ireland. Positive Life attends the Democratic Unionist party conference every year, and I make it my business to thank the charity every year for its tremendous work to promote a positive future for people living with or affected by HIV in Northern Ireland. It provides free rapid testing for those who are concerned that they might have HIV, and it offers support along the way. We are all indebted to Positive Life in Northern Ireland, and to all the other charities that play an invaluable role in battling HIV and making the stereotypes and stigma a thing of the past.

The Public Health Agency has a clear strategy for those in Northern Ireland who have AIDS, whether through transfusions, activities or whatever it may be. I am pleased to say that the positivity not only in Northern Ireland but elsewhere encourages me and gives me great hope. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown is an example of that positivity, for which I commend him. I also commend the Minister in anticipation of his answers, which I hope are along the lines we expect.

1.32 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for leading this debate and for his commitment to this cause. As the number of new HIV cases in this country falls, the importance of the issue does not. We stand on the shoulders of giants and of the 38 million globally lost to AIDS-related illness. Their early passing will not be forgotten. In fact, it inspires us to work harder and quicker.

This Government are proud to be one of the first in the world to commit to ending new HIV cases by 2030, and we are proud to put our money where our mouth is. This time last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), as Health Secretary, provided £20 million to fund opt-out testing in London, Brighton and Manchester. Thanks to the campaign of the Terrence Higgins Trust and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), Blackpool was also rightly included. This investment has had remarkable results and is already garnering savings for the NHS.

In the first 100 days of this programme, around 128 people were newly diagnosed and roughly 65 people who were previously diagnosed returned to the care of an HIV clinic. On top of all the standard HIV testing,

that is almost 200 people who no longer have HIV attacking their immune system and who cannot pass on the virus to others. What a triumph. Adding that half the hospitals also tested for hepatitis and found 325 cases of hepatitis B and 153 cases of hepatitis C, the success only builds. Well over 500 people have been prevented from becoming very unwell on our watch.

Having spent about £2.2 million on four months of testing, the savings are calculated at between £6 million and £8 million. These are not pipe-dream savings but a real reduction in the pressure that accident and emergency departments and hospitals face this winter. When Croydon Hospital started opt-out testing, the average hospital stay for a newly diagnosed HIV patient was 34.9 days. Two years later, it is 2.4 days. I know a few hospitals that could also do with such pressures being released.

In the west midlands we have five areas of high HIV prevalence, and my borough of Sandwell is among them with a prevalence of 2.92 cases per 1,000 adults, which is well above the national average. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence says that areas such as Sandwell should

“offer and recommend HIV testing on admission to hospital, including emergency departments, to everyone who has not previously been diagnosed with HIV and who is undergoing blood tests for another reason.”

Such testing is not yet happening in Wolverhampton, Coventry, Sandwell, Birmingham or Walsall. We have to find our undiagnosed and lost-to-care residents and get them into treatment as soon as possible.

The Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street, has written to the Health Secretary asking for this “invest to save” resource for our region, and I add my voice to his call and ask the Minister if he can help level up the HIV response outside London. With funding for opt-out HIV testing, we can put the west midlands on track to end new HIV cases by 2030.

Andy Street rightly said

“This is not a World AIDS Day stunt but a serious call for action. I don't want ‘The Ribbons’ to simply be a tribute. It needs to be a reminder that HIV is still happening to many”.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook) and local councillors in Sandwell, such as Councillor Scott Chapman, join Andy and me in asking for an extension to opt-out testing to cover my West Bromwich East constituency.

We have made such incredible strides. As well as remembering the devastation that HIV has caused for so many around the world, we have to celebrate how far we have come. We have preventive drugs available on the NHS—drugs that stop any trace of HIV so that those who contract it cannot pass it on to others—and we are now seeing the major success of opt-out testing in some of the country's worst HIV hotspots. In an odd way, the medical question is not really the problem; it is the stigma.

I recently met Harry Whitfield, also known as Charity Kase, who last year made his debut on “RuPaul's Drag Race UK” to showcase his incredible talents. He talked about how hard it was to deal with his HIV diagnosis. For last year's World AIDS Day, Harry said:

“The stigma around HIV is far worse than the disease itself. I take one tablet per day to stay healthy and completely undetectable so I can't pass the disease on. I'm thriving in my life every day, but that's not the narrative that gets told when talking about HIV.”

[Nicola Richards]

Last year, like so many, I was completely engrossed in “It’s A Sin.” Until then, I had not thought that much about HIV. Probably because of my age, I had not properly considered how terrifying that period of time was for so many. When I was sent an HIV test to raise awareness during testing week, I took the test and posted about it on social media. I knew it had the potential to create some odd feedback, but I felt it was important. Some of the comments came from people who thought HIV was a thing of the past, and they accused me of talking about it only as a means to control people now that we are out of the covid pandemic. It showed me the importance of keeping this issue alive.

My experience is similar to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), with people questioning why I thought it was necessary to take a test and what I had been up to. However, one constituent thanked me. He said:

“I’m a victim of this myself. I was fortunate to be born at the right time for effective treatments. But only just. These new tests were not around when I was diagnosed. I just happened to randomly find out through routine MOT as they call it.”

He also said told me that the stigma is the main issue.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing this important debate on World AIDS Day. Like the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), my Slough constituency has a relatively high prevalence of HIV. It is vital that our town is properly supported in the fight against HIV and AIDS in order to meet the 2030 target, which is why I wrote to the Health Secretary to request that Slough be included in the opt-out HIV testing scheme.

Does the hon. Lady agree it is important that the Government support areas like ours so that we get the right level of support? Without that support, we could experience a resurgence that none of us wants.

Nicola Richards: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Opt-out testing is one of the easiest ways to end the transmission of HIV and become the first country to be HIV-free by 2030, which would be incredible. Opt-out testing is clearly a great route to do that.

“It’s A Sin” has helped to bring this issue back to life, not just as a reminder of the 38 million people around the world lost to AIDS-related illness, but as a reminder of how far we have come. The series also makes it glaringly obvious that we have more to do to tackle the stigma.

I place on record my thanks and appreciation for the Terrence Higgins Trust. It is 40 years since the death of Terry Higgins, one of the first to die of an AIDS-related illness. The trust does incredible work to end the stigma around HIV, which is one of the biggest barriers that stops people getting testing, and therefore one of the biggest barriers to ending the transmission of HIV by 2030.

HIV is no longer a death sentence. It is no longer the terrifying disease that “It’s a Sin” so intensely brought to life for people like me who did not live through those incredibly difficult times. I thank the Government for

supporting opt-out testing, and I call one last time for the pilot to be extended to other hotspots, including the west midlands.

1.40 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards). I welcome this debate and I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for bringing it to the House today. I also wish to praise him for his leadership in this area and for the work he has done to educate the public on the realities of people living with HIV. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of prejudices out there, and his speaking openly about his own experience as somebody living with HIV is incredibly powerful and important. When people see that their representatives are representative of society as a whole it makes a real difference. I will not speak at length, because we have heard a series of excellent speeches and I am going to use some of the same facts and figures that have been mentioned. However, I want to say how pleased I am that we are still having these debates, because this problem has not gone away.

The Government committed in December 2021 to achieve zero new HIV infections, HIV or AIDS-related deaths in England by 2030. That is an ambitious target, but I am sure everyone across this Chamber can agree it is essential. The framework for achieving that means ensuring equitable access to and uptake of HIV prevention programmes, scaling up testing in line with national guidelines, optimising rapid access to treatment and retention in care, improving the quality of life for people living with HIV and addressing the stigma surrounding infection and testing.

We must work to address the lazy stereotypes associated with HIV/AIDS, especially those surrounding the LGBT community. I am pleased to see that real progress is being made. The Government have provided £20 million to ensure that HIV opt-out testing is expanded to areas with a high prevalence, including Manchester, London, Blackpool—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) for his dogged determination in getting Blackpool included—and Brighton. That has helped to reduce diagnosis times and improve diagnosis rates.

In Rochdale borough, where my Heywood and Middleton constituency is located, 2.2 in every 1,000 adults are living with HIV. I would particularly like to thank the teams at Middleton health centre and Heywood clinic for their work in providing sexual health testing and support, and I hope we will be able to take advantage of opt-out testing too, as it is essential. The roll-out of opt-out testing saw 128 people newly diagnosed with HIV, 325 people newly diagnosed with hepatitis B, as has been mentioned, and 153 people newly diagnosed with hepatitis C. At a cost of just £2.2 million across 100 days, the opt-out testing paid for itself, saving the NHS an estimated £6 million to 9 million, through early diagnosis and treatment. Opt-out testing also goes some way to addressing health inequalities, with higher proportions of women and people from black African and black Caribbean backgrounds being diagnosed compared with the national average.

In March 2020, the Department of Health and Social Care provided £16 million in funding to local authorities to provide PrEP. I warmly welcome that, but barriers

still exist. More than 57% of people waited more than 12 weeks to access PrEP and only 35% who attempted to access PrEP services were successful. It is essential that that changes. PrEP is a game changer for all of us. It is an essential tool if we are to end new infections by the next decade in the UK.

Of course, we know that this is not just a problem here at home. The truth is that covid-19 was the second pandemic of our lifetimes and we are still living through the first; this is a global matter. That is why I am proud that the UK provides funds to UNAIDS, the Robert Carr Fund and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. I will join the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown in saying that I would have liked to have seen the levels sustained, but my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) made the important point that there are other things we can leverage as a country to help other countries in their fight against this disease. The UK is a co-founder of Global Fund and the third largest donor historically—my hon. Friend mentioned the figure of £4.4 billion in that regard—and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office announced on 14 November that the UK will contribute a further £1 billion, so at least we are still in the fight. As with covid, the truth is that none of us is safe until all of us are safe, and we have a role to play in supporting those parts of the world less able to tackle HIV/AIDS than ourselves.

As we aim for our 2030 target, I would also like to draw the Government's attention to the recommendations of the Terrence Higgins Trust and National AIDS Trust, which are calling for the expansion of opt-out testing to all areas of high prevalence—I cannot stress how important that is—the provision of PrEP to all who could benefit from it, which is very important, and a refocusing of sexual health services that have been displaced by the recent mpox outbreak.

There is a huge amount of work to do if we are to reach our 2030 target, and that will rely on adequate funding, access and information across society. It will need those of us in this place to speak openly and honestly about HIV/AIDS and to be collaborative, working across the piece. I am confident that we can get to that 2030 target and I will continue to support everyone working to that endeavour for as long as I have the privilege to be in this place.

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

1.44 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I join all Members in commending the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for leading this debate and for informing us so well on a subject on which he is such a powerful crusader and advocate. I thank him and commend him for his contribution today.

Today, 1 December, is the annual World AIDS Day. From the inaugural World AIDS Day in 1988, the first ever global health day, until today, it has given an opportunity for people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV, to show support for people living with HIV and to commemorate those who have, sadly, lost their lives as a result of AIDS-related illnesses. More than 105,000 people are living with HIV in the UK, and

globally an estimated 38 million people have the virus. Despite the fact that the virus was only identified in 1984, more than 35 million people have died of HIV or AIDS-related illnesses, making it one of the most destructive pandemics ever known.

Each year in the UK more than 4,000 people are diagnosed with HIV. Many people do not know the facts about how to protect themselves and others, and stigma and discrimination remain a reality for so many people who are currently living with this condition. About 6,000 people in Scotland are living with AIDS, according to Health Protection Scotland data, and 98% of those attending HIV specialist treatment and care were receiving antiretroviral therapy—ART. In 95%, the virus cannot be detected in their blood, meaning they have an undetectable viral load and cannot transmit HIV. We know that many within our society are still largely unaware of the disease and the risks of it. A recent survey from the National AIDS Trust found that only 16% of people surveyed knew that if someone with HIV is on effective treatment, they cannot pass on HIV and can expect to live a long, happy, healthy and fulfilling life.

HIV continues to be a major public health crisis both in the UK and across the world, as we have heard today. Although we know that HIV disproportionately impacts segments of the LGBTQ+ community, the two issues should not be conflated; HIV is by no means confined to LGBTQ+ communities or certain black or ethnic minority communities. The fact is that anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age or any other factor, can acquire HIV or AIDS.

We in Scotland are extremely proud to be the first country in the UK to make PrEP available free of charge to those at a high risk of acquiring HIV. We have made huge progress in detecting and treating HIV, and people with the virus are able to live those long, happy and fulfilling lives. PrEP is free of charge from NHS Scotland for anyone who is more at risk of getting HIV. As we have heard from the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown, it is simply an oral medicine, in pill form, comprising two HIV antiretroviral drugs. It is prescribed to HIV-negative people at risk of becoming infected as part of a comprehensive approach to HIV prevention. We know that the drug is highly effective at stopping HIV from being passed on. In clinical trials, PrEP has been shown to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted HIV by between 75% and 86%, so it is hugely successful. Research led by Glasgow Caledonian University's Professor Claudia Estcourt shows there has been significant reduction in HIV infections since the implementation of the first PrEP programme in Scotland in July 2017, and that new diagnoses in Scotland have fallen by 20%.

The SNP Scottish Government will continue work to reduce the stigma of HIV, raise awareness of the condition and reduce its transmission. Support is being provided for new research on reducing transmission of the virus, and a separate working group will also look at the clinical utility of PrEP in Scotland.

The SNP Scottish Government have also provided £337,000 to develop a national online service for sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne viruses, which will allow people to request a test online and conduct that home self-sampling that we have heard about today from across the House. Every tool possible will be required in our fight against HIV/AIDS. These are all

[Steven Bonnar]

excellent tools and the Scottish Government remain committed to being on course to reach their target of eliminating HIV transmission in Scotland, and across the rest of the UK, by 2030.

As a fierce defender of minorities in this place, I must also mention the plain fact that many of those living across these nations with HIV are vulnerable. Some experience language, faith and cultural barriers associated with long-standing stigma, while others have complexities, such as mental health and societal issues, that impact their access to health and social care services, leading to poorer health outcomes. As we are all too aware, socio-economic inequalities drive health inequalities. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken by his Government to mitigate the impact of austerity and reduce inequality for all our minority communities?

The Government need to take an intersectional approach to healthcare—an approach that recognises that many people in the United Kingdom will face multiple and often overlapping disadvantages and barriers to accessing good healthcare, and sometimes, as we have heard, a postcode lottery.

Finally, on the matter of funding, the SNP is once again calling on the UK Government to reverse, in effect, the 83% cut to UNAIDS funding, which is a consequence of their decision to cut the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of our GDP. On 31 Oct 2022, the UK Government missed the deadline to donate to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. At the time, Mike Podmore, UK Director at STOPAIDS, said:

“The UK is acting as an unreliable partner and preventing the Global Fund from communicating clearly to its grantees about what funding is now available for them to work with, creating uncertainty.”

The consequences of that action could be immeasurable when it comes to the number of lives affected. Although the UK did provide some funding, it was £400 million less than in 2019. Again, we in the SNP call on the UK Government to do the right thing. The aid budget must be restored to its 0.7% level, especially if the UK does not want to be known as an unreliable partner among its counterparts.

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

1.52 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I, too, congratulate both my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it. In thanking my hon. Friend, I want to say that we listened intently to his opening contribution. It was full of wisdom, insight and personal advocacy and showed the commitment that he brings to the issue in this place. The House of Commons is a better place when we speak openly and challenge those in power about the issues that still prevail, not just in this country but across the world when it comes to HIV/AIDS.

On this day, we remember the 40 million people who have lost their lives to the worldwide AIDS pandemic and related illnesses since the disease was first found in the 1980s. In this debate, Members from across the

House, in a small, but perfectly formed manner, have raised some important issues. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for the way in which she always challenges inequalities around the world, especially inequalities facing women and girls, and, of course, this is an issue that affects women and girls around the globe. It is an equalities issue, and I thank her for her contribution. I also thank the hon. Members for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and even the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), for their contributions. The great thing about this issue is that it brings us together in unity on World AIDS Day. This is not a party political issue. As with covid, if we are to defeat the first pandemic, we must work together across party lines, and this has been a good debate because of that.

We all recognise the extraordinary work of those who have fought to eradicate the virus. As has already been said, we have come a long way since the first World AIDS Day in 1988. Here in the UK, we have seen unprecedented scientific advancement. We understand more about HIV, and we have legislated against discrimination to better protect those living with HIV. We have seen some long-overdue justice delivered to victims of the contaminated blood scandal, with interim payments being granted for some—but not all—of those impacted. This victory is a testament to the unstinting work of campaigners and, indeed, colleagues from both sides of the House. However, as has been made clear in the Chamber today, there is still much more work to do with regards to this injustice. I hope that, in his response, the Minister will provide an update to the House on when the Government will respond in full to the 19 recommendations laid out in Sir Robert Francis’s framework for compensation.

This World AIDS Day is not just about recognising and celebrating how far we have come, but about issuing a call to action. There can be no room for complacency in the late stages of this campaign. Today, we stand on the brink of achieving something extraordinary: ending all new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. That goal is ambitious, but achievable, and it is one that Labour is proud to support and to push the Government on to achieving. None the less, too many opportunities are still being missed, and sexual health services are struggling to keep up with demand. A total of 46% of people diagnosed with HIV are still diagnosed too late, and 38% of people attending sexual health services were not offered an HIV test last year. That is not good enough. Some 20% fewer people were tested for HIV in 2021 than in 2019, and research shows that 57% of people have waited more than 12 weeks for PrEP.

Shockingly, in 2021, no local authority in England—not one—reported more than five women accessing PrEP, and there are still stark racial disparities in treatment and in support that must be addressed. I wish to use this debate to press the Minister on what steps the Government are taking to tackle unequal access to sexual health services and, in particular, to PrEP.

In a recent study, 40% of people surveyed reported difficulty in booking a sexual health appointment online; 23% of people were turned away due to a lack of available appointments. With that in mind, what assessment have the Government made of sexual health accessibility

levels, and what consideration has the Minister made of making PrEP available beyond sexual health services—for example in GPs, gender clinics, pharmacies and abortion clinics? I assume that that work would be included in the promised PrEP action plan, but that has yet to materialise. Will the Minister commit to an implementation date for this plan today, and if not, why not? Furthermore, what recent assessment has the Minister made of the eligibility criteria for PrEP, and are there any plans to expand it?

PrEP is one side of the coin, but we do not often talk about the other side anymore—partly because of the success of PrEP—and that is access to post-exposure prophylaxis. The publicity has fallen for that, but it is still an important tool in the box for people who are fearing that they may have been inadvertently exposed to the HIV virus. There is a small window for those people who fear that they may have been exposed, or who have been exposed to HIV, to get access to PrEP for it to be successful. What are the Government doing to ensure that there is adequate advice and information on the availability of post-exposure prophylaxis?

Sexual health services are under unprecedented pressure due to mpox. Service displacement means that appointments for PrEP, STI testing and long-acting, reversible contraceptives have been cut. That has also led to reported hesitancy by clinics to deliver mpox vaccines. What action will the Minister take to ensure that all those who need the mpox vaccine can access one, and not to the detriment of other vital sexual health services?

Moving to testing, the Minister will no doubt be aware that yesterday, NHS England released its report on HIV and hepatitis opt-out testing in areas of very high prevalence. Labour has been proud to support that for several years. The report shows that because of the tests, more than 800 people living with undiagnosed HIV and hepatitis have been identified in these areas. We have saved an estimated £6 million to £8 million on treatment costs. Put simply, opt-out testing has been a huge success. With that in mind, can the Minister set out whether there are any plans to change the current scope of HIV opt-out testing to include all areas of high prevalence?

Finally, I want to touch on stigma. A study recently published by the Terrence Higgins Trust found that just 38% of people knew that those living with HIV and on effective treatment cannot pass the virus on to partners. Only 30% of people said that they would be comfortable dating somebody with HIV. The HIV epidemic is exacerbated by stigma, ignorance and misinformation. If we want equitable access to HIV treatment, we must proactively tackle the myths and bigotry that still permeate discussions around HIV. I am sure that the Minister will agree wholeheartedly with me about that.

I would be interested to hear the Minister's assessment of current legislative barriers affecting those living with HIV. A clear example is the fact that LGBT+ people with HIV are still not allowed to access fertility treatment, despite the fact that heterosexual people with HIV are able to do so. That is an out-of-date barrier and it needs scrapping. I am proud that the next Labour Government will equalise access to fertility treatment for LGBT+ people living with HIV. Will the Minister join us in committing to that, and pledge to introduce legislation now—before the general election—to end the restrictions that prevent people with HIV from starting a family?

Labour is committed to the HIV 2030 pledge. It is more than prepared to work on a cross-party basis to make this ambition a reality. But we must address some incredibly concerning trends in HIV treatment and access, and not become complacent because of the progress that has come before us. No new transmissions of HIV by 2030 is still possible. We want to succeed, but there is no time to waste. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown said, let us all, together, sprint to that finish line.

2.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): Let me start by congratulating all Members from across the House who have taken part in what has been an incredibly informative and high quality debate. Let me join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), on a speech that mixed huge personal experience and knowledge, years of advocacy and successful campaigning, and a huge number of insights.

I undertake to look at numerous issues raised by the hon. Member, but to pick just a few, he asked about: the bureaucratic barriers stopping syphilis testing from being added to the opt-out testing that we already do for HIV and hepatitis B and C; some of the risks around the shift to online clinics; people on PrEP being tested regularly; and the promising experiment by the Terrence Higgins Trust with saliva testing for HIV. He raised a number of other points, including the important issue about patent waivers. There was a huge amount in his speech to take away and look at.

The same is true of other hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) made hugely important points about women and girls, and gave some incredibly striking and harrowing statistics. She made important points about the barriers to testing, particularly among minority groups. We can learn from the way that we are tackling that problem in other fields, including in covid vaccination work.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave us insights on what is happening in Northern Ireland, such as the role of the Public Health Agency there and what it is doing on PrEP. He talked about the role of the church in his constituency and the connection between Swaziland and Strangford, which might surprise outsiders. He talked of the work of the Positive Life charity in Northern Ireland, which I commend.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) spoke powerfully about her constituents' experiences of stigma. She made the important point that, as a high prevalence area, it should be considered for the expansion of opt-out testing. A similar point was made by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson). I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Middleton Health Centre.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) talked about some important lessons that we can learn. We are keen to learn across the UK about the rollout of PrEP in Scotland. On the roll-out of our world-leading vaccination campaign against mpox—one of many issues raised by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) in his speech—we are talking to that relatively small number

[Neil O'Brien]

of clinics that have had to deliver the huge majority of the campaign about its impact financially and on their day-to-day work.

World AIDS Day is an invitation to underline our commitment to tackling HIV, to show our support for people living with HIV and to remember those we have lost to AIDS. I am proud of how far we have come: from the stigma and the sidelining of the past, which a number of Members have mentioned, to where we are today thanks to collaborative efforts and the commitment of the Government, together with HIV patients, their friends and family, campaigners, medics, researchers and the health and care system at all levels.

Today, when diagnosed early and with access to antiretroviral therapy, most people living with HIV in England can expect a near-normal life expectancy. People diagnosed with HIV can expect to receive world-class, free and open-access HIV care. That has been a result of our collective and collaborative partnerships. However, despite successes, HIV has not gone away. There is still more that we should do. That is why last year, this Government published their commitment to end new HIV transmissions in England by 2030 through the HIV action plan. That plan is the cornerstone of our approach in England to drive forward progress and achieve our bold ambitions.

We have come far in the first year since its publication. The UK met the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets for the first time in 2020: 95% of HIV-positive individuals were diagnosed; 99% of those diagnosed were receiving treatment; and 97% of those receiving treatment were being virally suppressed. I am pleased that the number of people being newly diagnosed with HIV in England continues to fall. The latest data on HIV diagnoses shows that 2,955 people were diagnosed with HIV in England in 2021—a 33% decline compared with 2019, when the Government first made their commitment to end all new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. We are conscious of the need to avoid flatlining or slowing the pace in any way. We are still understanding the impact of the covid pandemic and the things that happened during that period, but there has been progress.

Those successes have been underpinned by clear national leadership and strengthened partnership working. I am grateful to Professor Kevin Fenton, the Government's chief adviser on HIV, who has been chairing the HIV action plan implementation steering group, involving the key partners in the delivery of the HIV action plan, including local government, the NHS, and our voluntary and community sector. The steering group has met quarterly throughout the year to monitor progress on our commitments and ensure that appropriate action was taken to keep us moving forward with our objectives. Within the remit of the group, they have established specific task and finish groups focusing on key priority areas for action, such as improving equity and access to HIV drug prevention—PrEP—and addressing workforce challenges, among others.

We are also thankful for the work of the UK Health Security Agency, which excels as a world-class leader running high-quality data collection and surveillance systems to help us to better understand and address the challenges on HIV. Those have enabled us to truly understand developments, emerging issues and where

we can have the greatest impact with our prevention efforts, and add to our growing repertoire of world-leading British innovation, systems and technology.

Of course, none of this could have been possible without the brilliant efforts of our local government, NHS and voluntary and community sector partners to deliver the highest-quality healthcare tailored to the needs of their local populations. We know through their work that different areas face different challenges, and we remain committed to helping level up outcomes for the whole population across the country.

A key priority, therefore, of the Government's approach is to ensure that all under-served populations benefit equally from improvements in HIV outcomes. A range of important suggestions have been made in this debate about how to go further. The approach includes scaling up our prevention efforts and increasing access to PrEP. We have already invested £33 million to roll out PrEP access across sexual health services over the past two years. PrEP is now being commissioned as a routine service through the public health grant.

In delivering against these commitments, UKHSA has now developed and published a monitoring and evaluation framework to support local authorities, sexual health services and other key stakeholders to inform continuous service development in PrEP commissioning and delivery, using the existing available data. I am sure many of the people involved in delivery of those services will have followed this debate with great interest and noted some of the challenges posed by different hon. Members.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: One of the problems is that the Department does not collate data on the average wait times for sexual health clinics or the availability of stocks for PrEP appointments in those clinics. Without that data, we rely on voluntary organisations to make freedom of information requests and report periodically. Having a baseline set from the Department would make a big difference and help us to understand areas that are struggling to roll out PrEP versus areas that maybe are not. Is that something the Minister could take back to the Department? I understand why in the past we have been nervous about publishing data on sexual health issues, but now is the time when we can be a bit more open about that and maybe publish that data, or collate it if that is not already done, so we can start to target our actions.

Neil O'Brien: That is certainly something I will take away and look at. As the hon. Gentleman points out, there are a number of challenges in doing that and in unpicking the activities of sexual health services on different diseases, and he has already alluded to some of the risks. However, I will certainly undertake to go away and look at that important point.

We know there is still more to do to improve PrEP access for key groups and we are in the process of developing a plan for provision of PrEP in settings beyond sexual and reproductive health services, to help us to reach those who are underrepresented—something a number of hon. Members have called for. Our efforts are also focused on scaling and improving testing levels in targeted, high-risk populations, including in black African communities, to be able to reach those 4,500 individuals who we believe are living with HIV but unaware of their status.

As part of implementation of the action plan, NHS England is investing £20 million over the next three years to expand opt-out HIV testing in A&E departments in the local authority areas across the country with the highest prevalence of HIV and across the whole of London. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, it is a proven effective way to identify new HIV cases, as it promotes testing on admission to hospital of anyone who has not previously been diagnosed with HIV, therefore rapidly helping to identify the virus. Some 33 A&E departments are now live, delivering that important initiative.

We also took the opportunity to link the initiative to the hepatitis C elimination programme, backed by a further £6.85 million, to provide hepatitis B and C testing as well. As several hon. Members alluded to, NHSE published its report on the first 100 days yesterday, describing the progress, challenges, results and learning from the first period of this initiative.

Those very early findings show the benefits of the approach: more than 200,000 HIV tests were conducted over just the first 100 days of opt-out testing across London, Manchester, Salford, Blackpool and Brighton, which meant that more than 600 people were identified with a previously unknown blood-borne virus. Of those, 128 people were newly identified as living with HIV and an additional 65 people living with HIV who were previously diagnosed but were not under the care of an HIV clinic were also identified.

This approach is important to ensure everyone living with HIV can access testing and rapid linkage to treatment and care, allowing them to live a long and healthy life. Moreover, 325 people were newly identified with hepatitis B and 153 people were newly identified with chronic hepatitis C virus; a further 50 were found who had disengaged from care for both diseases and seven people were identified who had previously cleared the hepatitis C virus.

We will be considering the initial evidence from the first year of testing alongside the data on progress towards our ambitions to decide how and whether we further expand this programme. We are in the very early days of evidence on this, but I must say that evidence is extremely encouraging. I hear what hon. Members across the House are calling for, given the success of that programme in its first 100 days, but we need further evidence as it develops.

We redoubled our efforts to increase HIV testing throughout the country during National HIV Testing Week, which took place in February this year. Results are promising: 30% of the almost 25,000 users who ordered an HIV and syphilis self-sampling kit during the campaign had never tested before, and a majority of the campaign's target audiences reported having taken some kind of preventative action as a result of the campaign.

We know there is still more we need to do to achieve our ambitions. The HIV action plan monitoring and evaluation framework developed by UKHSA, published today, will explore in detail the inequalities and gaps in HIV prevention, testing and care and other indicators of the progress required to achieve our shared ambitions and will help inform our progress. Our actions continue to be closely monitored by the HIV action plan implementation steering group, which includes key delivery

partners such as local government, the NHS and the voluntary and community sector, to ensure we remain on track to meet the 2025 and 2030 objectives. The Secretary of State will report annually to Parliament on progress towards our objectives.

World Aids Day gives us the chance to reflect on progress and challenges, being accountable for what we have done over the past year and where we need to continue improving. But, most importantly, it gives us the possibility of coming together to restate our collective commitment to continue working together to end new HIV transmissions in England by 2030 and to finish the race.

2.17 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I thank everyone who has spoken today: the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) and for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), and the Front-Bench speakers. All the speeches and interventions have been very good.

I am pleased that the Minister talked about the continued roll-out of opt-out testing. My feeling is that when results come back that are so good, there is sometimes an argument to start making moves now. I am not saying it should be rolled out tomorrow in all those hospitals, but we know that the lead-in time takes a number of months to make sure clinicians and others are co-ordinated. Messages from the Department now, saying, "We will be rolling this out next year when the final results come back, unless something happens," would enable a smooth roll-out. Some of those things we can go a bit further on, but I am pleased that he mentioned them.

I am also pleased that the Minister will work to ensure better outreach for PrEP in community settings. Those community settings should not just be for hard-to-reach groups, but they, especially pharmacists and doctors, will be particularly helpful for those groups. I am delighted about that.

I will finish by thanking my local organisations, because it is always nice to mention them: the Lawson Unit, which continues to support my care and the care of everyone with HIV in Brighton; Peer Action; the Martin Fisher Foundation, named after one of the HIV consultants who passed away in Brighton and works on stigma; the two anti-stigma buses, with "Undetectable = Untransmittable" stats plastered on the outside, which drive around Brighton and to Tunbridge Wells and back again every day so that even the rural areas of Sussex get to see our messages; Fast-Track Cities, which the Minister mentioned; Lunch Positive; the Sussex Beacon, one of only two residential care centres for people with HIV and AIDS in Britain; MindOut; the Terrence Higgins Trust and, of course, Frontline AIDS, one of the leading global HIV development organisations, based in Brighton and Hove. All those organisations will be there at the memorial at 6 o'clock tonight, and I am sure that many of our community will be too. Thank you again to everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World AIDS Day.

Unadopted Roads: New Housing Estates

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)

2.20 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me this Adjournment debate on unadopted roads and the lack of facilities for new housing estates.

I know that new housing can be a controversial issue. Some of the biggest issues in my constituency relate to general practice capacity and police numbers not increasing sufficiently in line with the building of thousands of new homes. I want everyone to be well housed in well-designed communities with, crucially, adequate local facilities. I am sure we would all agree that safe roads to drive on, speed restrictions, traffic calming, street lights, pedestrian crossings, parking enforcement, and litter, dog and grit bins, and regular collections from them, are all things we have a right to expect in England and Wales in 2022. Asking for them is not asking the earth.

Yet the current position is that many hundreds of thousands of our constituents do not have those basic amenities, which those of us who are lucky enough to live on adopted roads take for granted. As I will argue, the lack of street lights, parking enforcement, pedestrian crossings, pavements, and speeding restrictions make living extremely dangerous at times for those residents. Unadopted roads are subject to surface drainage issues, leading to a higher risk of flooding, and mortgage lenders sometimes withdraw funds from prospective buyers if a road is not adopted.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): This is such an important debate. My hon. Friend highlights the issue of drainage. May I draw the Minister's attention to the situation at Knights Meadow in North Baddesley in my constituency? The drainage there has been designed outside the parameters of adoptability by the drainage authority, so there is no chance of the highway above the drain being adopted either. We are left in the horrendous situation whereby the homeowners can expect no solution to it, while having to cope in the meantime with sub-standard facilities, roads and drains.

Andrew Selous: On the last visit I did with Anglian Water in my constituency, I learned that water companies are not actually statutory consultees in new planning applications. The good local authorities talk to the water companies, but in my view, the companies should be statutory consultees, to avoid exactly the issue that my right hon. Friend raises.

On the safety issue, are we going to let the situation continue like this until—God forbid—a child gets killed? Road safety is a real issue, as I will illustrate. The Fletcher Road estate in south Gloucestershire is not adopted, and the traffic regulation order to bring in a 20 mph zone will not come in until the entire estate is complete, which could take 10 years. Last year, a child was seriously injured on the estate, and the accident safety report concluded that if the road had been properly constructed, and had speed humps, surfacing and a 20 mph limit, it would have been safe.

The Levelling Up Secretary has quite rightly used his righteous anger to make massive progress on dealing with the cladding issue and, most recently, with the

mould issue. My request to him is to make it a hat-trick on behalf of hundreds of thousands of people who are paying full council tax without basic facilities, many of which are designed to keep them safe. During the American war of independence, the cry went up, “No taxation without representation.” Why is it that we require residents on new estates to pay full council tax while receiving very much less than full council services? Many residents are now paying twice for identical services. On the Castle Mead estate in Wiltshire, residents will pay the equivalent of band D town council tax to a management company to use the open spaces around their homes, while still paying full council tax. That does not seem fair or right.

The last full survey of unadopted roads was conducted by the Department for Transport in 1972, when it was estimated that there were 40,000 unadopted roads in England and Wales, covering some 4,000 miles of road. It is very concerning we do not have figures for the situation today.

Let me take the Minister on a tour around my constituency. On Theedway in Leighton Buzzard, three street lights do not work—all close to an assisted living residence where many people have mobility issues—and there is no parking enforcement or road signage. All that is dangerous. In nearby Copia Crescent, one street light is on 24/7 while the other is broken. Local residents do not know which developer to go to for these issues to be fixed. In nearby Grebe Drive, Goldfinch Road and Fraserfields Way, residents report dangerous speeding, no traffic calming, no speed enforcement and churned up verges. One householder is having difficulty selling his property because his road is not adopted, so we are making people's main asset more illiquid and reducing the ease with which they can move. Properties in Clay Furlong and Claridge Close were sold in 2003—when the first residents moved in—but nearly 20 years later, the roads have still not been adopted. That is simply not good enough.

In Dunstable, the residents of Harvey Road have never had street lighting, and they have to navigate round potholes—that situation has gone on since at least 1961. A resident of a new estate being built at Tilling Green in Dunstable tells me that she has no street lights and that parking on junctions is extremely dangerous. She has had no reply from her management company about those issues. A constituent from the new Eleanor Gardens development in Dunstable tells me that Taylor Wimpey told her that it had handed the estate over to the council, while Central Bedfordshire Council said that it was unable to help because the handover had not happened. Homeowners—with all their pride and excitement about their new homes—have been left in the lurch again, not knowing where to turn to have multiple problems sorted out.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not intend to intervene all afternoon. My hon. Friend makes an important point about homeowners not knowing where to go. They assume they should go to the council, but then find that the road is unadopted. They then assume they should go to the developer, but then find that a management company was set up and that, in many cases—such as for several estates in my constituency—it simply does not respond.

Andrew Selous: In a typically insightful intervention, my right hon. Friend makes exactly the right point. If she is able to stay until the end of my speech, I will outline a number of potential solutions that I am excited about. There are things we can do that do not require money and may not even require legislation, and which would make a difference. I am not just outlining the problems; I am coming up with solutions, which is what we in this place are here to do, is it not?

Bidwell West—a huge new area in my constituency—has all those issues. They were first brought to my attention by a young couple from Centurion Way who are proud of their new home and want to be proud of the area they live in. They came to see me in my surgery in June to ask for litter bins. The adoption manager from Linden Homes would not even agree to speak to me when I raised the issue with the company. The leader of Central Bedfordshire Council told me that some developers have in the past worked with the council to install and empty litter bins before the roads are adopted. If some developers can do that, why can't all of them?

A mother from Bidwell West tells me that her nine-year-old daughter is scared to walk to school because there are no pedestrian crossings. There have already been numerous head-on crashes on her new estate because of the lack of signage and speed restrictions. There are now large potholes appearing in some of the roads, and the lack of lighting is dangerous for dog walkers and another pedestrians on these dark winter evenings.

A resident from the Kyngshouton estate, north of Houghton Regis, tells me that Persimmon indicated to purchasers that the roads would be adopted by the local authority, but five years later, that has not happened. The residents pay for council tax and a service charge to a management company where the majority of directors are Persimmon staff, and despite the residents having been told that there would be a director election process, that has not been forthcoming. Why should the residents have to pay twice? They also believe they could do a better job running the management company than the Persimmon directors. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) has told me that at Holyoakes Field First School there are no road markings and no parking near the school, resulting in children and parents having to walk on the road, which is extremely dangerous.

I am particularly indebted to the briefing I have received for this debate from the Reverend Tim Haines, the pioneer community worker for Bidwell West. He points out that on new developments it is not clear who is responsible for what—the very point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) has just made—and that at the very least we need a stakeholders working group, comprising builders, housing associations, landowners, the local authority and residents. Every developer with a responsibility for street lights and so on should have a named, available point of contact for residents and council officers to contact.

I am grateful to the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councils and the Home Builders Federation for the briefing they have provided to me for this debate. I am optimistic that a better future can be created, but it will need the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to take a lead and establish best practice requirements with penalties for failure to comply.

Some local authorities report that developers start building a road before entering into the section 38 agreement or try to vary the terms of the local highway authority's section 38 agreement. In other cases, the developers may build a road very slowly and not finish it or not build the road up to the local highway authority standards. The sewerage authority may also take time to adopt the sewers under the new road. The road may be finished, but there could be outstanding construction defects that the developer needs to fix, such as defective street lights, potholes, overgrown verges or broken drain covers.

The Home Builders Federation notes the unacceptable inconsistency between local highway authorities, with inspection fees varying between 5% and 15% of the bond value and the length of time between a technical submission and technical approval for both section 278 and section 38 agreements varying between one week and one year. The Home Builders Federation requests that costs imposed on it by local highway authorities be reasonable and consistent, and that the process for technical approval and legal engrossment be simple, effective, rapid, trackable and measurable—all very reasonable demands. It asks that councils do not seek betterment schemes over and above the engrossed legal agreement, so preventing adoption as a result.

I want the Department to take a lead on this issue and deliver significant improvement in how we provide roads on new estates with the associated facilities that are critical to prevent our constituents from being exposed to danger. I say again that that danger could lead to loss of life.

In Wales, a good practice guide has been adopted, to which local highway authorities and house building federations have signed up. At the pre-application stage, the highway authority is involved. If five or more properties are served by public highways, the highway authority serves an advance payments code notice on the developer within six weeks of building approval. Once the notice has been served, works cannot commence without a bond being in place, equivalent to the total cost of construction of roads as estimated by the highway authority. During this period, a section 38 agreement can be negotiated, or ideally it is done even sooner.

My plea to the Minister is to take the learning and evaluation of what has happened in Wales and to build on that for England, and to take the sensible points made by local authorities and the Home Builders Federation to get agreed and enforceable national standards, and to do so with speed and determination.

2.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Lucy Frazer): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for so powerfully articulating his constituents' and many other constituents' concerns regarding unadopted roads. He talked about constituents who are often paying full council tax but are forced to live on private roads riddled with potholes and devoid of basic necessities such as streetlights, road signs or litter bins. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) also raised the matter of Knights Meadow, which is causing concerns. I believe we all can agree that, irrespective of whether a housing estate is old or new, no one should be forced to live on a street that is so poorly maintained that it negatively impacts their quality of life.

[Lucy Frazer]

First, I will directly respond to the recommendations that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire has made, especially in relation to section 278 and section 38 agreements, as well as the guidance in Wales to which he referred. Then I would like to identify some of the steps that the Government are already taking to strengthen the enforcement powers of local authorities and to make sure that roads are properly maintained. Then I will address some of the broader points raised by my hon. Friend.

I take this opportunity to reassure my hon. Friend that I am committed to working with him and Members across this House to make sure that we can find the right solutions to the problems he has highlighted. I am not only happy to, but would be delighted to meet him and share the benefits of his research and expertise and to discuss this issue in more depth so that we can find the right answers to these questions.

Turning now to my hon. Friend's recommendations, he mentioned that in Wales a good practice guide has been adopted by local highway authorities and house building federations. He noted that in the pre-application stage, the highway authority is involved. If five or more properties are served by public highways, the highway authority serves an advance payments code notice on the developer within six weeks of building approval.

In England, the Department for Transport has issued clear and simple guidance to councils to help them navigate some of the complexities surrounding new developments and the adoption, maintenance and upkeep of roads. They can use that guidance in those initial conversations with developers before a road is built, and long before they become major headaches for parties, not least homeowners themselves.

The Department for Transport also published an advice note in 2017 on road adoption and made some significant updates to it in August this year, with some useful advice on bonds and fees. I would be happy and keen to talk to my hon. Friend about how we can further improve on this work that the DFT has done.

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point about the guidance that the DFT has already published and given to major house builders. The point I want to make is that as in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), the developers in my constituency are major house builders. These are people who should have had this guidance over many years and who know how to build roads of an adoptable standard. Will my right hon. and learned Friend use the considerable heft of her Department to summon them in and suggest that they start using the guidance already available to them?

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend makes a very valuable point, and I would also be very keen to speak to her on this issue, because she clearly has the same issues in her constituency, as we all do, and is very interested in this point. We do raise many issues with house builders, and I can add this to the list to raise, because it is important that the guidance is followed and that we get solutions.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire suggested that England needs more national standards. As he knows, under the Highways Act 1980, section 38

agreements allow new roads built by developers to become public highways, with the cost of maintenance falling to the public purse. It is certainly possible for local highways authorities to adopt streets for which they are not currently responsible, but this is usually agreed at local level, not national level, between the developer and the council. It is true that councils can use section 38 to step in if a developer fails to keep its promises regarding a new road or street. The legislation already gives highways authorities the power to do that, but there is no legal obligation on them to do so, so ultimately it is a question for the relevant council. I understand that the Department for Transport's position is that it does not intervene in operational issues, and that it does not have powers to make statutory or impose national standards. That said, I do think it is important we continue to discuss this issue to ascertain what more can be done.

It is worth saying that the local highways authority cannot of course always adopt a road on a new development each and every time, not least because that may not be what residents themselves want. The road may also be incomplete or not built to the right standard, and the drainage may not yet have been adopted by the appropriate body. For whatever reason, when a road is not adopted by the local highway, liability for maintenance automatically falls to those who own the properties facing the road. What that looks like may vary depending on the housing development, but by and large estate rent charges are the main way in which residents pick up the tab for a road's maintenance. The problem arises when homeowners are unexpectedly slapped with bills to maintain roads they did not even know they were responsible for and, worse, when they challenge the estate rent charges, they find that they have limited rights to do anything about it.

Andrew Selous: I am aware that some unadopted roads go back decades and decades, but it does concern me that in a major new development on the east of Leighton Buzzard in my constituency, where residents moved in only in 2003, the roads are still not adopted. It is 20 years later, and I really think it is entirely reasonable that the people buying those homes would think that these issues would have been sorted out by the developer with the agreement of the local authority. Does the Minister get the importance of these issues not just dragging on and on, and the need for quite swift resolution?

Lucy Frazer: I do totally understand the point. As a local MP, I have worked with developers and streets to get to the position where roads are adopted so that the local authority can take over. I totally understand the point my hon. Friend is making, and I look forward to the conversations we will have about how we can address this further.

Coming back to the estate rent charges, we and the Government recognise that this is a real concern for homeowners, and we are actually tackling it. We intend to legislate to give freeholders on private and mixed-tenure estates the equivalent rights of leaseholders, which means they will be able to directly challenge unfair estate rent charges. For the first time, they will be able to apply to the first-tier tribunal to appoint a new manager who can better handle the estate rent charges and is more responsive to what residents want, because as my hon. Friend said in his speech, they sometimes think they can do this better than the developers or agencies themselves.

My hon. Friend also talked about his concerns when developers fail to build roads to adoptable standards. When that happens, we want councils to take the toughest possible enforcement action. This is where the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which is currently going through this House, has a pivotal role to play in strengthening the hand of councils. Our reforms will remove the current four-year time limit that applies to some breaches; in future, it will be 10 years for all breaches of planning control. We are also doubling the maximum period of temporary stop notices from 28 to 56 days, and at the same time we are focused on closing existing loopholes that let developers obtain planning permission after a breach has occurred.

Caroline Nokes: May I just ask the Minister whether any of those powers will apply retrospectively, or is this just going forward? Will my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and I still be dealing with a 20-year-old case in his constituency and one that has certainly been rumbling on for 10 years in mine when the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill has passed?

Lucy Frazer: I am very happy to get back to my right hon. Friend, but I assume that in any event the maximum is 10 years for a breach of the planning controls.

Caroline Nokes: Very briefly on that specific point, we have existing problems, but my question is whether the new legislation will act retrospectively to tackle the existing problems, or is this only going to solve future problems that have not yet occurred in developments yet to be built?

Lucy Frazer: I am very happy to get back to my right hon. Friend on that specific point, but we do recognise that if developers flout the rules and breach conditions they will also run the risk of being hit with unlimited fines.

The status quo is that when a new development is granted planning permission, councils can use section 106 planning obligations to make sure developers build roads to an adoptable standard. It is important to stress that when residents have a complaint about the local planning and highways authority that has not been adequately resolved, they can also complain to the local government and social care ombudsman.

I want to finish by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire and my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North for securing and taking part in this debate. It is an important issue, and we in the Government do not underestimate for a second the misery that unadopted roads can inflict on our residents. Be in no doubt that we get it that poorly constructed, poorly maintained and poorly funded roads and street lights blight neighbourhoods, erode people's pride in the place they live and, ultimately, can ruin lives. Where loopholes have been exploited, councils have been lacking enforcement powers and homebuyers have found themselves powerless to challenge unfair bills, we are already changing the law to put things right. I am very grateful for the constructive thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire on where there is further room for improvement, and I look forward to further conversations.

We are committed to working with councils, the housing industry and hon. Members from both sides of the House to raise the bar on the quality and safety of roads and streets in all developments, and to level up communities by ensuring that vital infrastructure and services are right there on the door step when they are needed. That is our ambition, and that is what we are determined to do.

Question put and agreed to.

2.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 December 2022

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Waste Incineration: Permit Variation

1.30 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered permit variation processes for waste incineration facilities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the Chairman of Ways and Means for selecting today's debate, especially because doing so involved a change to the Order Paper at short notice. I appreciate the opportunity to bring this matter to Westminster Hall today. I also thank the Minister for attending; it is great to see her back in her place. She will have heard much of what I am about to say when she was in her role previously, not just in my speeches in Westminster Hall but in our many conversations. I am grateful that she is willing to listen to me talk on the topic once again.

It will come as no surprise to colleagues that the topic of my speech is the Beddington incinerator in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. The facility can currently process over 300,000 tonnes of non-hazardous residual waste a year. The waste is imported from four south London boroughs and further afield, as well as coming from my own borough, the London Borough of Sutton. Since the site completed commissioning in 2019, it has been bedevilled by problems, and to this day my constituents suffer because of a number of issues regarding the site.

The first issue is that the incinerator is statistically the No. 1 polluter in the London Borough of Sutton. Emissions limits have been breached on literally hundreds of occasions, with more than 20 incidents relating to carbon dioxide and 40 incidents relating to volatile organic compounds, plus many more invalid reports. The promised Beddington Farmlands restoration project has been delayed again and again, and protected ground-nesting birds have been killed by predators because of failures to keep water levels from dropping. Local roads have been damaged, congested and polluted by regular waste vehicle movements. The rise in nitrogen dioxide from gas canisters and recreational drug taking has caused multiple explosions at the facility, which have risked the safety of the workers and pushed emissions up with every occurrence. In addition, recycling rates have fallen by over 6% in the London Borough of Sutton alone. I will delve into all those problems, and more, later.

We were regularly reassured by the Lib Dem-run council—I note that not a single Liberal Democrat Member has turned up to the debate—that, following sign-off, the operator would not submit any future variations. Well, surprise, surprise: barely three years since the site was first developed, Viridor has indeed submitted an application to the Environment Agency to

vary its environmental permit to enable enhanced operations at the Beddington site. In layman's terms, that means that it wants to burn more waste at Beddington. That will mean more vehicle movements, which will mean more emissions, and more problems for my Carshalton and Wallington constituents.

The application for the variation was submitted way back in January, but the Environment Agency has only in recent weeks launched the public consultation on it. Over the past 11 months, I have had various conversations with Viridor, the council, councillors, community groups and residents about the proposals. During that period, it has become clear that the application is totally inappropriate. Given that this is a live application undergoing consultation, the Minister is limited in what she can say, but I want to make some points. What sparked the need for the debate was not the content of the application and the proposals alone, as serious as those issues are; in addition, I have found that there is extremely limited community engagement and influence over the processes for determining these applications. I hope that we can discuss that in more detail.

The regulation of incinerators in England is split between the Environment Agency and local authorities, with the EA regulating incinerators with a capacity greater than 3 tonnes per hour for non-hazardous waste and 10 tonnes per day for hazardous waste. That has been the case for the Beddington incinerator in my constituency. Incinerators below those levels are regulated by local authorities.

The environmental permit sets conditions that limit the discharge to air, water and soil of specified substances. The regulations require public consultation on some permit applications, but do not prescribe the methods of consultation. That can cause inconsistencies in the level of engagement that communities are offered around the country. Once an operator has an environmental permit, changes in the operation of the facility may require it to apply to vary the permit. It must apply to the regulator to vary the permit conditions when proposing a change that would mean that a permit condition can no longer be complied with. The Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 require the Environment Agency to consult on any new application or applications involving a substantial change.

Despite potentially significant cumulative impacts on communities following permit variation, there is no mechanism for local authorities to directly influence the determination. Unlike for initial applications for incinerators or other comparable major planning, environmental or licensing proposals or changes to conditions, communities are essentially frozen out of the decision-making process for permit variations for incinerators.

The Beddington site was first given the green light by Lib Dem-run Sutton Council back in 2013. The environmental permit allowed for the processing of up to 302,500 tonnes of waste per annum. The variation was granted in December 2020 to allow for the processing of up to 347,422 tonnes of waste per annum, based on the increase in availability, but Viridor is now looking to increase capacity to 382,286 tonnes per annum. That is a 26% increase in waste at the site since it was originally approved at the application stage.

In the past 12 months, slightly over 65,000 vehicle movements have been made to the incinerator. The draft proposed variations would increase projected vehicle

[*Elliot Colburn*]

movements to up to 76,000 per year. That is a 17% increase. Despite those shocking figures and the significant impact the variation will have on the community, there is a noticeable lack of discussion about the cumulative impacts of permit variations.

Paragraph 47 of the Government's planning practice guidance for waste highlights the importance of the cumulative impacts of intensifying existing waste management sites and the need to engage with communities:

"The waste planning authority should not assume that because a particular area has hosted, or hosts, waste disposal facilities, that it is appropriate to add to these or extend their life. It is important to consider the cumulative effect of previous waste disposal facilities on a community's wellbeing. Impacts on environmental quality, social cohesion and inclusion and economic potential may all be relevant. Engagement with the local communities affected by previous waste disposal decisions will help in these considerations."

Despite that, the increase in traffic generated by intensifying incineration at the Beddington site cannot be taken into account by the Environment Agency when determining whether the application is appropriate. Its website states that residents are not allowed to talk about vehicle movements and the impact their emissions will have when the application is determined because it is a planning matter. The irony will not be lost on Carshalton and Wallington residents that one of the Lib Dems' arguments for building the incinerator in the first place was that it would reduce the number of vehicle movements needed on the site.

The incinerator has been operational for barely three years, and this is the second permit variation application to land on the Environment Agency's doorstep. If this one is approved, what is to say that there will not be another one and another one and another one years down the line? At what point does the intensification of the site and the cumulative impact that it has on the community at large warrant an entirely new permit or planning application?

Residents in Carshalton and Wallington did not vote to burn more waste, then a bit more a few years later, then a bit more a few years later. They did not vote to expand the incinerator's reach, with waste brought to our area from another borough, then another and maybe another. They did not vote for more vehicle movements, potholes and exhaust fumes—they were originally told that vehicle numbers would fall. They did not vote for an increase in air pollution when they were told again and again that incineration is better than landfill. They did not vote for Beddington Lane, the road where the incinerator is located, to seem permanently to have roadworks, causing massive traffic displacement across the constituency. And now here we are at the precipice of another attempt to vary the incinerator's permit, a decision that will be taken out of local hands.

Blame cannot be laid solely at the feet of the process or regulations that are being followed. Lib Dem-run Sutton Council birthed the incinerator into our borough and has been incubating it for years while turning a blind eye to scandal after scandal, betrayal after betrayal, until the grotesque expansion of the incinerator risks transforming Beddington into the dumping ground of south London. That was the Lib Dem vision for Carshalton and Wallington—one that never appeared in any election manifesto.

There needs to be a mechanism to ensure that communities have greater influence—more than just a single written consultation—over these processes and the determination of repeated major permit variations. Communities need to be able to hold regulators and those who make these decisions, whether that is the local authority or the Environment Agency, to account.

I have organised my own petition to oppose Viridor's expansion plans and to call for them to be dropped. Already, almost 1,000 local people have signed the petition and said no to the expansion plans. I would hazard a guess that that is far more than will respond to the official consultation, because very few people are aware of it and there is no direct outreach engagement from Viridor or the Environment Agency. The application was submitted almost a year ago, but there has been hardly any promotion of the consultation. We are now firmly in the consultation period but, unfortunately, it falls in the middle of the Christmas period, when people will be distracted by other things.

Oddly, I am pleased about something. The Environment Agency has understood that the Beddington proposals are of high public interest, and it proposes to hold a second consultation once the current one has closed. However, there are other ways to improve engagement with the community, such as holding multiple public information events in residential areas, and a public hearing, which would allow stakeholders to provide evidence in support of their views directly to the body that will make the decision. Although not perfect, those activities would at least help community awareness and mitigate the feeling that the decision is being made by a faceless organisation far away from the local area.

Separate to the process of determination and consultation, there are other ways to mitigate issues with the content of permit variations. It is within the scope of the Environment Agency to assert conditions for permit variations. For example, a condition could be added to ensure the operator installs metal detectors and magnets to extract any recyclable or harmful metal materials before they are burnt.

I mentioned the scourge of nitrous oxide canisters, which can be purchased legally, in many circumstances to achieve a so-called legal high. I am sure other hon. Members will share their experience of seeing such canisters littered across the streets. They have to be disposed of, so they get into our waste stream and end up being incinerated. When they make contact with high heat, they explode, potentially causing damage to the plant, massive operational difficulties, and danger to the people who work at or live near the site.

Viridor has launched a public information campaign to make it clear that such canisters should not be put into residential bins. I support that campaign and welcome those efforts, and I hope we can send a message from the House today that we support efforts to ensure that gas canisters do not end up in bins. However, I would go a step further. Viridor is already using metal detectors and magnets to extract harmful metals at another site; the Environment Agency should stipulate the installation of similar technology in Beddington as a condition for the permit variation.

On a similar note, I find it appalling that we still do not understand how much recyclable waste is sent for incineration in this country. There need to be clear, measurable recycling targets that operators must adhere

to. The proponents of incineration often point to recycling as a metric of their success and evidence that incineration is better than landfill. While the latter is certainly true—no one disputes that, and no one wants to see a return to waste being put into the ground; that is, of course, the worst of all options—the same cannot be said for the effect of incineration on recycling rates. As landfill sites have begun to close and be phased out, incineration has picked up much of the demand, nearly quadrupling in the past decade from 12% to 44% of our waste management capacity. However, recycling rates have barely moved in that time, from 37% to 43%—just a 6% increase.

That is not coincidental or unrelated. According to worrying research by the House of Commons Library, data from the 123 waste authorities shows a negative relationship between recycling and incineration. In other words, higher incineration means lower recycling, and vice versa. I saw that at first hand when I visited the incinerator in Beddington. Recyclable materials will always find their way into the wrong bin—of course they will—but there must be processes to filter them out.

I have also been informed of investigations from other areas of England where specific recycling bin bags have been sent to incineration. Indeed, a local group in my constituency, and in boroughs in south London, put tracking devices in bins and found that they ended up in the incineration room at the incinerator. They were not being recycled but shoved straight in to be burned. That is an absolute scandal. Research from Zero Waste Europe reveals that more than 90% of materials that end up in incineration plants or landfill could be recycled or composted. Ninety per cent! That is huge.

Even when waste is turned into energy, recycling is still the better option. It can save up to five times the energy produced by burning waste, which is not a renewable resource, creates toxic pollution, and potentially emits more carbon dioxide than some hydrocarbon-powered plants. In other words, incinerators need waste, whether it is recyclable or not, to have an effective business model. I do not think that we can call that recycling.

However, there is some good news, which could help us phase out incineration and should be considered before expanded or future incineration sites are approved. That is, of course, the deposit return scheme, which has seen recycling rates rocket in more than 40 countries and is due to be rolled out here in the UK.

The resources and waste strategy sets out the Government's plans to reduce, reuse and recycle more than we do now. Their target is to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste throughout the life of the 25-year environment plan. The groundbreaking and world-leading Environment Act 2021 introduced powers to introduce a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. That will prevent billions more plastic bottles from going into landfill or being littered or incinerated. I believe that that will help to change consumer behaviours, with potential knock-on effects for other environmental activities, and will reduce the need for more incineration.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has consulted twice on introducing a deposit return scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, most recently in 2021. I understand that Ministers anticipate a scheme being introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in late 2024 at the earliest, subject to the outcome of the second consultation. I would be

grateful for an update from the Minister, but that represents a realistic yet ambitious timetable to ensure that DEFRA implements a DRS that is as effective as possible in achieving the UK's objective of boosting recycling levels. It will offer greater opportunities to collect higher-quality, uncontaminated materials in greater quantities, thus promoting a circular economy and reducing the need for incineration.

The UK Government plan to halve the amount of waste going to landfill or incineration in England by 2042. Proposals to expand existing sites, such as the one at Beddington, directly contravene that ambition. England currently has 15.6 million tonnes of operational incineration capacity. If consented capacity was built, that would grow to more than 28 million tonnes, while feedstock—the amount of waste to be burned—is expected to fall to around 13.4 million tonnes by 2042. That is less than the capacity we have now, and it would mean that we had 14.7 million tonnes of excess capacity in England—and that is without any of the further 3.7 million tonnes of capacity that is currently in the planning system being granted. Despite that, the Environment Agency is unable to take into account issues around national overcapacity when determining permit variations such as the one for Beddington.

Another cumulative impact of these proposals, which is being swept under the carpet, frankly, is on Carshalton and Wallington residents. I could speak all day, as I think I have demonstrated, about the Beddington incinerator and its continued impact on my constituents. However, I will wrap up my remarks to allow colleagues to speak and to hear what the Minister has to say.

I will just end by saying that Carshalton and Wallington has suffered as a result of continual failures by the Lib Dem council to hold the incinerator to account. The council forced it on residents in the first place and now it is doing nothing about it. Now, due to the processes that are in place, we are at risk of being on the receiving end of even more waste, more vehicle movements, more incineration and more emissions. There are alternatives to this and conditions that could mitigate the impact. I hope that the Minister can shed a little more light on the work that the Government are doing to phase out incineration and introduce other measures, such as the deposit return scheme.

Carshalton and Wallington residents must have a voice in this debate and they should have a say on whether their community—our community—takes on more of south London's rubbish to burn. The motion states:

“That this House has considered permit variation processes for waste incineration facilities.”

We need to consider the cumulative impacts of incineration and the impact of expanding incineration sites. The residents of Carshalton and Wallington have considered it, I have considered it, and I do not think that the process to vary environmental permits is working in the best interests of communities.

1.51 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate today under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), and to precede, as I suspect I will, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), in our triple alliance on incineration. We have been here many a time.

[Jane Hunt]

Let me set out the background to explain why I am speaking in the debate. An incinerator is currently under construction in my constituency and I want to articulate the frustration at it being built at all and the seeming futility of objecting to its construction and further extension of use.

That an incinerator needs to be built at all is questionable, because we have overcapacity in incineration in the UK. Indeed, in my opinion the only reason incinerators were embraced at all was the EU directive to charge a tax per tonne of landfill going into the ground, rather than promoting and encouraging a reduction in the use of virgin materials and a focus on recycling, as well as a significant shift in culture and thinking about it. Instead, we are left with a legacy of burning to avoid landfill, rather than a change of behaviour and action. In my view, that is the real waste.

As things stand, our incinerator has not even been built but the operator is requesting a change in the permit to increase the amount of waste that can be dealt with on the site. In March 2022 the Government launched their consultation on emissions targets relating to the Environment Act 2021, stating that they were determined to leave our environment in a better state than they found it. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said:

“It included around 800 pages of evidence that were published following three years of developing the scientific and economic evidence. The consultation closed on 27th June. We received over 180,000 responses, which all needed to be analysed and carefully considered. In light of the volume of material and the significant public response we will not be able to publish targets by 31st October, as required by the Act. However, I would like to reassure this House and all interested parties that we will continue to work at pace in order to lay draft statutory instruments as soon as practicable.”—[*Official Report*, 28 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 18WS.]

The Loughborough air quality protection group said in a submission to Leicestershire County Council’s cabinet on 25 October:

“Presumably, if the Cabinet is content for Leicestershire’s waste to be incinerated at Newhurst, Members will be making a conscious decision that this will contribute to the amount of PM_{2.5} breathed by the Community, including elite and endurance athletes, and they are prepared to live with the consequences.”

Fine particulate matter—PM_{2.5}—has a complex impact on human health. Once inhaled, these elements and compounds may pass into the bloodstream, scarring blood vessels. Others may become lodged in the deepest part of the lungs. In fact, death due to PM_{2.5} is the third leading-cause of preventable deaths in Leicestershire, and approximately 88 deaths in 2018 can be attributed to it.

Cabinet members at the council will also be aware of statements made by the Director of Public Health about the dangers of PM_{2.5}. Waste incineration at Newhurst will produce PM_{2.5} emissions to air. Emissions of PM_{2.5} emitted at the flue are subject to limits specified in an environmental permit. Those emissions will be monitored and reported to the Environment Agency, which will take action if and when limits are exceeded. The levels of PM_{2.5} in the ambient air, especially downwind of the incinerator in Loughborough, will be monitored by the environmental protection team from Charnwood Borough Council.

The permitted annual mean levels of PM_{2.5} are currently set at 20 ug/m³, and will be reduced to an expected 10 ug/m³ when the Government next release targets. The comparative World Health Organisation level is 5 ug/m³. However, such levels of 2.5 in the air do not mean that it is safe for the community to breathe. The World Health Organisation states that,

“even the new limits should not be considered safe, as there appears to be no level at which pollutants stop causing damage”.

A further consideration is the location of Newhurst incinerator in relation to the Loughborough University campus, where elite and endurance athletes train and compete. Data recently collected by Charnwood Borough Council environmental protection team, using sophisticated monitoring equipment located between the incinerator site and the campus, show an annualised mean of PM_{2.5} of 11.5. That is even before the incinerator becomes operational.

In my own submission to the environmental targets consultation of May 2022, I stated that

“where we are lacking in research and data is the impact PM_{2.5} has on elite athletes. The University informs me that, while the average resting human breathes approximately 5 to 6 litres of air per minute, a typical endurance athlete may breathe around 150 litres a minute, and some world class athletes may breathe 300 litres a minute. This increased ventilation means that elite athletes are far more susceptible to respiratory problems such as asthma.

This is of particular concern in my constituency, given that the University is the UK’s leading university for sport, playing host to international, Olympic and Paralympic teams who come to take advantage of its unique facilities, some of which are located in the vicinity of the new incinerator. I would, therefore, argue that before setting an air quality target, more work needs to be done into the impact of PM_{2.5} on those with higher activity levels”.

The EU industrial emissions directive 2010 requires facilities within its scope to operate under a permit based on the use of best available techniques. BAT means

“the economically and technically viable techniques which are the best at preventing or minimising emissions and impacts on the environment as a whole.”

The Loughborough air quality protection group went on to say in its submission to the county council:

“Much of what is incinerated is not genuinely residual waste, but rather valuable material that could and should have been recycled or composted. Compositional analysis studies show that there are many instances where the majority (i.e. over 50%) of ‘waste’ collected at the kerbside could have been recycled or composted had it been put into the correct bin. And this does not even take account of the opportunities for Councils to extend the range of materials they accept for recycling at the kerbside.

When incinerators burn plastic they consume fossil fuel. The small amount of energy produced by incinerators is generated inefficiently and comes at a high climate cost. Difficult-to-recycle materials are increasingly being redesigned or phased out, meaning incinerators could become increasingly reliant upon burning recyclable and compostable material.”

Permits or not, extensions to permits or not, particulate matter targets set or not, we have too much capacity in the incinerator network right now, let alone with sites that are yet to come on stream, such as the one in Loughborough. I understand that Scotland undertook an independent review of the role of incineration in the waste hierarchy in Scotland, with a final report published in June 2022. The Scottish Government accepted all 12 recommendations, including a recommendation that no further planning permission for incineration facilities

be granted. In March 2021, the Welsh Government placed a moratorium on new large-scale energy from waste plants, which came into effect immediately.

As I have done in debates before, I ask the Minister when there will be a moratorium for England—or are we to become the waste incineration site for the UK? When will there be targets for PM_{2.5} specifically, but for air quality in general, as stipulated in the Environment Act? Will that take into account the special nature of groups such as elite athletes? Will additional research be taken into air pollution and those with higher lung capacity? Could the BAT system be better defined regarding the emissions produced and what is technically possible—not just what is viable—and therefore focus on both climate and climate change rather than finance? What steps are being taken to encourage and incentivise businesses to reduce, repair and recycle more, both in their production processes and what they actually produce? What steps are being taken to make savvy choices in what individuals consume and how they dispose of the waste created? This is happening on our watch, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned, the fact that it falls between two stools—the Environment Agency and the planning process—needs to be addressed. Permits are not necessarily enough; we need to look at the issue on a wider scale.

2.2 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate, and it is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt). They both gave excellent speeches on this really important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington has an active incinerator in his constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough has one that is in development. I will talk about an incinerator that is not yet built, but which I certainly do not want to see built or to become operational. I note for the record that, although I am not involved, I have close family members who run and operate a plastic recycling business.

I will use the limited time available to talk specifically about waste incineration, touching on my concerns about how decisions on new incinerator applications are progressed, how environmental permits are awarded for waste incinerators and the future direction of waste incineration. The subject is of particular interest to me and many of my constituents and has been for many years because, going back as far as 2013, my constituents have constantly and consistently fought a battle to stop an incinerator from being built in Marley, on the outskirts of Keighley.

I will provide a bit of background. The Minister will be aware of the concerns that I raise, as I have raised them with not only her but her Department a few times before. The incinerator scheme was originally awarded planning consent by our local authority, Bradford Council, back in early 2017. The decision was made in spite of huge local opposition—opposition that has been fought for many years, and led by the Aire Valley Against Incineration campaign team, which is an excellent group. I give particular credit and extend my personal thanks to Simon Shimbles and Ian Hammond of the Aire Valley Against Incineration campaign team for working

closely with me on this issue many times since I was elected as the Member of Parliament for Keighley. Their passion, dedication and acute attention to detail has shone throughout all our discussions. As I have pointed out before, it is a campaign organisation that, over the last six years or so, has seen its following—and involvement from local residents—grow to over 6,000 people, which shows the strength of feeling on the issue. It has worked tirelessly for many years, and since forming it has represented the views of the many residents living in Riddlesden, East Morton, Long Lee, Thwaites Brow, Keighley and our wider community far better on this subject than our own local authority, Labour-run Bradford Council. It is disappointing to see not one Labour Back-Bench Member or, indeed, any Back-Bench Member from the Liberal Democrats taking part in this important debate.

It is infuriating that the green light has been granted for the Aire valley incinerator to be built and to operate. I will pick up on some of the huge concerns that I and many others have, and address some of the flawed decision-making processes and disastrous decisions that have been adopted throughout the planning application and environmental permit stages. This is an incinerator that is set to be built at the bottom of a valley, in close proximity to schools, residential care homes, playing fields, people's homes and spaces where children grow up and play. Despite that and many other factors that I will get into, both the Environment Agency and Labour-run Bradford Council as the local planning authority have deemed the construction and operation of the incinerator to be suitable and fit for our environment.

I have looked back at Bradford Council's report, which its assistant director of planning produced for a planning committee that met in February 2017. The report concluded with a recommendation to grant planning permission, and it makes worrying reading because it concludes there are no community safety implications. Bradford Council's air quality officer registered no objection, which is ironic because the council has just implemented a tax on hard-working people through our clean air zone tax, which impacts on many of my constituents who travel in and out of Bradford and want to use its businesses. Yet on the incinerator, to which it gave the green light, it registered no objection to the air quality implications, and the Environment Agency registered no objection at the planning stage. It commented:

“We have established that there are no show stoppers or serious concerns relating to the location of the proposed development”, despite its close proximity to many homes and being situated at the bottom of a valley, as I say, next to playing fields.

Bradford Council's report goes on:

“The proposal enhances the quality of the environment, and promotes recycling.”

How on earth can burning waste be classed by Bradford Council as enhancing the quality of the environment when it is known that particulate matter such as sulphate, nitrates, ammonia, sodium chloride and black carbon enter the atmosphere from such a process? I can only conclude that the council must be taking us in Keighley for fools. It goes on to say that an incinerator burning waste promotes recycling; that is ridiculous. My constituents deserve much better. Both Bradford Council's planning decision and that of the Environment Agency in awarding

[*Robbie Moore*]

the environmental permit have let all of us in Keighley and our wider area down. We have been let down by the process.

The potential impact on people's health from the incineration process cannot be ignored. When the Environment Agency was doing a consultation on awarding the environmental permit, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and I both submitted a 10-page objection to the permit being awarded, raising concerns about the inadequate and unfair consultation process. In my view, it was a complete sham. We had concerns about noise and odour pollution, and the fact that the incinerator is to be built at the bottom of a valley, with the resultant challenges of the topography and the implications that emissions can have on public health as a result of temperature or cloud inversions.

The incinerator, as I have said, is to be built at the bottom of a valley. Residents live on either side. Going up the hill, schools are located. Travel down the Aire valley on a damp day and the cloud hangs low. The incinerator at the bottom will impact on air quality, and that is what I am concerned about.

I also raised concerns about the modelling of the pollution data that the Environment Agency used, because it was unreliable. I will give some examples. Data was collected by the Environment Agency from the Bingley weather station, which is located 262 metres above sea level, whereas the proposed Aire valley incinerator is to be built at roughly 85 metres above sea level. That discrepancy in elevation means that the estimated dispersion of emissions from the incinerator is based on information from a weather station at a significantly raised position where wind speeds behave much differently from those experienced at the bottom of the Aire valley. We also raised concerns about the proposed monitoring of emissions and any enforcement action that is likely to follow. There are also issues regarding stack height. The incinerator is proposed to have a stack height or chimney height of only 60 metres, yet other comparable incinerators have stack heights far higher, meaning emissions are better dispersed.

The list goes on, but perhaps the most significant of my concerns was about the incinerator's impact on human health and air quality. It is clear that the incineration of waste creates a number of emissions. There is much concern about the impact of waste incineration on air quality and human health. The concerns relate predominantly to particulate matter, which is mainly composed of materials such as sulphate, nitrates, ammonia, sodium chloride and black carbon.

The Minister will be aware that back in 2018 and 2019, Public Health England funded a study to examine the emissions of particulate matter from incineration and their impact on environmental health. Although the study found that the emissions from particulate matter from waste incinerations were low and made only a small contribution to ambient background levels, a contribution was noted nonetheless. There are many variable and influencing factors, such as stack height—meaning the chimney height—the surrounding topography, the feedstock, the microclimate and so on. We cannot simply look at reports and apply them as a blanket approach to every incinerator that is considered. Applications must be looked at individually.

Residents are, like me, quite rightly concerned about the air-quality impact of incineration, because of not just the incinerator itself but the increased traffic flows bringing waste to the site, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned. Unbelievably, when I questioned the decision making for the environmental permit that the Environment Agency has awarded, it told me that it could consider emissions only from the incinerator itself, not the emissions from the increased traffic flows, because that was a planning matter that Bradford Council had already given the green light to. It considered the emission levels released from the traffic flows to be acceptable. That is ironic, given the fact that the council has just imposed another tax on hard-working people across the whole of the Bradford district through the clean air zone tax. It is an absolute disgrace. We find ourselves in this completely, utterly ironic situation in Keighley and across the wider Bradford district.

The situation raises a much bigger issue: the process of how permits are awarded in the first place. My concern is that a cohesive, full-picture review is not taken into account when looking at the impact on air quality of the whole incineration process, which includes the emissions from traffic flow. That is one of the main issues I would like the Minister to note, and I am sure she will. The message from Keighley is that we do not want the incinerator. We will not be the dumping ground for Bradford's waste. It is infuriating that because Bradford Council awarded planning consent in the first place, the development is likely to go ahead. As I have said many, many times on this issue, local voices should be heard much more loudly and clearly in any decision-making process for this type of development.

I wish to touch briefly on the importance of driving a circular economy. A circular economy means prioritising, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and regarding waste as something that can be turned into a resource. This contrasts with the linear “take, make, consume, then dispose or incinerate” model, which assumes that resources are abundant, available and cheap to dispose of.

We have many mechanisms and tools available. Unlike incineration, landfill is already subject to a tax. The Government should look at the benefits of bringing in an incineration tax. It would work in a similar way, in that it would be calculated with reference to the tonnage of waste sent to incinerators. If we have a landfill tax and bring in an incineration tax, that will work as a fiscal disincentive to incineration and lead to more innovation in other practices, such as recycling and reuse. Of course, an incineration tax is not something new or radical, having already been adopted by other countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria.

As a country, we must move towards a more circular economy, where reusing and recycling are the norms of public life. We owe it to the next generation to ensure that our planet is left in a much better state than when we found it in.

2.15 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak for Labour, which I do in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who is on a visit to the

Senedd in Cardiff today in her role as a member of the Welsh Affairs Committee. I am afraid Members will have to bear with me.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this debate. The first time we debated together in this place was on this exact same subject, and his speech did seem familiar to me. I know that he and the other Members present have been doughty campaigners on this issue. It is vital that we discuss these matters for our environment and the preservation of our planet. Labour Members talk regularly about these topics, and I wish that all Members were as enthused about the subject as Labour Members and the other Members present.

The hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) made some really important points about PM levels, air quality and public health. I have been to the campus at Loughborough University—in the past, before the hon. Lady was a Member—and seen the high level of sporting achievement there. However, air quality is important not only for elite athletes but for everybody.

My parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), is not the only Member of Parliament for Keighley to have opposed the incinerator. His predecessor was also a doughty opponent; I worked with him on the issue. I have some unfortunate news for the hon. Gentleman: I will probably be visiting his constituency in future to campaign for his predecessor—that might not surprise him—because I want him to return to this place.

The hon. Member for Keighley made some excellent points about Environment Agency data. It is not only in this area that we have issues with EA data; there are also issues relating to water quality, which is another issue we have in common, with the River Wharfe and sewage. We have many common issues across the constituency boundary. We have all been unfortunate victims of the planning system and the unfortunate way it is constructed. We certainly need a significant change in that system, not just for incineration but in a number of areas.

We are here to discuss permit variation processes for waste incineration facilities. It is a very focused topic, but an important one. We heard a lot of focused information in the three contributions so far. We are elected to work in the interests of our people, and the collective task of tackling waste, improving recycling rates and taking the steps needed to protect our environment and preserve our planet is one that we must do together. That has always been the approach Labour has taken to legislation and policy development but, alas, Ministers have preferred dithering and delay to working with other parties constructively and effectively. I hope that will change, as I know the Minister is one to work together with all sides.

Incinerators emit large quantities of CO₂, with roughly 1 tonne of CO₂ released for each tonne of waste incinerated. About half of that CO₂ derives from fossil sources such as plastic, meaning that England's incinerators rely on fossil fuels for feedstock, as most plastics are derived from crude oil. Incineration capacity in England is currently around 17.2 million tonnes, comprising 14.6 million tonnes of built capacity and 2.6 million tonnes under construction. It was not that long ago that the waste industry was proposing a further 20 million tonnes of incineration capacity for England. Existing capacity already exceeds the quantity of genuinely residual

combustible waste, as all three previous speakers have noted. We need to be careful about how we proceed, because the feedstock issue might overwhelm us.

The EA regulates incinerators with a capacity of greater than 3 tonnes per hour for non-hazardous waste and 10 tonnes per day for hazardous waste. Incinerators below this size are regulated by local authorities. It would be helpful for the Minister to share the number of incinerators located in areas where local authorities do the regulating and whether they have adequate resources. I suspect we all know the answer to that, given the cuts to local authorities over recent years.

Once an operator has an environmental permit, changes in the operation of the facility may require the operator to apply to vary the permit. The operator must apply to the regulator to vary the permit conditions when proposing a change would mean that a permit condition can no longer be complied with. Other changes—for example, a change in aim of the operator on the permit—might also require a variation application. From some almost-helpful Environment Agency guidance on permitting, we know that a

variation application may include an increase to the extent of the site over which the regulated facility operates...Where this occurs, issues such as the protection of the land must be addressed."

Will the Minister indicate whether she thinks that is working to plan?

The December 2018 resources and waste strategy for England was published under the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). In it, the Government stated:

"Incineration currently plays a significant role in waste management in the UK, and the Government expects this to continue."

More recently, in October 2022, in response to a parliamentary question, the Government stated that they have

"no plans to introduce a moratorium on new incineration capacity in England."

That is a cause of much concern for the Opposition and, I am sure, for everyone present. I urge Ministers to think harder and go further to find more sustainable ways of dealing with our waste crisis.

Now, as we move towards reaching our net zero targets, we are in the danger zone of relying on incineration and not making the kind of progress on recycling rates that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington alluded to in his remarks and on which the hon. Member for Keighley concluded his remarks. Millions throughout the country expect to see such progress.

An overreliance on incineration as a means of tackling waste will, in the end, serve no one. That overreliance means we will be prevented from moving up the waste hierarchy in dealing with waste generally. It will stop us looking at waste as a resource that can be recycled, reused and put back into our society and the economy, and thereby kept out of the ground or prevented from contributing to toxic air.

I will be grateful if the Minister, when responding to the debate, could outline what specific discussions she has had with the environment Ministers in the Welsh Government and Scottish Governments on tackling the overreliance on incineration and how waste can be tackled? With devolution respected and acknowledged, there needs to be some conformity in how we approach such an important issue.

[Alex Sobel]

Over the past two decades, the household waste recycling rate in England has increased significantly from just 11.2% to almost 50%. I am pleased that half of that time saw a Labour Government ambitiously push for a change of behaviour and real action on the green agenda. However, I must point out that England still falls short of the EU target of recycling a minimum of 50% of its household waste by 2020—which we were obviously signed up to in that period. Our departure from the European Union does not mean we should shift gear or slow down; we need to go further and faster.

As of 2018, Wales was the only nation in the UK to have reached that target, and in 2017 Wales recorded a recycling rate of 64%. I pay tribute to the Welsh Labour Government and in particular to the First Minister and the environment Minister, Lesley Griffiths. As the Minister knows, England is responsible for the overwhelming majority of waste from households in the United Kingdom. As such, it is vital that England, and therefore this Government, shows leadership and acts. Such action could have been delivered through the Environment Act. Indeed, on Report, Labour tabled a range of amendments on waste, but we were defeated by Government Members. I would say that was a wasted opportunity.

Evidently, we need to act, and act fast, on the processing and collection of waste. Indeed, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs resources and waste strategy monitoring report from August 2020 stated:

“The large amount of avoidable residual waste and avoidable residual plastic waste generated by household sources each year suggests there remains substantial opportunity for increased recycling.”

It is important to remember the role of local authorities, whether in Leeds, London or elsewhere around England. They are on the frontline when it comes to waste collection and recycling. I am sure colleagues will join me in urging the Minister to fight for proper resources for regional government and councils throughout England.

As the Minister will recall, until 31 December 2020 we were covered by the European waste incineration directive, among other pieces of waste-related legislation. How has she ensured that we have not lowered standards? Opposition Members have previously asked Ministers to confirm that the United Kingdom will maintain the EU definition of waste; is that still the case? If we are to change the definition, why?

We all know that incineration is inextricably linked to waste and recycling, which is why in the debate today we are discussing the issue in the round. Labour Members are committed to increasing recycling rates and improving the processes for doing so right across England. We recognise the importance of carrying people with us and the fact that if we do not have buy-in from the public, we are unlikely to make the sort of change and progress that our planet desperately needs to happen.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington for securing the debate. I look forward to working with him, other Members and the Government to preserve our planet and protect our environment. That is the only way in which we can put incineration behind us and move forward to a new world of an ambitious and effective circular economy.

2.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I thought this was going to be a short debate, but it has been very full, hasn't it? We have had a great amount of detail and passion on the subject of incinerators, although I expected no less given that the Members present are vociferous spokespeople for their constituents on this issue and are always speaking up for them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing the debate. This is one in a long line of debates he has secured on the proposed expansion of processing capacity at the Beddington energy recovery facility. He noted that there are no Liberal Democrat colleagues present to join in the debate and speak up on these issues, which he raised seriously for his constituents; indeed, no one is speaking up for the Liberal Democrat Sutton Council.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Environment Agency launched a consultation on 10 November to seek views on the operator's proposals to extend the capacity of the Beddington incinerator, and the consultation is open until 23 December. I encourage him and his constituents to make their views known—I am sure he is already doing so. By holding the debate, he is clearly showing his intent, but there is due process and a correct way of taking part in the process.

Under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016, the Environment Agency is required to consult on any substantial change to environmental permits or to those considered a site of high public interest, which is what the Beddington incinerator is designated as. The Environment Agency has a legislative process to follow and, as my hon. Friend will know, I cannot comment directly on the merits of any such application while that consultation is ongoing. He suggested that there have been hundreds of breaches of permits; I believe that is not actually the case, but I would be happy to write to him to set out clearly what the situation is and to clarify the position about the breaches, if he is happy with that.

I thought I would provide an overview of the work my Department is doing to minimise residual waste, as well as the Government's considerations on energy from waste, so that I can allay some of the concerns raised by hon. Members. All large energy-from-waste plants in England must comply with strict emission limits and they cannot operate without a permit issued by the Environment Agency. The EA will grant a permit or give permission to vary a permit only if it is satisfied that the plant would not give rise to any significant pollution of the environment or harm to human health. The UK Health Security Agency's position is that modern, well run and regulated municipal waste incinerators are not a significant risk to public health. When the Environment Agency receives an application, it assesses it against the criteria required by the environmental permitting regulations and, for applications to vary an environmental permit, the Environment Agency is duty bound to issue a variation if the environmental impact remains acceptable and other relevant requirements are met.

I will touch on some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt). She spoke about air quality in her constituency and

how it relates to elite athletes and so forth. All energy-from-waste plants have to comply with strict emission limits, as she knows, under the environmental permitting regime. They cannot operate without one of those permits. As I have just said, the UK Health Security Agency's position is that modern, well-run incinerators are not a significant public health risk.

My hon. Friend also touched on PM_{2.5}. Obviously, a huge amount of evidence has and is being gathered to set the PM_{2.5} targets. DEFRA works with the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants and specialists in the Department of Health and Social Care—we have a joint unit on the issue—so that we take the best evidence on health issues. We are finalising the response to our targets consultation and working as quickly as we can to lay draft statutory instruments as soon as is practical, so my hon. Friend will know about those shortly. I want to allay her fears on that particular point.

All my hon. Friends touched on our resources and waste strategy. In the 2018 resources and waste strategy, we set out how we will preserve our stock of material resources by minimising waste, promoting resource efficiency and moving to a circular economy. That was outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). In addition, we have consulted on establishing a statutory target under the Environment Act 2021 to reduce residual waste arisings on a kilogram per capita basis by 50% by 2042, from 2019 levels.

Jane Hunt: What the Minister is saying about increasing recycling to reduce the amount going to incineration is absolutely superb, but we are already over capacity before my incinerator is online and certainly before the incinerator in Keighley is online. Could we have a moratorium, so that we do not put those incinerators online while we assess what can be done otherwise?

Rebecca Pow: That issue was also raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). DEFRA has no plans to introduce a moratorium on new energy-from-waste capacity in England, because we expect the market itself to assess the risks and determine the economic viability and deliverability of developing the new infrastructure. There is no financial advantage for the public sector or the market in delivering overcapacity in the energy-from-waste provision in England. Through the resources and waste strategy, we have committed to monitoring residual waste treatment capacity and we intend to publish a fresh analysis of that in due course.

The strategy is about reducing waste, reuse, recycling and so forth. The whole point is to reduce the amount of waste we get, and the strategy will play an important part in diverting residual waste that cannot be prevented, reused or recycled from landfill. Landfill is generally considered the least favourable method of managing waste; incineration comes above that. We are putting in place consistent collections, deposit return schemes and extended producer responsibility schemes, which all seek to reduce the amount of waste that we need.

In October 2020, we changed the law to introduce a permit condition for energy-from-waste operators that prohibited them from accepting separately collected paper, metal, glass and plastic, unless it had gone through some form of treatment process. We are at the point of

setting up the new scheme where every single authority will have to have consistent collections, where they will separate such waste, and none is able to go into an incinerator. That is what I mean when I say that the market will determine the life of incinerators and whether we need future incinerators. Taken together, our policies will reduce the dependence on energy-from-waste plants. Even so, there will always be some residual waste and some energy-from-waste capacity will always be required.

I heard the passionate comments about Labour-run Bradford Council. It has made its own decision about whether it wants to rely on incineration; I urge that council to look much more at reuse and recycling, much as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley said. He was vociferous on that point. Waste operators need to consider what constitutes appropriate levels of treatment capacity, based on the availability of residual waste, in the context of our national policy measures for waste reduction. It is really important that any proposed developments do not result in overcapacity in energy from waste—I think that that is actually what my hon. Friend was saying—at local or national level.

Some interesting points were made about permitting and what was or was not taken into account. Of course, the Environment Agency's principal legislation for regulating waste activities is the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016, which specifically preclude the EA from addressing nuisances and hazards arising from traffic. The issue of traffic was raised to a huge extent. The EA cannot include on environmental permits conditions that address the volume or emissions of traffic. As has been pointed out, vehicle movements are specifically covered by planning legislation, which falls under the remit of the local planning authority and must be considered at the planning stage. That is where the case has to be made to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington's Liberal Democrat council or my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley's Labour council, because it is they that have granted those permissions. That is an important point to remember.

In the resources and waste strategy, we are absolutely committed to monitoring residual waste treatment capacity. As I have said, we intend to publish a fresh analysis of that capacity in due course.

I thank everyone very much for raising their points. Some really serious points have been made in this debate. I believe that there is general consensus among all of us that we want to minimise waste and maximise the use of our resources. I know that the shadow Minister and I have a lot in common on this subject. I have set out the measures that my Department is already taking, which aim to minimise residual waste and maximise recycling. I have set out that although there will always be residual waste that requires managing, we do not want to see overcapacity in energy-from-waste treatment. On that note, I shall conclude.

2.37 pm

Elliot Colburn: First, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore). The three of us have been here many times before, so I am grateful to see them here.

To pick up on a point that the Minister made in summarising the debate about emissions breaches at the Beddington site, I have the receipts, as they say. In 2020

[*Elliot Colburn*]

alone, there were 184 incidents in which the carbon monoxide limit was breached and there were more than 700 invalid carbon monoxide reports, but I will happily write to the Minister with details of that.

I think it is clear, from listening to colleagues today, that the processes for making permit variations for incinerators are simply not fit for purpose when they do not include things like the cumulative effects—for example, in relation to traffic. In Beddington, residents were told that incineration would improve recycling. It does not. They were told that they would get a redeveloped Beddington Farmlands. That is missing. They were told that they would get a green energy provider. That has been a massive failure. They were told that it would improve traffic. That has gone up. They were told that it would improve air quality. There is no evidence of that. And they were told that capacity would not be increased in the future, but we are on increase No. 2.

Carshalton and Wallington residents deserve better—residents of any constituency deserve better—when this is forced upon them, so I encourage the Government to look again at the permitting system for incineration.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered permit variation processes for waste incineration facilities.

2.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women

[*JULIE ELLIOTT in the Chair*]

3 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Elliott. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for their support in securing this important debate.

This year, the UN's 16 days of activism fall at the same time as the FIFA men's World cup. FIFA decided to hold the competition in a country where women remain tied to their male guardian and need his permission for key life decisions on matters including work and travel. We also meet against the backdrop of war in Europe. As is all too familiar across the globe, women are being targeted through sexual violence. Thousands of women have been transported hundreds of miles from home and forced to build a life for themselves and their families in other countries. Our thoughts and solidarity are with them.

In the UK, we are in a cost of living crisis and in the grip of an epidemic of appalling violence committed by men against women and girls. Those two facts are inextricably linked. The epidemic includes violence at home, violence in the playground, violence in the workplace, violence on the walk home from school, violence online and across social media, and violence brought to life through the grotesque barrage of freely available extreme pornography on every corner of the internet. The violence can be short, sharp and brutal; sexual and degrading; insidious and coercive; hidden behind closed doors or hiding in plain sight—it is everywhere.

Our collective unwillingness to speak honestly about this epidemic is perhaps driven by the same thing that compounds the horrors visited on countless women and girls: shame. Unlike those women and girls, we should be ashamed—ashamed that women feel unsafe on our streets, ashamed that girls are unable to enjoy the same freedoms and experiences as boys, and ashamed that many of our public bodies are haemorrhaging trust as institutional misogyny blinds them to their basic safeguarding obligations.

The facts speak for themselves. The number of women murder victims is at a 15-year high—I repeat, a 15-year high. Rape prosecutions and convictions are at a historic low, and countless women victims are abandoning their trials due to delays that this Government created—delays in the Crown court are at a record high.

Yet the collective response has remained essentially unchanged for generations. Instead of investing in things that would help prevent males from developing into perpetrators and improve women's economic circumstances—education, policing, criminal justice and large-scale societal change around care—we focus on the result of that inequality, and women and girls remain reliant on “that chat”. “Don't walk down the lane on the way home; stick to the main street.” “Keep your headphones off.” “Keep hold of your phone when you get off the bus and keep your house keys poking between your

fingers.” “Don’t wear high heels. If possible, wear a big coat.” “Don’t go for a run tonight; it’s too dark.” “Stick the bins out in the morning.” “Oh, and if anything does happen, it will be your fault.” Women have to second-guess their safety on a daily basis.

Although I say the facts speak for themselves, that is only because women have fought hard to ensure the accurate reporting and gathering of sex data. A woman is killed every three days. I commend Karen Ingala Smith and her work documenting the facts through Counting Dead Women, which is a phenomenal project. Data shows that domestic violence, already endemic across Britain, skyrocketed during the pandemic. There were 260,000 domestic abuse offences between March and June 2020 alone. Research by UN Women UK found that 71% of women in the UK have experienced sexual harassment in a public place, rising to 86% of 18 to 24-year-olds. In the first lockdown, a fifth of women and girls aged 14 to 21 were catcalled, followed, groped, flashed or upskirted, rising to 51% during the summer.

Let us look at the causes. In Bristol, the 2020 mayoral commission on domestic abuse, along with the joint strategic needs assessment, reported the variation in domestic-related abuse and crime across my city, from 7.1 per 1,000 in Redland to 79.9 per 1,000 in Hartcliffe and Witherwood in my Bristol South constituency. Analysis in the UK and internationally has consistently found vulnerability to domestic violence to be associated with low income, economic strain and benefit receipt.

Earlier this month, the chief executive officers and directors of the End Violence Against Women Coalition joined more than 80 other organisations to warn that the cost of living crisis is having a devastating impact on women, putting them at greater risk of violence and abuse. It is a sobering report. Many women face the choice of staying in an abusive situation or experiencing financial hardship or destitution. Relocation to safety, disruption to employment, and access to legal advice all come with a hefty price tag. These circumstances are only worsening in the cost of living crisis, as women are dominant in low-pay, insecure work in the public sector, care, retail and hospitality. All those sectors are being squeezed, putting more and more women and children at risk of harm, destitution or even death.

At exactly the same time as demand for support to escape abuse is increasing, already overstretched specialist services have been confronted with rising bills to operate their life-saving services. Frontline organisations, such as refuges, are facing steep energy bills, and staff are covering the cost of service users from their own pockets, including feeding women who have not eaten for days.

I hope that the Minister has been listening carefully—I thank him for that—but we have had enough of listening. We do not want any more time for “that chat”. We need to raise women’s economic status up the political agenda in all our political parties. We need to help women to access paid work at decent pay levels, with access to affordable childcare. We need to ensure that benefits are made in such a way as to ensure that women do not become dependent on their male partners. We need to ensure that women are not penalised for non-contribution as a result of caring. We need to ensure that the issue of financial abuse as part of abusive behaviour is recognised in the Government’s strategy to address violence against women and girls.

There are some first steps that would help. It would be helpful if the Minister would agree to implement some of the following: put a rape and domestic abuse specialist in the police force in England and Wales; overhaul the police standards system, including vetting, training and misconduct, to ensure that victims get the best possible service and support from the police; bring in a domestic abusers register, which would allow authorities to track perpetrators and prevent them causing harm to more women; and set up specialist rape courts, which would end the traumatisation of victims by the system. Let us make the UK a beacon of progress.

Alongside that, we need a recommitment to the importance of empirical data as fact. Data must be accurately compiled and accurately sex disaggregated in order to fully understand the impact of all crimes on women and girls. To tackle endemic sexism and sex-based violence, we must count sex, just as it is vital to combat discrimination against other groups. The need to accurately record separate and additional data is obvious. The offending patterns of men and of women show the highest differential of all, so we need to monitor the sex of the victims and perpetrators of all crimes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) stated recently in this place that at least six regional police forces now record suspects’ sex on the basis of gender identity, following the advice of the National Police Chiefs’ Council. Data based only on self-identified gender is not accurate data on which to build a violence against women and girls strategy, or to effectively plan services that support all victims and target all perpetrators, whatever their sex and however they identify. I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. Data is key to protecting women and girls from violence, and I hope the Minister can confirm the need for sex to be recorded by police forces in England and Wales.

We talk often in this place of equality. We often celebrate the very presence of women and girls in sporting teams, on boards, in leadership roles or in politics as an end point. It is not. For as long as every woman and girl lives in a society that remains in itself so unequal, and presents such dangers, we should perhaps pause and reflect.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Earlier this year, the UK ratified the gold standard set by the Istanbul convention, but it has decided to opt out of article 59, which protects migrant women. Does the hon. Member agree that this defeats the point of the convention? There should be equal protection for all women, and this creates a hostile and discriminatory environment for some of the most vulnerable women in the UK.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Member makes an excellent point; I agree. I am sure that the Minister, or my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), will address it later from the Front Benches.

As we reflect, let us remember that the great feminist writer and thinker, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, once said:

“Your feminist premise should be: I matter. I matter equally. Not ‘if only.’ Not ‘as long as.’ I matter equally. Full stop.”

Let us hope that, when we gather again next year, not only have the statistics become slightly less depressing and the Government response slightly less dispiriting, but we have taken some steps, however small, toward

[Karin Smyth]

empowering every woman and girl to believe that they have a right to live a life where they matter equally—full stop.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Order. I am going to impose an informal time limit of five minutes. If we all try to stick to that, we will get everybody in.

3.9 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Elliott. I am very grateful to follow the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). I reflected on what she said, and I agree with every word. For a number of years, we have heard about how much emphasis this Government place on tackling violence against women and girls, but the statistics that she outlined show that so much of that is talk. It is about time that we started delivering, and making those interventions that challenge men and male behaviour.

Let us not mince our words: this is male violence against women and girls; these are crimes perpetrated by men. In this place, men often take rather too much comfort in talk about great advances in equality, but the day-to-day lived experience of women is still poor. As the hon. Member for Bristol South outlined, we take decisions every day to protect our own safety. It is well documented that female Members of Parliament receive more abuse and harassment than their male counterparts. In 21st century Britain, that is not good enough, and we need collective action to tackle it.

I am pleased to see that some male Members have chosen to participate in the debate. I am not surprised to see my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who has always shown some support for these issues, but I want to see a few more. It would be nice to know that more of our male colleagues are genuinely concerned about our day-to-day lived experience. I lay that down as a challenge. It is rather a substantial one for the Minister: it means that he perhaps has to compensate for the lack of interest among his colleagues. I hope that he receives my chastisement on their behalf.

In the week that we heard in Parliament from Olena Zelenska about the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, we are told that as many as 30% of the women of Ukraine have been victims of sexual crimes in the conflict. That is a clear reminder that rape remains a weapon of war. We talk about the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, which is good work, but what it rather euphemistically describes is the organised process of rape. We hear that in Ukraine the youngest victim is just four years old, and the oldest is 85. That is the brutality of war, but until very recently the experience of women in war was not routinely considered. I am pleased and proud that this Government have taken up that initiative—the conference was this week. However, it is all very well us telling the rest of the world and virtue signalling about the issue, but we still have to sort things out here. I am afraid that sexual violence remains a real challenge and a lived experience for everyone.

It feels a bit “first world” to talk about some of the problems that we face here, but the trauma faced by any woman who is a victim of sexual violence is significant and lifelong. We must ensure that we deliver on our promises.

We have enshrined in the NHS a commitment to a lifetime therapeutic care pathway for any victim of sexual violence. In practice, that does not happen. We know that very many women still wait for counselling months and months after an incident, and we know that is a barrier to bringing perpetrators to justice. When women relive what has happened to them, they re-traumatise themselves. They need support, but the NHS commitment is just words. Up and down this country, the local commissioning required to deliver it is not happening. We see victims of sexual violence as items of evidence. Their experience of trying to secure justice is utterly dehumanising.

I could go on much longer, but I will obey your strictures, Ms Elliott. In this place, we too often approach these issues from the perspective of the pointy-elbowed middle classes, and the most vulnerable in our society are left behind. I will not stop beating up Ministers in debates like this one until we have proper protection for women in prisons. We are seeing sex offenders self-identifying as women and being able to enter women's prisons; we had a rape only very recently. That has to be tackled. And I will not be happy, either, until someone engaged in sex work who is murdered receives as much attention as a nice, pretty middle-class girl. I will leave it there.

3.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Members for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing the debate. I am very glad to say that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is the spokesperson for the Scots Nats, and I never miss any of these debates. As men, we are very glad to be here.

I welcome the news that earlier this week the UK hosted the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative summit. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) asked a question on this very issue at Prime Minister's questions this week. At business questions today, I asked the Leader of the House a question along these lines. The Government have had the summit and they have shown, through the answers that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House gave, that there is a commitment on this issue.

It is important that the UK works towards recognising sexual violence in conflict as a line that is not to be crossed, with serious repercussions for the perpetrators of such an awful crime and the violation of a woman or child's dignity. There are numerous factors that might put a woman at greater risk of violence, but there is one that I will focus on specifically; others will touch on other subjects. The factor I will focus on is women belonging to faith groups who face persecution on the grounds of their faith and the violence that goes along with that.

Margaret Ferrier: Sometimes a woman's decision to wear a headscarf or modest clothing is described as oppression, but there are many women who say that their decision to display their faith in that way is not oppressing; they find it empowering. Does the hon. Member agree that respecting the choices that women make in expressing their faith is an important aspect of society empowering women and girls?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do; as always, the hon. Lady brings an aspect to the debate that truly helps to illustrate things.

Persecutors target men, women and children in different ways and to different extents. Women invariably face a greater breadth of persecution, owing to the compounding factors of their faith and their sex, which unfortunately makes them an easy target for those who want to take advantage. It is probably no surprise that the targeting of women is strategic and malicious. Women are the ones who give birth to the next generation and bring up families. It is a great tragedy that their life-giving nature is violated by extremists and those with evil intent, as they take away their life of freedom and peace.

A report by Open Doors on the persecution of Christian women and girls explains that in countries impacted by conflict in central and west Africa—Nigeria, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo being key examples—women and girls are at high risk of abduction. The report states:

“Once taken, they are then forced to marry militants and bear children, who are used to boost the ranks of militant groups”.

Such “forced marriage” is rape by another name. Horrifyingly, the bodies of women and girls offer an extra dimension of conflict for extremists and perpetrators of violence to wreak their destruction and their dehumanising actions.

One example of such gender-based persecution is Leah Sharibu, who was kidnapped along with 110 other students from her school back in 2018. The Islamic State of west Africa refused to release Leah when she did not renounce her Christian faith. Leah is still waiting for release. When some of us were in Nigeria in May, we asked about her and we were hopeful that something was going to happen, but it does not seem that anything has happened. I hope that the Minister can give us some indication of what is happening. Leah has been forcibly married and raped since the age of 14. She now has two children born of that forced marriage, with little hope of being able to pass on the Christian faith that she believes in to her own children.

Regrettably, Leah’s case is just one of thousands of such cases. How is it that eight years after Daesh launched a genocidal campaign against the Yazidis, with 2,763 Yazidi women and children still missing, nobody seems to be interested in this issue? I am not being critical of the Minister or the Government, but can we be given some indication about what is happening to those Yazidi women? It seems that they are off the radar for nearly everybody who I can think of.

My hope is that the Government ensure that any funding given to support women and girls around the world targets women and girls who face vulnerabilities due to their faith, with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office recognising faith as a factor in such vulnerability. Defending women and girls should encompass all aspects of the UK Government’s overseas engagements. Therefore, the Department for International Trade should seriously consider any reports of gender-specific religious persecution as it negotiates trade deals and before it signs any new trade agreements. Our Government should take care about the human rights records of countries with which they trade. Turning a blind eye to the treatment of women in a country we benefit from is not something that I wish to hear about. I want to hear about how we are moving forward progressively and positively for women and girls.

Finally—I am conscious of the time, Ms Elliott—increased efforts must be made to help women and girls who suffer violence and endure persecution because of their faith to reach safety. I will give another example: I

am saddened that Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz is still in hiding after escaping her Muslim abductor in Pakistan. She is still waiting for the Home Office to grant her asylum claim. It is unbelievable. The facts are obvious; the evidence is there. The Right Rev. Philip Mounstephen, the Bishop of Truro, has said:

“Tragic cases like that of Maira Shahbaz are a test case for the UK Government’s commitment to put freedom and religion front and centre in its foreign policy.”

My comments today are a new call for the Government to do just that and make freedom of religion or belief a reality for everyone across the world.

3.20 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I will start where my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) finished: by talking about the pointy-elbowed, middle-class privilege that allows me to stand here and say that still, in 2022, we cherry-pick which victims we think are innocent and which we do not. That is why there is massive media coverage of some cases and not of others. We like our victims to be young, blonde and white, do we not? When police community support officers of my age are killed, it makes barely a headline, as in the case of Julia James. The murders of young women such as Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, whose photographs were taken by police officers, do not gain the same number of column inches as the murder of Sarah Everard. When women such as Raneem Oudeh and her mother are murdered while the police are ignoring their calls for help, we must wonder what cultural element came into that.

It is important that we stand up in this House and are prepared to use our pointy-elbowed, middle-class privilege to highlight that, in this country, on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, we need to get our own house in order. We need to be prepared to legislate for things such as public sexual harassment. Let us face it: countries such as Morocco have managed to legislate for that, but we still have not.

I have high hopes for my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and his private Member’s Bill. I pay full credit to police forces such as Nottinghamshire police for collecting statistics on misogyny as a hate crime, but we need that to be rolled out to more police forces across the country. In this place, we have done some great work and every year the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) stands up in the Chamber on International Women’s Day and reads that great long list—which is not getting shorter—of those women who have been murdered over the previous year. At her behest, a couple of weeks ago I met, virtually, Carole Gould and Julie Devey, the mothers of Ellie Gould and Poppy Devey Waterhouse—young women murdered by their partners. Carole and Julie have set up a new organisation, Killed Women, specifically to make sure that we listen to the victims and consider the aftereffects for those families who have lost a loved one in horrific circumstances. We all need to listen to those stories and understand the very profound impact that ongoing violence against women is having in this country.

I will speak very briefly of the work that the Women and Equalities Committee is doing on this subject. I pay tribute to you, Ms Elliott, for having been a guest in a recent session. We are looking at sexual harassment,

[*Caroline Nokes*]

misogyny, violence against women, and sexism in all its forms across a variety of areas in this country, whether in schools, colleges and universities—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock for the great work she did on that before she left the Committee—or in the music industry, where black women are overly sexualised. We know from the case of Child Q that black children are—I am not sure if this is even a word—adultified and treated as adults when they are still children. That still happens way too often. We heard of the horrors of being a young black woman in the music industry—they were truly horrific in the same way as the sexism in football that we heard about.

Similarly, we hear time and again about how women at university are treated appallingly and how, in too many cases, the institution does not stand up for them. I will highlight Bristol University—apologies to the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for referring to her city again—because it did not support a young woman who spoke to me yesterday on this subject. When she went to the police, she was told that she had to think of the mental health of the student she was accusing of sexually harassing her. That, to my mind, is absolutely unthinkable. How are we going to empower and encourage young women to have the courage to come forward, speak of their experiences and press charges when they are being told to consider the impact on the individuals they are accusing? We know that 97% of the accusations made are truthful.

I want to pay tribute briefly, in 50 seconds or less, to—

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Caroline Nokes: That will not give me an extra minute. I pay tribute to former Ministers who have worked so hard on this issue, some of whom are sitting in this room today, including Ministers from across the Home Office who worked so hard on the tackling violence against women and girls strategy and on finally getting the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 on the statute book. My message to all of us is that there is more that we can and must do. We have to keep pressing forward. If we do not do that, we will not be able to look around the globe and wring our hands in horror at the actions that we see elsewhere, when our own house needs to be in much better order.

3.25 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) on securing this vital debate, although it is shame that such an important debate is not taking place on the Floor of the House, in Government time.

These annual debates are so important, not just so that we can hear the latest sad figures of violence and hold Ministers to account for the ongoing abuse and killing of women and girls, but so that we can speak about the wider context and to try to call for a better way forward.

Locally, Cheshire police tell me that arrests for domestic abuse have increased by 76% this year, and that we have the highest charge rate for stalking in the country and

the third highest charge rate for sexual offences and rape. Such statistics, even positive ones, are evidence of failure, not signs of progress, because they represent change from an unacceptably low baseline. Moreover, even with higher figures for arrests, charges, prosecutions and convictions, the sad truth is that far too many women will not engage with the justice system or report what has happened to them. Women will suffer domestic abuse many times before they go to the police.

We have an appalling situation in which survivors of sexual violence can have their counselling notes read by police officers, prosecutors, defence lawyers and even the person who raped them, often in order to try to find something to make the survivor look untrustworthy or to discredit their testimony. Rape Crisis England & Wales is clear that counselling notes should be kept confidential; otherwise, survivors will continue to have to choose between the pursuit of justice—statistically futile though that may seem—and looking after their own needs and mental health. It is absolutely sick that we expect that from them, when they should be supported to see both justice and compassion.

Specialist services for survivors are on their knees, and survivors suffering from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder—a condition more frequently suffered by survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual violence than by veterans—find themselves in a postcode lottery, waiting years to access treatment, if they can access it at all. We cannot talk about support for victims without recognising that there needs to be vastly more funding for these services, including for support by independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic violence advisers. I would welcome a commitment from the Minister in those areas.

We need not only better policing and judicial processes, but to change our social culture itself. It is not enough to merely get better at prosecuting offences after the fact. We must ensure that we are using every legal and social lever to stop it happening in the first place. I commend the men speaking in this debate, because they recognise that violence against women and girls is a scourge that cannot be ended by the victims. We need men to work to stop this. I do not mean the small minority of men who are the perpetrators, but the majority of decent men who are horrified by the results of this violence and who can influence the behaviour of their peers.

We need a renewed focus on sex and relationships education in schools, to insist on dignity at a young age, and clear expectations and behaviour codes in the workplace. I suggest we start here, by making sure all our colleagues in this workplace are modelling that, too. We also need adverts that put the onus on men, such as those promoted by the Mayor of London that say:

“Have a word with yourself, then your mates”.

Male role models need to front such campaigns in order to change expectations, so that when lads meet in groups, whether that is in the locker room, the pub or anywhere else, they can display character and object to reactive group misogyny, no longer being bystanders implicitly supporting such behaviour.

We also need to ensure that women can no longer be financially trapped into abusive situations, or at risk of destitution when they seek to leave. Those are the kinds of holistic changes that we need to see if we are serious about ending violence against women and girls.

I know that everyone in this Chamber wants to end violence against women and girls. Our challenge is to tackle the wider context of toxic behaviour that breeds it. I hope that by next year's debate, we will have made more progress on that fundamental task.

3.30 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing the debate. I also declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, the co-chair of Conservative Friends of International Development, an ambassador for the HALO Trust, and a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for action on conflict and global Britain. To say that I am invested in this issue and in development matters would perhaps be a bit of an understatement.

I would like to give more of an international focus, given that the UK has just held the conference on preventing sexual violence in conflict. In 2012, I was a junior researcher in the then Foreign Secretary's office, and I watched William Hague, Arminka Helić and Chloe Dalton formulate the concept behind the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. I will go on to say a little more about its creation. I saw those early days as a halcyon moment—a British drive to ensure that we were leading the world in international development and tackling the issues that were so often overlooked, because when the United Kingdom stands up and leads the way on development, so many other countries follow us.

In those early years, the UK demonstrated its ability to create and lead new international initiatives and encourage greater global action—whether on women's rights, conflict prevention, healthcare or support for multilateral organisations based on the rules-based order, we led on it. Indeed, at every summit, conference and non-governmental organisation engagement, there were always British diplomats and politicians sitting around the table, writing the resolutions, helping to push the international community and securing international buy-in. Those activities continue—they are things that we need to champion in this place and within our Government Departments. However, the creation of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative in 2012 was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. To be privy to the creation of a movement that found domestic and international support and brought 150 countries together in unity was to behold true diplomacy, leadership and statecraft.

PSVI came about because, as is so often the case, it was an overlooked issue. In every conflict and crisis zone around the world, the use of rape and sexual violence was always well documented, but justice and support for survivors went largely ignored. Horrendous accounts have been written—there are countless reports and books—including Christina Lamb's book, "Our Bodies, Their Battlefield", which I encourage all colleagues to read if they have not done so. It reminds us that this is not a modern-day phenomenon, but a continuous factor in conflict through the ages. In nearly every instance of conflict, rape and sexual violence is exhibited. It is used by the perpetrators as a free tool of war—used to intimidate, divide, ostracise and subjugate. For its perpetrators, it is enacted with an expectation of

impunity—that, in the confines of war, these atrocious acts can be committed freely and without fear of justice or consequences. For its victims, it is an act that will live with them for the rest of their lives. They never forget it; it is often never treated; and, worst of all, they never see justice brought to bear.

The prevalence of this important issue, and the lack of international action, meant that there was an opportunity to address that oversight and engage the international community. That is exactly what our team did, and in 2012 we set up the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. We held the first conference in 2014, and this week we held our second conference, albeit a few years delayed due to the pandemic. We have demonstrated our ability to lead on this issue, but—as is always the case in this world—we can go further.

We made significant promises in 2014, with lofty goals. As the special envoy, Angelina Jolie, has said, we knew they were lofty goals, and

"there has been some progress, including a few prosecutions at the national level, the adoption of the Murad Code and the establishment of the Global Survivors Fund. But it has not been nearly enough to meet the needs of survivors, or to deter perpetrators from using rape as a weapon of war in almost every new conflict in the past decade."

We now need to think about what we can do next. I welcome the Government's decision to introduce a new three-year strategy and £12.5 million of new funding, and the continuation of funding to the Global Survivors Fund. On that point, could the Minister clarify how much money is going to be put into the Ukraine gender-based violence fund? However, we know that political will and economic interests across the world are preventing the meaningful action that is needed. We need to think about what survivors need, and I will make two very quick points.

First, we must lead the charge and put more spending into preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence. To date, less than 1% of humanitarian relief is spent in that area. That funding gap is preventing the delivery of our ambitions, meaning that, while we might identify the problems, we are not solving them. Secondly, we must ensure a new international mechanism to lead on this specific issue, to specifically ensure that survivors are supported, crimes documented, and justice sought for those who have been raped. I will leave it there, Ms Elliott, because I am conscious of the time. Thank you.

3.35 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing this very important debate at a very important time.

I hoped, as I was growing up, that the world was getting better in every way. I just assumed that it was, I think as part of the post-war agreement of people. But I am constantly disappointed that my daughters are less safe than I was. When I was a student, I went out on the streets with Reclaim the Night, but my daughters, who have just left university, have been less safe at university, on the streets and online, and will be less safe at their workplaces, than I was at their age. That really depresses me. We are going in the wrong direction, so I am glad that this debate is pulling us up short and ensuring that

[*Fleur Anderson*]

we act to make the world better for my daughters and their daughters, as well as for women and girls not only in this country, but around the world.

Violence is all-pervasive on our streets, in a way that we take for granted as women. When I realised that men do not have to worry about holding keys in their hands as they walk about—I have done it instinctively all my life—and that there would be a freedom if I did not have to worry as I walked around, it was an alarming moment. It showed me the difference that there should be in our world.

I congratulate everyone who joined Reclaim the Streets in Roehampton just a couple of days ago, demonstrating against violence against women and girls by men. They marched through the streets of Roehampton all together. It started last year, and it was an even bigger demonstration this year, with men and women, standing together in our local community, speaking out about something that we want to see an end to.

Violence is at an all-time high, and convictions for rape are at an all-time low. Women and girls feel unable to report rape and violence against them. That must change, as well. We need to address the culture of misogyny, sexism and predation.

I will highlight specific issues where Refuge is calling for change. The first is the need for sustainable funding for specialist gender-based violence services, including accommodation-based and community-based domestic abuse services. Not everyone will go to the police, but more women are likely to go to those specialist services.

The second issue is on tech abuse. I know that the Online Safety Bill is due to be discussed. I hope that Members will speak out in those debates in favour of making women safer. If the Bill could require Ofcom to develop a violence against women and girls code of practice, that would be a huge step forward.

The third issue is about the cost of living, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South. Refuge is calling for the creation of an emergency domestic abuse fund, because perpetrators are taking advantage of the cost of living crisis to increase their economic abuse and control. It will be worse than ever before this winter.

Fourthly, Refuge is calling for all criminal justice practitioners, including the police, to be required to participate in in-depth training on domestic abuse. That happens in some areas, but not all; it is a postcode lottery. I would also add a requirement for the police to give back phones to rape victims after they have gathered the necessary evidence from them. I know of many women who have gone in and reported a rape but then had their phone taken and kept for months and months, which just adds to the abuse that they have suffered.

Moving on to the international action that we can take, I attended the PSVI conference. I declare that I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on PSVI and a member of the APPG on domestic violence and abuse. I am glad that the conference was held this week. It really put the international spotlight, from so many countries, on this issue. The scale of the issue—the number of women and girls who are suffering sexual violence, who are survivors and who are going through this right now—is extraordinary.

I heard about the devastating effects from women from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ukraine, Colombia and Bosnia—this is happening all over the world. They all said: “No more words only. No more speeches”—ironically, in speeches—and they were quite right: we now need actions. We need an increase in humanitarian relief funding for action on sexual and gender-based violence. Currently, that is at less than 1% of humanitarian relief. We need to increase funding to stop war in the first place—through the conflict prevention fund—but there have been enormous cuts, including of 60% to Somalia and 90% to Africa’s Sahel region. We cannot cut the aid budget and still expect that conflict prevention will continue, because it will not. We have to back up our words on sexual violence by backing our peacebuilding work. I hope to hear from the Minister what he will do now so that all women and girls, wherever they live, are safe.

3.40 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott.

Violence against women and girls is a problem not just for women and girls. Every woman or girl who feels scared to walk down a street, get on a bus, go on a date, go to school or college, or get in a car with a man she works with is a daughter, sister, mother, wife, partner or friend of a man or a boy. It is not unreasonable to believe that half the population have exactly the same right to take such things for granted as the other half.

When the Government launched the multimillion-pound national broadcast media campaign *Enough*, we said that violence against women and girls should become as unacceptable as driving without a seatbelt. Many years ago, when seatbelt laws were first introduced, people said that it would never become engrained, no one would do it and people would not change. Those same people would say that violence against women and girls is inevitable and that we should stay at home, protect ourselves, not wear high heels, not go on the internet to look for dates, be more careful, not enjoy ourselves and definitely not get drunk at a festival. Those people were wrong then, and they are wrong now.

This Government have driven a sustained focus on bearing down on the awful crimes of rape and domestic abuse. This Government have increased funding to projects all across the country to increase the safety of women and girls on the streets, in the night-time economy and in their home. This Government have passed new laws to keep sex offenders and rapists in prison for longer. We have outlawed many forms of the worst types of violence that women and girls suffer, such as coercive and controlling behaviour. We passed new laws to toughen the measures to be taken against stalking.

There is of course a lot more to do. A lot of that work was done in response to the violence against women and girls strategy. Many actions are outstanding across the whole system—not just for the Home Office and Justice but for frontline health professionals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said so eloquently.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am afraid that I have a lot to say, so I will not on this occasion.

In my constituency, we have benefited from tangible differences, thanks to this Government, with more than £400,000 in funding for the community on the Greenlands estate. I thank my friend Councillor Emma Marshall for all her fantastic work for the residents near the Woodrow centre, and of Ombersley Close and Rushock Close, working with our local police and crime commissioner, John Campion. She said that the funding has made people feel safer, and I have heard it myself when talking to residents in Woodrow and Greenlands.

I have been privileged to work with victims of spiking and those who campaign for them. We need to do more. I ask the Minister, through the good offices of his colleagues on the Treasury Bench, to speak to the Home Office and ask them to complete their review of the laws around spiking. That review was promised. There is an argument that we need a new offence, and I would like to see the results of the work that the Home Office policy officials are doing.

I will close my comments by saying that when we talk about women and girls, we must be clear about what we are discussing. I have a science background: definitions and language matter. We must be precise in our terminology. We do not serve the needs of those who wish to change gender or have a different gender identity by forgetting all about or ignoring the needs of biological females—adult females and children, girls, who are female children.

We have the privilege to stand up in this place and talk about these issues. There are many outside this Chamber who are looking to us to provide clarity. We have a duty to keep our citizens safe when they flee danger, when they flee abusive, predatory men and when they are fearing for their lives in their homes and need to reach a place of safety.

The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) mentioned Karen Ingala Smith and her book “Defending Women’s Spaces”. She speaks with the benefit of her decades of experience, campaigning for and supporting women who are victims and survivors of rape and sexual assault. She says many women only feel comfortable talking about the devastating and intimate details of male violence in a safe environment. A safe environment means women-only. We can look to the guidance issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and make sure that that guidance goes to all those providing services to keep women and girls safe.

3.46 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we were very grateful to receive more than £500,000 from the Government’s safer streets fund. I thank Roger Hirst, our police, fire and crime commissioner, for his leadership. The Bunny Walks is a network of green footpaths that weave through Chelmsford, connecting homes, the university and the city centre, but the footpaths were overgrown, the lighting was terrible, drug dealers were frequently spotted in the undergrowth, and women, children and families felt unsafe. Now, the overgrowth has been cut back, lighting and CCTV cameras have been installed, and the paths are busy again because safety has returned. But there is so much more to be done.

The Everyone’s Invited campaign, which went viral early last year, had shocking revelations of the abuse suffered by girls in our schools. As Children’s Minister at the time, I met the campaigners and we promised to

shift the dial, so it is welcome news that the Online Safety Bill will come to Parliament next week, with children at its heart. The measures to protect children from online content that promotes self-harm and anorexia need to be implemented urgently, as do measures to prevent children from accessing online pornography.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said, the VAWG strategy has done many great things, but I was really concerned to hear recently of two rape cases, one of a 14-year-old and the other of a 16-year-old, where the victims felt that if they went to the police, their stories would be smeared all over social media and they would not get justice. I have raised that with Essex police, because we must do more to support girls who have been victims of rape and help them to get justice.

In Essex, the number of rape cases prosecuted has risen from just 22 cases three years ago to 70 last year. That is out of more than 2,500 reported. The proportion of cases taken to court is far too low. One major issue is the huge delays. Victims sometimes have to wait for two years, maybe even longer, and the waiting list for Essex courts is more than double what it was pre-covid. It is absolutely vital that these court delays are stopped.

I, too, attended this week’s conference on preventing sexual violence in conflict. As Ukraine’s First Lady, Olena Zelenska, reminded us so bravely, a child aged as young as four years old was raped by soldiers in Ukraine. From Ukraine to Ethiopia and so many other countries around the world, rape is being used systematically as a weapon of war.

During the conference, the Nobel laureate Denis Mukwege also came to Parliament to speak to MPs and Lords. He reminded us that we must not sacrifice justice on the altar of peace, because without justice, the peace will not last. I hope the conference does make a lasting difference to ending impunity and enabling survivors to get justice.

Women and girls who have been raped also need access to healthcare. Rape is the cruellest of crimes, but forcing the woman who has been raped to have no choice but to carry the child of her rapist is also incredible cruelty. All too often in conflict-affected areas and humanitarian situations, a woman who has been raped has no choice, and no health support. Dr Mukwege said that if a woman can access health support in his country within 72 hours of that rape, they can have treatment to prevent them from getting AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, and can take the morning after prophylactic, but all too often supplies are not available.

The UK is one of the few countries that helped to fund access to contraception and women’s health clinics from its development budget. During my time as Minister for Africa, I visited 15 African countries and also visited many women’s health clinics. Many of the women I spoke to were in loving relationships and the clinics were giving women the chance to choose whether they brought another child into their family. I heard at first hand from women and men about how having that choice was life-changing not just for the woman but the family and the entire community, but it is even more important that we get support to the woman who has been raped.

In October I visited Afar, the neighbouring province to Tigray in Ethiopia. Many women in Afar were raped when the conflict spilled out of Tigray earlier this year.

[Vicky Ford]

At the hospital, I saw the clinic that the UK had quietly funded. That clinic offered abortions to the women who had been raped in that war. The lead doctor at the hospital told me the service was vital.

There have been huge cuts in our development budget. So much of our overseas budget is being spent here in the UK, so it is devastating to think that around the world, in some of the poorest countries, the doors to women's health clinics are shutting. Across the world, women's rights to sexual and reproductive health are being rowed back. *Roe v. Wade* is just one example in one of many countries. We will not tackle violence against women and girls without also making sure that we stand firm in defending a woman's right to health.

3.51 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I have the honour to serve on both the Home Affairs Committee and the Justice Committee. For the best part of 20 years before coming here I was a criminal defence solicitor—a witness to the depravity of male violence against women in all its forms—so I shall confine my remarks to the criminal justice system.

There is always a temptation to sugar-coat some of the figures, but we should not do that; we should be honest. The charge rate for rape in this country is a national scandal—a national disgrace. It is 1.7%, so when we talk about conviction rates we are talking about 68% of 1.7%. In the year ending March 2022, the police recorded the highest annual number of rape offences ever: 70,330. Charges were brought in just 2,223 cases, meaning that only one in 100 rapes recorded by the police in 2021 resulted in a charge, let alone a conviction. How can that be? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said earlier, for that to be anywhere near correct we would have to state that 99% of cases were simply untrue, which is nonsense. We have to face up to the reality that we have to have a system that delivers more charges to put more people before the court and properly prosecute and take seriously these incredibly serious matters.

But it gets even worse than that; it is not simply about rape convictions. This week the Home Affairs Committee heard from Professor Alexis Jay, who was the author of an independent report into child sexual abuse involving scandals in various places. The inquiry cost £187 million and took seven years to come to its conclusions. Professor Jay said that agencies such as the police had reduced the priority placed on investigating child sexual abuse, and that the focus had gone to other important areas. We have got to a situation where a report has been required and the situation is worse than when it started. Professor Jay went on to say that there has been a general view—this is now; not seven years ago—that children in care were not worthy of protection, especially girls. That is now. So we have no cases going through.

In terms of other offences of violence, we are not simply talking about rape here. The prosecution rates for other offences of harassment and the like are just as dire as the ones that we see for rape. We therefore get to some fundamental questions about what we are as a country and what the criminal justice system exists for. A factor that was very clear to me during my time in private practice was that if somebody was suffering

from mental health problems, addiction or homelessness, there was not a chance that their case would be referred by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service for prosecution. They were viewed to be unworthy and unreliable with their evidence. Our system is as bad as I have described: the more vulnerable a victim someone is, the less chance they will have to access not only justice within the criminal justice system, but support and counselling services. It is non-existent.

Opposition Members and Government Members have made some very valid points on the fact that there is no housing, as is the case in my area. Victims of domestic violence are stuck in the house—there is nowhere for them to go. In my area, there are limited refuge services. There is no safe space for women to go. How have we got to this situation?

In terms of practical solutions, we have a criminal justice system. This is unfair on the Minister, in a sense—it should be a Minister from the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice answering this debate—but we have to make these points very clear. We have to get to the heart of the matter. The relationship between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service has to be straightforward.

If a woman comes in and makes an allegation that somebody has done an appalling act to her, they should be charged with that offence. It is not for the police or the Crown Prosecution Service, in my view, to decide what is right and what is or is not a proper allegation. That person should be put before the court and prosecuted. If they are not, we are creating a system where people are being told that they are untruthful before even entering the system. I can only speak from looking at this myself. Why would someone want to put themselves through this system, when the person will be months on bail and years going through the court system, and it is only 1.7% of the people who actually do the offence in the first place who even get to that point? It is a scandal of prolific proportions and it is getting worse and worse.

There are wider cultural questions but, putting it bluntly, we have to take this seriously. We have to make sure that young girls are not scared to go out in Bury or other areas on a Saturday night. If they contact the police, people need to be charged, held to account and sent to prison. Unless that happens, men will continue to act in this barbaric way against women and we as a country will continue to hang our head in shame at the situation we are in.

3.57 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the speech that the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) has just given. I congratulate the hon. Members for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing this very important debate. It has become somewhat of a sad and serious tradition to mark the international day for the elimination of violence against women and girls in this place. I have been proud to speak in many of these debates.

The hon. Member for Bristol South led off the debate powerfully and thoroughly. She started with an excellent point on the decision to host the World cup in Qatar, particularly as it runs over the 16 days of action. It is a shame that women and girls are not safe to walk their own streets.

The hon. Member for Thurrock spoke powerfully about the fact that this violence is carried out by male perpetrators. Every day, women take decisions to affect their own safety. The hon. Lady said she would like to see more men in this debate and in general in these debates, and I agree.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the Members present today are consistent and proud supporters of the movement. The hon. Gentleman—the hon. Member for Westminster Hall, as I like to call him—spoke of the different ways in which perpetrators target their victims and, indeed, the persecution of Christian women and children, an issue he does a huge amount of work on.

The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) spoke of her middle-class privilege, but I think it is fair to say that it is all of our middle-class privilege, rather than just hers. She was so right to say that all victims are not equal.

The hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) spoke of a local police officer who told her that offences are up 76%. She rightly made the point that such horrendous stats are essentially the tip of the iceberg, with many women unwilling or, indeed, unable to report their abuse.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) set out his impressive bona fides as a very strong campaigner in this area. He added a very welcome international perspective to proceedings; some of his comments on the use of rape and sexual violence in conflict were particularly powerful.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) made the good point that, as she grew up, she hoped that the world would get better, but it is in fact less safe for her daughters walking the street. She spoke of her local Reclaim the Night march; I have attended my local Reclaim the Night march as well, but I was unable to attend this year as, sadly, it was on Tuesday of this week.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) was absolutely right to lay into the victim-blaming culture and to lay out the vast improvements in abuse legislation on both sides of the border but, as we have heard, all the legislation is for nothing without proper funding and enforcement.

The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) highlighted the Everyone's Invited campaign, which works in schools. When I started working on the issue, I found the stats about abuse and violence against girls in schools to be the most shocking of all.

Last, the hon. Member for Bury North finished with a powerful speech focusing on enforcement and the scandalous levels of charging and conviction. We can all agree that that is an issue on both sides of the border; there is no politics to be had on that particular issue.

As others have said, there is an issue with the culture these days in social media. The management and ownership of certain social media companies is consuming a great deal of attention at the moment and I am sick to the back teeth of multibillion pound international companies hiding behind the curtain of free speech when we talk about online harms and the treatment of women and girls. Their version of free speech is the kind where rape threats and stalking are treated as minor misdemeanours, while posts about breastfeeding are deleted and users

banned. The rampant misogyny that is allowed to spread almost entirely unchecked online is only getting worse since the takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk. It would be wrong to single out Elon Musk and his anti-woke agenda; all the social media companies are failing abysmally at sniffing out misogyny and are utterly disastrous at stamping it out. Together with the historically unprecedented ease with which young men and boys are able to access pornography—often violent pornography, as we have heard—we are seeing an utterly toxic environment unleashed on deeply impressionable minds.

At this point, the Online Safety Bill looks likely to fall short of forcing the media giants to accept some responsibility for the bile and abuse hosted on their servers and from which, in one form or another, they improve their profit margins. If we want to change, build a better society and provide safety for women and girls, we cannot rely on the social media companies to challenge things. It falls to us as individuals, and as a society, to do things for ourselves—that is why campaigns such as White Ribbon UK are so important. Since being introduced to White Ribbon in late 2015, I have been proud to support the campaign; indeed, I chair the all-party parliamentary group on White Ribbon UK. It has been a journey of discovery for me, going from what I imagine is the case for most men—an awareness of the cruelty and sadism of which others are capable, without looking too deeply at the reasons and complexities—to wanting to drive change forward in my own community and across the country through my work in Westminster.

I am proud to be a White Ribbon ambassador, along with thousands of men across Scotland and the UK. To support the campaign, we pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. It is on the condoning and remaining silent where we can make real change. We will all have experienced behaviour or language from men whom we encounter that runs contrary to values of respect and dignity toward women. Too often, those behaviours are not challenged; they are put down as banter or old-fashioned, and left to fester.

I was pleased to host a coffee morning on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, bringing together those working to support survivors and community groups that work with men and boys in those communities. We were fortunate to hear from both Renfrewshire Women's Aid and Jubilee House, a charity serving Renfrewshire and beyond, which I was lucky enough to visit recently. Its focus is on empowering families to live fulfilled lives, free from abuse, and pretty much anything that empowers women to live their best lives. I met Fiona from Jubilee House, who shared some of the great holistic support provided by the charity and emphasised the crucial importance of education and supporting women and children to recover and get on living once the initial emergency support has been provided.

Some of the facts and stories were, as is unfortunately always the case at such events, utterly shocking. Violence against women and girls costs the Scottish Government alone £2.6 billion a year. Up to 10% of women will be victims of domestic violence in any given year, and, as we all know, more than 80% of domestic abuse incidents involve men abusing women. Marianne from Women's Aid highlighted the financial challenges faced by women

[Gavin Newlands]

who are affected by domestic abuse, and told us of the new Cost of Leaving campaign. In the light of the cost of living crisis, the need to highlight such challenges has never been more urgent.

Despite the horrific stats and narrative, that event was absolutely worth organising, and it is something that I want to do annually—well, for as long as I am in this place.

Jim Shannon: Hopefully for a long time!

Gavin Newlands: I know there is subtext to the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

I want to ensure that organisations in my constituency know that support and help is there for them if and when they want to start making change among the people they speak to daily. Young men have dozens of interactions with friends and family every day, and those friends and family members will have hundreds more. Some of those conversations will be about women and girls, and of those, some will perpetrate disrespect and disregard for the rights of women and girls. If we can turn just a fraction of those conversations into something to be challenged or objected to, we can make a start—just a start—on nipping the attitudes in the bud before they are allowed to fester and develop into something more serious five, 10, 15 or 20 years down the line. That does not mean letting grown men off the hook, but helping a developing mind along the right path is light-years easier than attempting to put the genie back in the bottle in adulthood.

To conclude, I welcome the UK Government's progress on ratification of the Istanbul convention, on which I have campaigned on for many years—indeed, an SNP colleague passed legislation on it—but the previous Secretary of State had reservations about ratifying it. I urge the Minister to speak to the Home Secretary and revisit the decision to opt out of articles 44 and 59, because migrants deserve the same protection as everyone else.

Despite the progress that has been made in removing the taboo around domestic abuse, to some extent it is still society's dirty little secret. The attitudes of misogyny and bigotry that ultimately lead down a path of gender-based violence are still there and are, in some cases, being allowed to grow unchecked. It is incumbent on us all, not just as MPs but as human beings, friends, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, to bring that dirty secret out into the open and ensure that all of us—men and women—are fully aware of the carnage and horror that some of our ilk wreak on women and girls, because challenging those behaviours means knowing about them.

4.7 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Elliot. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for securing this really important debate.

Labour believes that we will never have justice, or achieve a collective potential, until women and girls everywhere can live their lives free from violence. As women, we know that fear of violence can shape every single part of our lives, holding us back in many ways,

and that the aftermath of violence has a lifelong impact. In the UK, violence against women and girls is far from being ended. Today, we remember in particular Bibaa Henry, Nicole Smallman, Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard and the tens of thousands of women who are assaulted, abused, raped or murdered by men in this country every single year.

We are going backwards. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South rightly said, a woman is killed every three days in this country. Only 1.5% of rapes now result in a criminal charge—a huge decline since 2015. Even now, nine police services have failed to provide any specific training to their officers on how to handle domestic abuse. I know, because I shadow him, that the Minister has responsibility for international rather than domestic policy, but I hope he will join me in calling that out and acknowledging that those facts are shameful.

I am in the Chamber as a shadow Foreign Minister, so I hope Members will understand that most of my speech will be on the international action that is necessary, but clearly the UK has an enormous problem within our own borders and the Government have much work to do to make up for those failings.

In my speeches, I always like to try to give voice to those who do not have my privilege, so I want to mention a few testimonies from the conflict in Ethiopia. As we support the peace process there, we have to ensure that accountability is paramount. A Tigrayan mum who reported that she was raped by Eritrean soldiers said:

“Five of them raped me in front of my children... They used an iron rod... to burn me. They inserted pieces of metal in my womb... Then they left me on the street.”

Another Tigrayan mum of two, who reported rape by 10 regional militia members while trying to flee to conflict, was told:

“If you were male we would kill you, but girls can make Amhara babies.”

These are the words said to a 14-year-old girl, who reported being raped, along with her mother, by Tigrayan forces:

“Our families were raped and now it is our turn to rape you.”

The suffering and trauma that those women experienced and the misogyny driving the atrocities is clear. We need a systematic response, backed by consistent resources, and we need to keep working to break down gender inequality and the attitudes that fuel male violence.

As we have heard, this week the Government hosted the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative conference. I was there, and I heard consensus about the need for action and for spaces where survivors can raise their voices safely. Sadly, the conference was marred by the decision to include a speaker regarded by many survivors as complicit in atrocities, including sexual violence, during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. I have to ask why no survivors of sexual violence in the conflict in Ethiopia were enabled to speak. I hope we can hear about how lessons will be learned, because sadly the work of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff and UK-funded non-governmental organisations has been undermined and that work can be so powerful.

We support legal advice for survivors and provide resources to help women build their strength to fight for political change in their countries. I was grateful to hear

directly from African women survivors about what they need from the UK. They were very clear that we need to empower local leaders on programme design and delivery, because they can use UK funding most effectively.

We need to continue the UK's work on tackling stigma and empowering women within militaries, the police and judiciaries. The need for UK partnership goes way beyond specialist programmes, because we know that poverty and inequality often create the conditions for women to be violently abused and denied justice. When girls are out of education or there is a crisis such as the devastating drought in the horn of Africa, they are much more vulnerable to the abuse of child marriage. Once a girl is in that position, further violence, including rape and domestic abuse, becomes far more likely, and freedom and justice are much harder to obtain.

Nala was 12 when conflict forced her family to flee their home. Her father was killed and the family ran out of food. Out of desperation, her mother married her to an adult man who raped and abused her, and abandoned her when she became pregnant. In many of the countries where the most appalling atrocities against women and girls are happening, Governments are weighed down by unsustainable debt and undermined by climate disasters. Very few have the resources to reform their legal systems or provide protection, support and justice for survivors. Many Governments are struggling to keep the lights on and the teachers paid.

Our development assistance has been slashed. The aid that remains is much less focused on the poorest countries. That does not help vulnerable women and girls in these countries. The proportion of UK bilateral aid going to low-income countries has fallen by eight percentage points in the last five years. It is now barely above 50%. That does not even take into consideration the massive share of our aid being spent wastefully by the Home Office here in the UK.

I strongly welcome the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative strategy, but how will it have its intended effect when resources are dwindling? Action to tackle the global food crisis, give girls access to education and healthcare, and build peace and resilience against climate change all helps in our fight against male violence, but we can only offer warm words if the money gets spent by the Home Office.

We also need to ensure that there are sanctions. The UK strategy states:

“We will seek to use...UK sanctions regimes to deter ... perpetrators”.

As we know, there will not be any deterrent unless sanctions are actually used, but the Government have not even mirrored sanctions on the central reserve police in Sudan, who were sanctioned by the US because their officers allegedly raped women protestors. As I have said, there have been so many reports of horrifying sexual violence against women, children and men by Eritrean forces involved in the conflict in Tigray, but recent Eritrea sanctions have not been mirrored either. I hope that we will see leadership on sanctions designation in the coming days, as the Foreign Secretary has said.

I think many of us agree that the Government's record on justice for women in the UK is, frankly, dire. Despite all the chaos of the past months and the damage done to the UK's international reputation, we should be proud of the work that our officials do to

support women and girls around the world. The truth is that we need to do more of it. If the Government focused on long-term partnerships and aid delivery, we could have a much better impact.

All women and girls deserve to be safe from violence. All survivors deserve justice. We must amplify survivors' voices and build women's power. In partnership, we can break down the inequalities and misogyny that drive violence against girls and women everywhere. I hope that the Minister will set out how the Government plan to do just that.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am glad to be able to respond to this powerful and forthright debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for calling the debate and leading off. I should say that this subject sits in the portfolio of the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), but I am pleased to be here in his place. I am grateful for Members' contributions, and I will try to cover them all and give some assurance about the Government's policy.

The hon. Member for Bristol South laid out in quite stark terms the landscape of inequality and risk that women and girls face with regard to gender-based violence. She kicked off with remarks about Qatar and put the subject in the context of Ukraine, but she also focused on her constituency and Bristol. That was quite an alarming picture. She made very good points about the need for specialist rape courts, for particularly well-qualified individuals to be working in our police forces, and for a data-driven response to that challenge. I commit to her that I shall gently ask one of my fellow Ministers, perhaps from the Ministry of Justice or the Home Department, to write to her with an update on how we are getting on in relation to specific expertise in dealing with rape cases in our courts system. I was very grateful that she raised that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock was frank in her very stark assessment of how poorly we are doing when it comes to the statistical feedback. She laid down a very forthright and welcome challenge to the Government, and she drew attention to the very bad experience of our own colleagues in conducting their lives as female MPs. She mentioned the very dignified and powerful speech delivered to us and all colleagues by Madam Zelenska on Monday and put that in the context of our efforts in Ukraine.

I am glad that my hon. Friend commended our PSVI conference, but she also reflected that we need to keep our own house in order, and we accept that challenge. Our policy should not be just words, and she made the case for proper therapeutic care in the NHS and proper protections for rape victims in prisons. Again, I will ask my colleague in the Ministry of Justice to write to her with an update about the situation regarding proper protections in prisons. I will also ask, from the NHS side, for an update on the therapeutic care pathway for rape victims. I will be very pleased to do that.

My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke movingly about the international context with regard to victims of gender-based violence and

[*Leo Docherty*]

about kidnap in Nigeria and the Yazidis in Iraq. Of course, we are keenly aware of the ravages of Islamic State in Nigeria. We raise that on a very frequent basis with the Government of Nigeria, and we will continue to do so. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those cases here today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) referred very forthrightly and movingly to the Killed Women organisation. I am grateful to her for raising that. I was glad that she commended the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, but she quite rightly said that we must get our own house in order, and the Government certainly accept that challenge.

The hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) made a very valid point about the confidentiality of counselling notes in the handling of rape cases, which is by necessity extremely sensitive. I will ask my colleague in the Ministry of Justice to write with an update on our policy with regard to confidentiality in the handling of counselling notes, because the hon. Lady made it very clear that that is a key component of successful prosecution of these cases. She put it in a very well rounded way when she said that violence against women and girls cannot be ended by the victims. I thought that that was a very good way of seeing it, and she made a good point. We all join her in calling for holistic change.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) gave us some interesting reflections about the genesis of the PSVI conference and programme. We are grateful for his long-standing involvement in that and his keen advocacy of it still, some 10 years later. I agree with him that it was an achievement of true statecraft, and it continues to be. I think that those who visited the conference on Monday saw the energy, resource and priority that the Government afford this work, but of course that will only be as good as our ability to maintain the momentum, commitment and political priority. Of course, it is a priority, and that can be seen in our international development strategy.

My hon. Friend asked me how much resource was going to the Ukraine fund specifically. I can tell him that it is £10 million, and that will be routed through Ukrainian organisations on the ground. They will be best placed to afford that assistance to our Ukrainian allies, who are heroically resisting outrageous Russian aggression.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) also reflected on the PSVI conference. She made some quite critical remarks. I accept those in the spirit in which they were intended. I should confirm to her that our bilateral violence against women and girls spend is £27.6 million annually, and it remains a major priority. That is why we have another commitment, of £12.5 million, over the next three years. It is front and centre in our development strategy, as is only right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) challenged the Home Office to update her on spiking laws. That is a very serious issue, and I commit to asking my colleague in the Home Department for an update. We all recognise those sorts of cases in our own constituencies, and I am pleased to take action on that.

I was most grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for reflecting on the Bunny Walks initiative in her constituency, which is

a powerful example of community action. She also made a commendable point about the PSVI conference: there can be no peace without justice. She spoke movingly about the valuable time she spent in Africa, and I was pleased that she referred to her visit to Ethiopia in October. I think that all colleagues will commend and thank her for her energy while in her ministerial role, and for her continued interest in these issues from the Back Benches. We are most grateful for her continued advocacy.

Caroline Nokes: I join the Minister in his comments about my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), but I will not let him gloss over what she said about women's right to reproductive health, which is a crucial part of preventing violence against women and girls. Will he join me in reaffirming the Government's position on women's right to access abortion, and in regretting the fact that, in some countries, abortion is still not available when it should be?

Leo Docherty: I am very happy to join my right hon. Friend in those remarks. We are of one view, and I am very grateful for her intervention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) made a strident and powerful speech, based on intimate personal experience in his own constituency, about the low prosecution rate in rape cases. I will ask my colleague in the Ministry of Justice to write with an update on that. My hon. Friend painted a picture, based on intimate personal knowledge, of a derisory state of affairs. I will seek an update for him.

I am grateful for the powerful contribution of the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown). I join her in calling out the shocking impact of gender-based violence on women and girls, and I am grateful to her for bringing to the attention of colleagues the powerful testimony of survivors in Ethiopia. She asked, validly, why there were no Ethiopian survivors at the conference on Monday. We will take that home. She rightly pointed out some other lessons that we should learn from the conference about the handling of the experiences of survivors. I can confirm that they are being learned in advance of the next conference. She spoke about empowering women around the world. I assure her that gender-based violence will remain a core priority of the Government, and that we will seek to reflect that in our sanctions policy.

We were delighted that, subsequent to the conference, 54 states endorsed the political declaration, which sends a powerful sign of international resolve. We thought that that was important. That is backed up by our new three-year strategy and £12.5 million of new funding. More than £5 million will go to the Global Survivors Fund, founded by Dr Mukwege and Nadia Murad. We are putting our money where our mouth is. This work has resource and significant political energy. I again thank colleagues for their contributions to today's powerful debate.

4.28 pm

Karin Smyth: I thank the Minister for agreeing to take all the issues that have been raised today, particularly my request on the recording of sex data and other issues, to colleagues across Government, including those in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, and in

women and equalities roles. I thank both the other Front Benchers for their contributions, and I thank everybody for a good, wide-ranging debate.

We are united across parties. There is more to do. I think we all agree that we must get our own house in order, as well as support initiatives across the world, particularly on peacebuilding and women's reproductive rights. I think we are also united in wanting to make our country and the world a safer place for the women and girls who follow us. In that vein, we shall persist, and

hopefully we will have a good debate for White Ribbon Day—perhaps in the main Chamber, in Government time—next year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 1 December 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Project Gigabit Autumn Update

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): Today we have published Building Digital UK's latest Project Gigabit delivery update. We continue to make excellent progress with Project Gigabit, the Government's £5 billion mission to deliver lightning-fast, reliable broadband across the UK.

In this Project Gigabit autumn update, we report on the awarding of a £108 million contract in Cumbria that will bring gigabit-capable connectivity to up to 60,000 homes and businesses across the region. This is the first regional contract awarded under Project Gigabit, and follows local contracts awarded in Teesdale and north Northumberland in the past two months.

We also report on the boost we are giving to the gigabit broadband voucher scheme, increasing the value of vouchers to £4,500 for all beneficiaries, up from £1,500 and £3,500 for homes and businesses respectively. To date, over 111,000 vouchers have been provided through the scheme and its previous iterations, with more than 77,000 vouchers used to connect premises to gigabit-capable broadband.

The report also provides an update on the progress of the Project Gigabit procurement pipeline. BDUK has now undertaken market engagement exercises across the whole of England, and has launched procurements with a total value over £780 million, to connect up to 545,000 premises. The publication also reports on the completion of a public review by Highland and Islands Enterprise, working with BDUK and the Scottish Government, ahead of a first potential local procurement in Scotland.

I will place a copy of the Project Gigabit delivery plan autumn update in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS405]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fuller Inquiry Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Following my statement on 16 December 2021, I am pleased to inform the House that a compensation scheme to facilitate compensation payments to the family members of David Fuller's victims has been established today.

The scheme, which will be administered by NHS Resolution on behalf of Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, will ensure that compensation is paid to relatives as soon as practicable. The scheme will operate on a tiered approach. All qualifying family members will receive a fixed amount of compensation. Increased payments will then be made for psychiatric

trauma and/or financial loss, subject to evidence. Entry into the scheme is entirely voluntary and the scheme will be advertised nationally to help ensure all eligible family members are aware of it.

The scheme represents a highly co-operative effort between NHS Resolution, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust and the families' representatives and I would like to thank all those involved for their work in developing this compensation scheme for families.

I would also like to take the opportunity to update the House on the timescales of the inquiry. The inquiry is progressing well and due to the significant amount of evidence being received, the report on matters relating to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust is now planned for the first half of 2023.

[HCWS404]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council: Commissioners' First Report.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): On 22 March 2022, the then Minister for local government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), updated the House that the Secretary of State had decided to intervene in Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and had appointed two commissioners. Those commissioners submitted their first report to the Secretary of State on 20 June 2022 as part of the objective of ensuring that the residents of Sandwell have, as the statement by my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden indicated, what they need from their local council, including confidence in its governance and service delivery.

The first report provides an update on the work under way to make the authority functional again. The commissioners confirm that

“There are a lot of very tangible changes that need to be made in the council in the immediate term”

and that they

“are still at the early stages of this intervention”,

with a recognition that

“there are many challenges ahead.”

To do that, the report primarily focuses on two elements: first, the single improvement plan being implemented to address the issues raised in the reviews undertaken by Grant Thornton, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the Local Government Association. Secondly, it provides a broader overview of the commissioners' focus and early activities being undertaken as part of the long journey back from the unacceptable position into which the authority had fallen.

The report confirms that the authority has now adopted a single improvement plan which encompasses actions in relation to all of the recommendations in the aforementioned reviews. The commissioners have also provided the Secretary of State and me with a copy of that improvement plan. It has aggregated the many recommendations of those reviews, including a number which are serious and statutory. The commissioners have also developed twelve “proxies for success” which the commissioners intend to use to evaluate progress

during this intervention period. Evaluation of those proxies will commence in future reports from the commissioners. In the meantime, the commissioners did point to a number of early indicators of welcome progress, including the arrival of new officers, the willingness of Sandwell's cabinet and councillors to start to respond to the recommendations from the reviews and some very early signs of culture change. It is clear, however, that there is much more work to do, and any early indicators of progress must be sustained for a long period to give confidence of a real change in culture, behaviour, processes and governance.

The commissioners' next report to the Secretary of State is expected in December 2022. A copy of the commissioners' first report will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HSWS406]

TRANSPORT

Railway Infrastructure: England and Wales.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper):

I should like to make a statement on the settlement for the next five-year funding period for railway infrastructure in England and Wales.

Maintaining and renewing our country's rail infrastructure is critical to delivering the railway that passengers and freight companies expect, and for supporting economic growth. Every five years the Government are required to set out what we wish to achieve from the operations, maintenance and renewal of the railway.

This is done through a document known as a high-level output specification, and the funding available is set out through a statement of funds available.

I am today, 1 December, publishing the objectives and funds available for operational railway infrastructure in England and Wales for the next control period, control period 7. This covers the period April 2024 to March 2029.

The Government fully recognise the critical role that rail services played for business, key workers and our society during the covid-19 pandemic, and the vital role that they play in connecting communities and supporting economic growth.

The high-level output specification makes it clear that the Government will press ahead with rail reform, addressing the challenges facing the sector, such as fragmentation and outdated working practices, with a strong continued focus on operations, maintenance and renewal. This strong continued focus is important in supporting a safe, efficient and reliable railway for passengers and freight customers.

Achieving these objectives will be facilitated by significant Government investment as set out in the statement of funds available, with Network Rail spending around £44 billion over the period April 2024 to March 2029. The Government now expect Network Rail to develop detailed plans to deliver on these objectives, working closely with its customers. These will then be subject to strong and effective scrutiny by the Office of Rail and Road, as independent regulator, to develop robust, credible, value-for-money plans for the next control period.

[HCWS407]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 1 December 2022

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following is an extract from Prime Minister's Question Time on 23 November 2022:

Ed Davey: My constituent Vanessa has contacted me in floods of tears. Her mortgage payments have risen by £500 a month. She and her husband were already struggling with high energy bills and high food bills; now, like one in four mortgage holders across the country, they fear losing their home. “We are out of options and heartbroken,” says Vanessa. Will the Prime Minister introduce a new mortgage protection fund, paid for by reversing his tax cuts for the banks? Will he help Vanessa to keep her home?

The Prime Minister: I am deeply sorry to hear about Vanessa's circumstances. I want her to know that the plan that the Chancellor announced last week will help families like hers up and down the country, because it is the right plan to tackle inflation, limit the increase in mortgage rates and ensure confidence in our economy.

There is specific help that the Chancellor announced, offering low-interest loans to homeowners on benefits to cover interest on mortgages of up to £250,000. The Chancellor is also meeting mortgage lenders in the coming weeks. We will continue to do all we can to support those homeowners who are struggling with their payments.

[Official Report, 23 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 285.]

Letter of correction from the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak):

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) during Prime Minister's Question Time.

The correct response should have been:

The Prime Minister: I am deeply sorry to hear about Vanessa's circumstances. I want her to know that the plan that the Chancellor announced last week will help families like hers up and down the country, because it is the right plan to tackle inflation, limit the increase in mortgage rates and ensure confidence in our economy. There is specific help that the Chancellor announced, offering low-interest loans to homeowners on benefits to cover interest on mortgages of **up to £200,000**. The Chancellor is also meeting mortgage lenders in the coming weeks. We will continue to do all we can to support those homeowners who are struggling with their payments.

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**not later than
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