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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 9 February 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 9 February 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### BUSINESS AND TRADE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Exports from Devolved Nations to the EU

1. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to help increase exports from the devolved nations to the EU. [903563]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** We are supporting businesses in all parts of the United Kingdom through our export support service, including our innovative Export Academy, which helps build market export capability among small and medium-sized enterprises across the UK. We have also established trade and investment offices in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, increasing the visibility of the Department's services in the nations, and channelling the benefits of our new export and investment strategies to the entire UK. I am sure the hon. Member is aware of those benefits in his own constituency, with businesses such as Lynkeos Technology winning a £100,000 contract last year in Germany with the assistance of the Department.

**Gavin Newlands:** I like the hon. Member, but that answer was nonsense, quite frankly. The Institute of Directors found in a recent survey that almost half—47%—of businesses are still finding trade after Brexit a challenge, with just a third envisaging any opportunities at all from Brexit. That report also found that 45% of SMEs are exporting less to the European Union post Brexit, with Scottish exports having already slumped by £2.2 billion because of Brexit. Does the Minister agree that Brexit is an act of state-sanctioned economic vandalism?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is saying this is nonsense. I am sure that those businesses in his constituency and across Scotland who get support from the Department do not share that attitude. As well as focusing on the EU, which is and will continue to be an important trading partner of the UK, we are looking to the entire world, hence focusing on so many other countries. I hope he will be a little more “glass half full” in the future.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Is the Minister aware that the Scottish Government are planning to bring forward draconian restrictions on the advertising of whisky and other drinks in Scotland? Not only will that cost jobs in Scotland but it will make it much more difficult for the industry to export to the EU and elsewhere.

**Nigel Huddleston:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Such measures could have a considerable negative impact on so many Scottish businesses. That is precisely why we are seeking opportunities to support them, for example with trade deals, and trying to ensure that we reduce tariffs and are able to export more overseas. While we are backing our businesses right across the UK, I hope that in future we can get support from the Opposition, who might at some point come and join us and support one of the trade deals we are negotiating.

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

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): Unfortunately for the Minister, and unfortunately for Scotland, the latest data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that between July and September last year, exports from Scotland to the European Union slumped by 5%. Will the Minister explain for an expectant nation exactly how that is in any way strengthening the case for the Union?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that, as we recover from a global pandemic, certain sectors and certain industries are suffering more than others. That is precisely why we have an export strategy and why the Secretary of State has articulated a five-point strategy for growth. We will continue to work positively with all sectors to grow our export opportunities. UK exports to the EU for the 12-month period to September 2022 were up by 25% in current prices.

**Richard Thomson:** It is not just the SNP who are saying what a disaster Brexit has been. With the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies saying that Brexit is clearly an “economic own goal”, and even a former Brexit Secretary saying that there have been no economic benefits from Brexit, is it not surely time for voters in Scotland to be given the choice between continued British economic decline or a prosperous, independent European future?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I know the hon. Member and some people are tempted to continue to fight the battles of the past, but this Government will be laser-focused on the future and future opportunities. We have the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership and so many other opportunities around the world, and I think it would be good for all of us in this place to talk the British economy up, rather than talk it down.

#### US State-level Market Barriers

2. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her US counterpart on reducing market barriers at the state level in the US. [903564]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** We are taking tangible steps to improve our trade relationship with our largest bilateral trading partner, the United States. We have already signed state-level memorandums of understanding with Indiana, and North and South Carolina, which we are using to address barriers and promote British business in priority areas such as procurement, renewable energy, automotive, and life sciences. Together, those states imported more than £3.3 billion of UK goods in 2021. In December, the previous Minister for Trade Policy met counterparts in California to discuss an MOU, and counterparts in Utah to advance our talks. We are also making progress with Oklahoma and Texas, alongside our regular engagement with states across the US.

**Greg Smith:** I welcome my hon. Friend's answer, particularly the priority areas he outlined. However, from financial services to online shopping, digital trade is at the heart of doing business with our closest ally—the United States. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the progress made on removing barriers specific to such digital trade with individual states?

**Nigel Huddleston:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the digital economy. We very much see digital trade as an excellent area to focus on, deepening ties between the US and the UK. As part of that, we are keen to explore where we might be able to facilitate co-operation and promote digital trade with the US at state level. Further, the US-UK trade dialogues in Baltimore and Aberdeen last year helped to identify a range of trade-related areas for the two countries to collaborate on, and we agreed to strengthen further our bilateral trade in a range of areas, including on digital trade.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** After failing to get a trade deal with the United States, the Government have resorted to signing non-binding agreements with separate US states. The Minister's answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) on the different sectors was interesting, but the Government have refused to confirm what economic benefits these agreements will bring to the UK economy. I give the Minister another chance: will he tell me what value in pounds and pence these agreements will bring to our economy?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Again, I am somewhat disappointed that the Opposition are talking down the opportunities we have. These MOUs seek to bolster the already strong trading relationships with US states, which, as I said, are worth £3.3 billion of UK goods. As we move through and implement the MOUs—we have good faith and goodwill with the people we have been negotiating with—we will inevitably increase our trade volumes. The US is already our strongest and most important trading partner, accounting for about 16% of the UK's overall trade, and growing.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** In my constituency, companies are able to sell to Europe, the far east, South Africa and south America, but they have difficulty selling their products—foodstuffs that come from our

farms across Strangford in Northern Ireland—to the US. Will the Minister give some indication of what can be done in conjunction with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland to open those doors to sales?

**Nigel Huddleston:** We are fighting for opportunities right across the UK. As I said, the US is a really important trading partner. With the MOUs, we are seeking further opportunities, but we are also working on removing trade barriers and inhibitions to trade. For example, since leaving the EU, we have secured major trade deals with the US, reinstating beef and lamb imports and ending damaging steel and aluminium tariffs, so we are working in individual sectors to try to find further opportunities at both state and federal level.

### Export Opportunities for SMEs

**3 Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help increase export opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses. [903565]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** UK exports have grown by 24% year on year, and our landmark 12-point export strategy will challenge Government and the private sector to reach £1 trillion-worth of exports a year. As part of that strategy, we created the export support service, which has brought together helplines and services across Government to build a one-stop shop for UK exporters facing challenges in exporting to the EU. We are also delivering for businesses through our dedicated team of international trade advisers, reinforced by Department for International Trade events and programmes such as the UK Export Academy.

**Mark Eastwood:** Last month, I was delighted to co-host my first successful export academy at Kirklees College in association with the Department for International Trade and UK Export Finance. Will the Minister outline how local DIT officers and UKEF can assist SMEs to export their goods and services across the world?

**Ms Ghani:** Mr Speaker, may I first thank you for your leadership in hosting President Zelensky yesterday? It really was a humbling moment for us all. My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood), with his can-do attitude, is constantly championing everybody in Dewsbury. As he may know, UK Export Finance offers a range of trade, finance and insurance products to help small and medium-sized businesses fulfil export contracts. It works with more than 100 private sector partners, including all major UK banks. UKEF support is underpinned by the innovative general export facility, a product designed to give SME exporters more flexibility when accessing trade finance. It unlocked almost £250 million of working capital loans in the last financial year. Local trade has obviously helped strengthen the “Made in the UK” branding, which provides export support to SMEs across the country. Face-to-face support for exporters in England is delivered via a network of around 200 international trade advisers. There is so much to say, but I think I should stop there.

**Mr Speaker:** Hear, hear. I call Matt Western.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): SMEs in my area have been doing a huge amount of business internationally. One such company has been exporting 80% of its business for decades. In recent years, it has been challenged by China, and has had intellectual property issues; its IP has been stolen. I am afraid to say that it felt unsupported by the Department for International Trade. It faces an issue in Germany. Will the Minister meet me to help this business with the challenge that it faces in those countries?

**Ms Ghani:** The beauty of having former business Ministers in the new Department is that we are across most of these issues, including the issue of IP. I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman, or to make sure that the right Minister does, because we need to protect our IP.

#### Export Barriers for Food and Farming Businesses

4. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling export barriers for food and farming businesses. [903567]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** May I also pay tribute to you for the way that you welcomed President Zelensky here yesterday, Mr Speaker? The occasion made us even more proud to be British.

Over the financial year up to March 2022, we did away with 192 barriers across 79 countries, including by opening up markets for UK poultry meat in Japan, and for UK pork in Mexico—a market that will be worth £50 million to UK pork producers in the first five years of trade. Of course, Cornwall is home to fantastic British produce, such as Cornish yarg and clotted cream, which are promoted and recognised around the globe through the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland campaign, and at home through our “Made in the UK, sold to the world” marketing strategy.

**Mrs Murray:** I have to mention Cornish blue and Cornish Gouda, which are made in my constituency. South East Cornwall farmers are rightly proud of their excellent produce. What more can the Department do to help these small businesses access the widest possible market?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we should be very proud of the food and drink sector. It is our largest manufacturing sector—larger than automotive and aerospace put together. Our Export Academy delivers specialist food and drink modules to get companies started, and our Export Support Service can answer questions on export markets in Europe. Companies can access our network of international trade advisers across England, and the Department has teams in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I call shadow Minister Dame Nia Griffith.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): It is over a year since the announcement of eight additional agrifood and drink attachés. Given that there was yet another gloomy report from the British Chambers of Commerce last month, which said that three quarters of SMEs

anticipated zero or negative export growth this year, help is certainly needed. Will the Minister tell us what specialist training the attachés have completed on food and drink regulation in the relevant countries? How many UK SMEs have they helped to find new markets, and what is the value of any new exports that they have secured?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I am very happy to engage with the hon. Lady on that question, which had a number of other questions within it. As she knows, we have staff in more than 100 markets, and are building our existing attaché roles in China, Japan and the Gulf region. The Government are placing eight new dedicated UK agriculture, food and drink attachés in growth markets such as the US, Canada, Africa, India, South America, Brazil and Mexico.

#### Export Opportunities for SMEs

5. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help small and medium-sized businesses export products and services to new markets. [903568]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** The Department is opening new markets and creating new opportunities for exporters by agreeing new trade agreements and tackling market access barriers in countries around the world. Indeed, recently a deal was struck, worth up to £20 million, that allows Welsh lamb exports to the US.

**Gerald Jones:** The 2019 Conservative manifesto committed to 80% of UK trade being done under free trade terms by the end of 2022. The Government have clearly failed in their commitment to deliver free trade agreements. Does the Minister believe that free trade deals with the USA and India would help more small and medium-sized businesses to export? If so, would he care to apologise to businesses for over-promising and under-delivering yet again when it comes to these deals?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Trade agreements are clearly very important, which is why we have struck 71 agreements with countries around the world, as well as with the European Union. It would be a good thing if the Opposition were to support those free trade agreements. I just reassure the hon. Gentleman that trade with the EU, for example, is now at record levels. Last year, exports to the EU were £330 billion, compared to £298 billion in 2019.

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Small and medium-sized businesses make up a large part of the huge food and drink export sector that the Minister has already discussed. Tomorrow, the Scotch whisky industry will announce full-year export results for 2022. Significant growth is expected, particularly in India, even with 150% tariffs. Will the Minister update the House on negotiations with India? Does he agree that a deal to reduce tariffs on Scotch whisky would be good not only for the distillers of Scotch whisky in Scotland but for the wider supply chain right across the UK?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I know my hon. Friend is visiting one of his distilleries next week. I agree with him that opening new markets to our whisky exporters is one of

the great opportunities open to us in a post-Brexit Britain. As he knows, whisky is one of the UK's largest food and drink exports, with £4.6 billion in 2021. We have an ambitious programme of free trade agreement negotiations to break down barriers. We are now in our sixth round of negotiations with India this very week.

### Inward Investment

6. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help secure more inward investment into the UK. [903570]

13. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps she is taking help increase foreign direct investment into the UK. [903578]

17. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help increase the level of inward investment into the UK. [903583]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The UK's total inward investment stock is the second highest in the world, having recently passed £2 trillion. As the Secretary of State outlined, we want to make the UK the undisputed top investment destination in Europe, attracting high-impact, high-value investment into our strategically important sectors which will make a real difference to the UK economy. We are facilitating both Government-to-Government and industry investment. The UK-UAE sovereign investment partnership will bring £10 billion to key UK sectors. Likewise, the Moderna partnership will support our research and clinical trials infrastructure, building a state-of-the-art vaccine manufacturing centre and creating over 150 highly skilled jobs in the UK. Compared to 2020-21, last year—2021-22—the estimated economic impact of foreign direct investment projects supported by the Department for International Trade increased by 82% and the number of new jobs by 53%.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister, why are the answers so long? We have not heard the rest of the questions yet. I have a big list.

**Antony Higginbotham:** Burnley and Padiham are already home to some brilliant international businesses, such as Safran Nacelles, Paradigm Precision and Futaba Manufacturing among many, many more. Together, they support thousands of local jobs. To make our area even better, we want to attract more investment, helping businesses already here to grow and attracting new ones in. Will the Minister agree to meet me to talk through how we can make Burnley the best place to invest in Britain?

**Ms Ghani:** I think my hon. Friend, in promoting Burnley so much, has already made it the best place to be doing business. Burnley has a global reputation for manufacturing excellence. The companies that he references demonstrate the attractiveness of his constituency to investors across the globe, and the free trade agreements make it easier for investors to bring capital and create jobs in Burnley. And, of course, we would be delighted to meet him.

**Daniel Zeichner:** The Minister references the life sciences sector, which is so important for future prosperity, particularly in and around Cambridge. We are in danger of falling behind in the race for international investment, as evidenced by the fact that since 2018 we have fallen from fourth to 10th in hosting late-phase clinical trials. What are the Government doing to address that issue?

**Ms Ghani:** On clinical trials specifically, when I was life science Minister we commissioned a review of clinical trials—we knew that was a blockage—but I do not think the data he presents reflects the £1 billion Moderna deal we have just secured, including the deal with biotech. The fact that we have life science missions will enable us to attract more attention and work to the ecosystems we have here in the UK, including in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I am more than happy to work with him, because life science is one of our key exports of expertise.

**Robbie Moore:** I recently had the honour of welcoming the Prime Minister to Keighley, where he had the opportunity to visit Teconnex, a global leader in clamp technology that also provides battery storage to help commercial and industrial facilities to become more energy-independent. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that with businesses such as Teconnex in my constituency and other world-leading businesses right here in the UK, we can be seen as a more attractive place for foreign investment?

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend proudly represents Teconnex as a firm in his constituency. The Department is keen to support all businesses that seek to invest or expand in the UK, particularly those that can help to spread jobs and opportunities across the UK and help us to deliver net zero. The Department is working across Government; we have previous Business Ministers here, and we are very close to the automotive sector and the supply chain. The new Department will ensure that there is a single, coherent voice for business inside Government to help my hon. Friend to represent business in his constituency.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The investment in Moderna will not be worth anything if we do not have the precision temperature-calibrated machinery to help with that development. SK Wiring in Denton is the UK's only manufacturer of that high-tech wiring. It stayed open during the pandemic, even though it lost 70% of its industrial trade, to keep the covid vaccine going and keep the NHS going. It is now at risk of closure. Can we have an urgent meeting so that we can keep this critical national infrastructure developed in Britain?

**Ms Ghani:** Within the life sciences missions, manufacturing is a key point. I was at the life sciences conference in San Francisco when we finalised the deal with Moderna. Of course this is not about playing politics; I am more than happy to meet the firm in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, because vaccine manufacturing will be a key growth area for us.

### Trade with European Countries

7. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps she is taking to help increase trade with European countries. [903571]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** Europe remains a vital destination for British businesses, with exports of over £386 billion in the year to September 2022. That is up almost 25%, in current prices, on the previous year. As we speak, the Secretary of State is in Rome to establish the UK-Italy export and investment promotion dialogue, which will help to strengthen practical co-operation on exports in high-performing sectors and promote inward investment. We are also working closely with EU member states to tackle priority barriers and unlock export opportunities for UK businesses.

**Wera Hobhouse:** More than half of firms surveyed by the British Chambers of Commerce are struggling with the new post-Brexit export system. The Office for National Statistics reports that Brexit costs the economy £1 million per hour, and the UK economy has not recovered as well as other countries post covid. What plans does the Minister have to reduce trade barriers and EU border bureaucracy, which have hugely increased since Brexit?

**Nigel Huddleston:** As I said earlier, I hope that we can look at the opportunities of leaving the EU as well as trying to fight past battles. There are a host of opportunities; for example, I do not think that the EU had a particularly proud record on services around the globe. We are opening up services for many companies, which under the EU we were to a very large degree constrained in doing. We have huge resources for supporting businesses. Trade with the EU has been growing considerably, and we will do everything we can to support further growth.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** These barriers have had a greater impact on EU trade than on the UK. When does the Minister anticipate the EU will wake up to what is in our mutual interest?

**Nigel Huddleston:** My right hon. Friend makes a perfectly good point. Our agreement with the EU is one of the most thorough and comprehensive trade agreements, but we need to work further. We are constantly looking at opportunities—country by country, industry subsector by subsector—to open up more trade by reducing the barriers. These are barriers that also existed when we were in the EU.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op):** Over the past three years, according to the latest German trade figures, exports to Germany are up by almost a third from the US, by almost a quarter from the rest of the EU and by more than 10% from China, yet exports from Britain to Germany are down. Everybody else's exports are up; Britain's are down. Is it a lack of support to our exporters to Germany, is it the poor deal that the Conservative party negotiated with the EU, or does the Minister blame British business for the situation, as one of last year's Prime Ministers once did?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Again, all I have to say is that I have much greater confidence in British industries taking advantage of opportunities, not only in the EU but around the world. I wish others in this Chamber shared that optimism and confidence in British business.

## Foreign Direct Investment since 2016

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** If she will make an estimate of the level of foreign direct investment into the UK since 23 June 2016. [903573]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** More global multinationals have set up subsidiaries in the UK than in any country other than the United States. This is the best place in Europe in which to raise capital. Between April 2016 and the end of March 2022, the Department assisted more than 8,700 foreign direct investment projects in the UK, which have created about 348,000 new jobs across the United Kingdom.

**Mr Hollobone:** The UK has had a great track record of attracting foreign direct investment since we voted to leave the European Union. The figures given by the Minister will include the £200 million investment by Ball Corporation in the United States in the UK's largest and Europe's most advanced car manufacturing plant, in Burton Latimer. How does the UK's record of attracting foreign direct investment compare with those of our major EU competitors?

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend has given a fantastic example of the opportunities that have been created. The UK is a highly attractive destination for FDI, and has been among the top recipients in Europe over the last decade. According to the *Financial Times* and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the UK has the highest market share of greenfield FDI capital expenditure in Europe, at 20%—almost double that of Spain, which is in second place with 12%. It also has the highest levels of Food and Drug Administration stock in Europe, second only to the United States globally. It is remarkable how far we have progressed in such a short time.

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** The Biden Administration's Inflation Reduction Act 2022 makes investing in the US very attractive, particularly for innovative green technology. How are we going to compete?

**Ms Ghani:** In my previous role I was dealing with the impacts of the Inflation Reduction Act, and I hope I will continue to do so, because so many business representatives whom I have met have raised it as a concern. The hon. Lady has referred to green technology. A great deal of work has already been done to promote all our expertise, especially in relation to hydrogen, but there is a huge amount of investment in the UK's green technology sector and technology in general, and we are also a leading light when it comes to lithium. I was recently in Cape Town with our Green Lithium firm, which wanted to negotiate on how it could do more work in the United States. That is exactly what we are here to do—to facilitate collaboration of that kind.

## Trade Envoy for the Commonwealth

9. **Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the potential merits of establishing a trade envoy for the Commonwealth. [903574]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** The countries of the Commonwealth are important trading partners. Our total trading relationship was worth more than £146 billion in the 12 months to September 2022, which is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already appointed trade envoys to 15 Commonwealth nations. We have trade agreements with 33 Commonwealth members, and five of the 11 members of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership are in the Commonwealth as well.

**Giles Watling:** As chairman of the 1922 committee's Back-Bench foreign affairs policy committee, I recently shared our report with ministerial colleagues. One of its recommendations was the creation of a Commonwealth-specific trade envoy post. Does my hon. Friend agree that in this post-Brexit era, increasing trade and movement between the Commonwealth and the UK should be a top priority to foster economic growth? By the way, this is not a pitch for that job.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes, I am afraid that those jobs are at the discretion of the Prime Minister.

I hear what my hon. Friend is saying. We already have extensive coverage through the existing network, but we review the network regularly because we are committed to working with our allies in the Commonwealth to remove the barriers to trade and strengthen trading relationships to foster economic growth. Growing exports to Commonwealth countries is a priority, and trade increased by 25% in the year to September 2022. As for movement, we have a new global immigration system which is vital in supporting trade and economic growth, and the movement of business people on a temporary basis promotes and supports trade in services and goods and investment activities. Recognition of professional qualifications and business travel are always an important part of our trade deals.

#### Automotive Exports

10. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase automotive exports. [903575]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The Department is working across Whitehall and with industry to secure export-led investment as the sector makes the transition to zero-emission vehicles, including new electric vehicle models, along with battery gigafactories and the electric vehicle supply chain. We have a dedicated export support system throughout the UK in the shape of our international trade advisers, ensuring that the automotive industry is the country's biggest single exporter of goods, exporting nearly 80% of vehicle production—about 6% of the UK's total exported goods.

**Rachel Hopkins:** If we are to continue to drive British automotive exports, it is critical that automotive businesses such as Vauxhall in Luton can make the transition to manufacturing electric vehicles effectively. The rules of origin from 2024 onwards highlight the need to attract the wider electrified supply chain to the UK as soon as possible. How is the Minister working with the automotive sector to expand our domestic electric vehicle supply chain—especially in respect of batteries—to avoid any future tariffs when rules of origin come into effect?

**Ms Ghani:** The hon. Lady will hopefully find some comfort in the fact that I have many meetings with the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and have met the automotive sector multiple times to deal with this issue. We are very much aware of the rules-of-origin issue, which is why we are investing so much in batteries. In particular, the Faraday battery challenge is a £541 million project to help us to develop new battery technologies. I have mentioned already that I was in Cape Town to deal with the diversification of access to critical minerals in supply chains to ensure that we can process them and manufacture here.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Would the Minister like to congratulate Group Lotus in my constituency, which exports more than 70% of its car production? Would she like to take the opportunity to come to Hethel to see the new Lotus Evija supercar, which can do nought to 180 mph in nine seconds?

**Ms Ghani:** I am not sure that I can speak as far as that car goes, but I am more than happy to come to Hethel to visit Group Lotus. The amount of progress that has been made by experts, academics and scientists when it comes not only to zero emission vehicles but to speed is remarkable.

#### Foreign Direct Investment: Metro Mayors

11. **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): What recent discussions her Department has had with Metro Mayors on attracting more foreign direct investment. [903576]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** I met Andy Street this week to talk about foreign direct investment, and Lord Johnson will meet the 10 Metro Mayors today and look to discuss how we can attract more investment into mayoral combined authorities and how the Department can connect strategic regional opportunities to major international capital, such as the sovereign investment partnerships that have been established over the past 18 months by the Department and the Office for Investment.

**Gareth Bacon:** I chair the all-party parliamentary group for London as a global city, and last year we published our first report, which featured analysis of the London-plus effect, a term coined by the London & Partners agency to show that our capital is the gateway to the world and that companies that first invest in London go on to contribute £7.6 billion and create 40,000 jobs throughout the country. Is my hon. Friend's Department willing to consider convening roundtables with the Metro Mayors on how to maximise the potential benefit to the UK of the London-plus effect?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Andy Street was very clear about the importance of London to regional development in the west midlands. The Department convenes roundtable joint sessions with the M10 Metro Mayors twice every year, in addition to ongoing ministerial-mayoral bilaterals and official-level engagement. Such meetings include the discussion of shared priorities in respect of international trade and investment and of greater collaboration throughout all regions to increase foreign direct investment from new and existing investors.



**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will know that there are no Metro Mayors in Wales, but there are city deals and leaders that link across the south-west of England into Bristol and across the south Wales belt. Will the Minister set out what he is doing to work with local government leaders in Wales to ensure that investment is brought into Welsh constituencies as well as those throughout England?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are pleased that across York and North Yorkshire we are about to get our own Metro Mayor; I am sure he is working hard to bring that kind of governance to his area too, because it clearly delivers opportunity right across the country. As he knows, the FDI stock in the UK is worth £2 trillion, which is the second highest amount in the world. I am sure the opportunities would be beneficial to the hon. Gentleman's constituents should he strike that kind of deal.

### Free Trade Agreement with the US

12. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on a free trade agreement with the US. [903577]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** We recognise that the US is not currently focused on FTAs. However, we stand ready to resume negotiations when they are ready. In the meantime, we are working to improve the trading landscape, including by removing US steel and aluminium tariffs and lifting the US ban on British lamb and beef. We are also working with the US on areas of shared interest that include digital trade, small and medium-sized enterprise support and supply chain security.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The reality is that there has been no real progress and, despite all the previous rhetoric, there remains no free trade agreement with the US. Does the Minister think his suggestion that this is the fault of the US President will help or hinder future negotiations?

**Nigel Huddleston:** As I said, the US is not currently negotiating FTAs, not just with us but with any other country. We are working and we have very good dialogue with one of our closest allies in so many areas, including economically, culturally and militarily, and that dialogue will of course continue. As I said in my previous answer, we are working in many areas, including steel and food, to create opportunities, alongside work in respect of the memorandum of understanding. Considerable progress can be and will continue to be made, even without an FTA.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Global free trade is and always has been the greatest motor for global prosperity, which is why many of us voted for Brexit. A free trade deal with America is the greatest prize of all. Will the Minister confirm that, as far as we are concerned, there are no barriers at all—whether it be chlorinated chicken or whatever—to trying to conclude an agreement? We want this deal with the US. Does the Minister think that it will happen?

**Nigel Huddleston:** We are very keen to conclude a deal with the US, but, at the moment, it is not able to enter into those negotiations. However, that will not

prohibit us from continuing to find opportunities and to remove barriers where and when we can, as well as seeking those opportunities across the world. I appreciate what the right hon. Member said at the beginning of his question about how we, on the Conservative Benches, are firm proponents of free trade. It is good for the UK economy and good for the world economy, and we need to continue to make sure that that message is heard loud and clear.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Had the Conservative party negotiated a free trade agreement with the US, as it promised at the general election, British firms would have been protected from new market barriers to green trade that are being introduced by the US Inflation Reduction Act 2022. That means that new investment and jobs here in Britain in green energy, electric vehicles and new technology are at risk. Is it not the truth that the infighting in the Conservative party last year meant that Ministers woke up much too late to the threat and that they have done far too little since to try to ameliorate the damage?

**Nigel Huddleston:** As I said, the US is not focused on free trade agreements at the moment, and we are disappointed that the US has opted to pursue policies in the Inflation Reduction Act that will harm British businesses and impact global supply chains. The UK expects to be and, as the closest ally of the US, should be part of any flexibilities in the implementation of the IRA, and we will continue closely engaging with the US Administration to ensure that UK concerns are addressed.

### Tackling Modern Slavery: Trade Negotiations

14. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking through trade negotiations to help tackle modern slavery in global supply chains. [903579]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** The UK is a world leader in the promotion of human rights and remains committed to ensuring that trade supports an environment where workers' rights are upheld, including working towards the eradication of modern slavery in global supply chains. We should remember that the UK was the first country to produce a national action plan for the implementation of the UN guiding principles on business and human rights. In both our agreements with Australia and New Zealand, for example, we have secured world-leading modern slavery provisions.

**Kate Osamor:** I thank the Minister for his answer, but the UK has named the Gulf Cooperation Council as one of its priorities for trade deals and has begun negotiations. We know that the economies across the Gulf are built on the terrible kafala system, enabling coercion and debt bondage and facilitating modern slavery. How can the Government justify such talks with the Gulf Cooperation Council given those basic human rights concerns?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Protecting UK workers' rights remains a priority for this Government. The UK will continue to meet its obligations under the International Labour Organisation and to advocate for the highest labour

standards and working conditions globally, and that includes in our discussions on free trade agreements. In the UK GCC FTA, we will retain the UK's high standards and protections, including the right to regulate labour, and we will also seek assurances that labour rights are not reduced to gain a trade advantage. We have these discussions in this and other Departments, and we are always happy to have frank conversations with our friends.

### Green Industrial Sector

16. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help increase trade opportunities for the green industrial sector. [903582]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** Green trade is a foundational building block of sustainable growth, helping to protect our environment and our energy security, and future-proof UK jobs. In the two years to October 2022, the Government have supported £20 billion of net zero-related inward investment to help grow our green industries.

**Selaine Saxby:** Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we drag our feet developing new renewable energy industries, foreign investment will go overseas?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I agree with my hon. Friend and thank her for her incredible work on the Celtic sea initiative. I attended her reception in Parliament, which was very well attended indeed and very optimistic about the potential for the Celtic sea.

We know that the net zero transition will create new industries worth around \$10 trillion to the global economy by 2050. We recognise that the international landscape is becoming increasingly competitive as a result, but we are not dragging our feet. Securing inward investment to the UK's green economy is a top priority for the Government, and the Department will be working closely with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, UK Export Finance and the Office for Investment, using all the levers at our disposal to promote the UK offer overseas.

### Parliamentary Scrutiny of New Free Trade Agreements

18. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support effective parliamentary scrutiny of new free trade agreements. [903584]

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** The Government are committed to transparency and effective scrutiny in our trade agenda, going beyond the statutory framework set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. That includes providing extensive information prior to the commencement of talks on free trade agreements, as well as regular updates to Parliament during negotiations. At the end of negotiations, we have committed to additional parliamentary scrutiny time, as well as to publishing further information such as the advice of the independent Trade and Agriculture Commission.

**Liz Twist:** Over the last year, the Government's former Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has labelled

the Government free trade agreements a failure, and the Prime Minister has called them one-sided. Is such criticism the reason the Government spend so much time avoiding any real detailed scrutiny of these trade agreements?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady's characterisation that there is insufficient scrutiny, and I respectfully disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who made some comments earlier this year. Last time I answered this question, you quite rightly had a go at me, Mr Speaker, because I gave a long list of examples of extensive scrutiny on our free trade agreements. I will spare the House by not repeating it, but I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave previously.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903588] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** The Secretary of State for Business and Trade is currently in Mexico, driving forward our negotiations to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership and progressing bilateral trade discussions. I am delighted to be representing the Department as the Minister for international trade; I thank my predecessor for his work in delivering the Government's ambitions, and the former Minister for exports as well.

Just last week, the then Minister for trade policy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), held talks with his counterparts in Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore on trade, outlining the benefits the UK will bring to CPTPP as we look to conclude our accession process. When the UK joins, the bloc will represent 15.4% of global GDP, rising from 12%. Later today, I am meeting ambassadors and high commissioners from all CPTPP countries, where I look forward to discussing how we can enhance their ties with the UK. Our negotiators continue to engage with their counterparts.

**Daniel Zeichner:** International students are of huge benefit to every constituency in this country, not just to university cities such as Cambridge, but different parts of the Government seem to be sending out very different messages as to how welcome they are. Will the Minister tell us what his Department is doing to secure this important trade benefit for the UK?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The Government are always open across multiple Departments to engage constructively with industry and players, and that will continue to be the case. If the hon. Gentleman would like to invite us to have a discussion with him, somebody in his constituency or other stakeholders, we would be delighted to do so. We work with businesses in this party.

T4. [903592] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Wimbledon, Morden, Raynes Park and Motspur Park are home to many high-tech companies, including GripAble, which is developing solutions for neuro diseases. What are the Government doing in these trade deals and what steps are they taking to ensure that we get investment and trade in high-tech companies?

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** My hon. Friend once again promotes a fantastic business in his constituency. The UK tech and digital sectors are key for us and are our greatest success stories, with a total valuation in excess of £1 trillion in 2022. The UK tech sector retains the No. 1 spot in Europe and is No. 3 in the world, as the sector's resilience brings continued growth. On tech within life sciences, we are one of the top countries in the world to be seen collaborating and investing with.

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

**Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** I thank you, Mr Speaker, and all House staff for the work on President Zelensky's visit. I also welcome the Ministers to their rearranged places, but I do not think it is a surprise that the Prime Minister has decided to shuffle the deckchairs on this particular ship. We had a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with no industrial strategy and we had a Department for International Trade delivering either no deals or bad deals. In an assessment of the Conservatives' 13 years in office, can the Minister inform the House when they expect to hit the target of £1 trillion-worth of exports, which David Cameron promised by 2020?

**Ms Ghani:** What a blow to one's ego to know that one's Department is such a disappointment, but we are working so closely with our colleagues to drive investment, represent businesses and focus on trade that it makes absolute sense for us to be here. I know that I am new to this business, but I thought that the £1-trillion target was for 2030. If that is the case, we have seven years to go, so I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman be a little patient. In seven years' time, he will be there, on the Opposition Benches, and we will be here, on the Government Benches, ready to update him.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** David Cameron promised it by 2020; the last Prime Minister but one promised it by 2030; and, as the Department for International Trade set out in a written response, the Office for Budget Responsibility said that the target will not be met until 2035—15 years late. Is that any surprise? The Government have delivered no trade deal with the US, no trade deal with India, and an ongoing impasse on the Northern Ireland protocol, and the current Prime Minister said that the deals that they have delivered, such as the Australia deal, were "one sided". The truth is that they can swap around Ministers and departmental names, but at the heart of it is a failing Government who are out of ideas.

**Ms Ghani:** I completely understand why the right hon. Member may be confused. We on the Conservative Benches represent business, and I know that the Labour party was stopping people from doing their business by backing the strikes. We on this side of the House represent trade, but I cannot think of a single trade deal that he was proud to support. I can understand the level of complete confusion, but I do not understand some of the figures that he cites.

There is such fantastic news out there. We have talked about the fact that we have attracted £20 billion in tech. Why would the right hon. Member not be proud of that? If he wants to talk about reports, just last night

I read the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, which said that the UK would be the fastest growing G7 economy by 2050, and will outgrow Germany, France and Italy. That is good news. I thought Thursday mornings were about promoting Great Britain—

**Mr Speaker:** And topical questions are meant to be short and brief. I call Philip Hollobone to set the example.

T6. [903596] **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Excitement is building in Kettering ahead of the visit by the Minister with responsibility for small business, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), to the North Northants Business Network on Friday 10 March. One hundred representatives from local small businesses are really keen to meet him. Will he be kind enough to give us a taster of the optimistic message that he will bring to small businesses in Kettering?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** Excitement is also building in me ahead of my visit to Kettering. I am a proud champion of small businesses, which, as we all know, are the engine room of growth in our economy. That growth has been good over the past 12 years—the third fastest in the G7—but we want it to be faster. I am very keen to engage with my hon. Friend to see how we can help small and medium-sized enterprises to do that.

T2. [903589] **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** Now that the Trade Remedies Authority has been in operation for almost two years and has produced its decision, can the Minister tell me what plans there are, if any, to review how it operates and the guidelines to which it works?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I thank the hon. Lady for the constructive engagement that we have had about the TRA. I know that some of its decisions have been impactful on her and her constituency. We will be looking for some reform of the TRA, and I would be happy to discuss that further with her.

T7. [903597] **Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con):** It is brilliant to see that state-level memorandums of understanding are being signed in the US, but with only three so far, it is clear that we can go further to cement that important trading relationship. What progress are we making with other states, and when can we expect further MOUs to be signed?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Absolutely. We have agreed MOUs with Indiana, North Carolina and, most recently, South Carolina, as my hon. Friend sets out. We are actively engaging with other states, including Oklahoma, Utah, Texas and California, and I look forward to updating the House on further progress.

T3. [903591] **Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op):** I understand that the Government are set to undertake a second round of trade negotiations with Israel in the spring. Israel applies our current agreement to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, against the EU negotiator's original intentions. Have the Government considered how they

will go about preventing any repeat of that situation and preventing illegal settlements from benefiting from the prospective deal?

**Nigel Huddleston:** We are progressing with the free trade agreement with Israel. We are excited about the opportunities it presents, in particular because of the focus on science, technology and innovation. I understand the point that the hon. Lady is raising. I think some of it cuts across other Departments, but I will write to her.

**Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** The global dairy market is forecast to be growing in the region of 2%, so can my hon. Friend outline what steps his Department is taking to ensure that our world-class British dairy products are at the front of the queue to benefit from that growth?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said earlier, food and drink is our largest manufacturing sector—larger than aerospace and automotive put together. He is right to point out the opportunities for dairy in our free-trade negotiations, and that will be taken forward as the negotiations progress.

T5. [903594] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** Banks and insurers are using environmental, social and governance criteria to block companies that work in the defence industry, stifling jobs, skills, innovation and UK exports. Why have the Government done nothing about that?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The hon. Lady raises an important point, but we are trying to work across all sectors—industry by industry and sector by sector. We have clear processes, particularly when it relates to arms. We are trying to seek opportunities for fair trade across the world, whether it is imports or exports, and we will continue to make sure that we do so on an ethical basis.

**Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con):** What action does my hon. Friend intend to take to reduce tariff barriers with developing countries, such as Pakistan?

**Ms Ghani:** I believe that my hon. Friend is the trade envoy to Pakistan, and I look forward to collaborating with him. Pakistan already has a preferential trading relationship with the UK through our generalised scheme

of preferences. This will be replaced by the developing countries trading scheme, and Pakistan will continue to benefit from duty-free exports to the UK and the removal of tariffs on 156 products. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** Edusport Academy, based in my constituency, was set up in 2011 and had a thriving business prior to Brexit. It brings young sports people over to Scotland, combining sport and English language training. Since Brexit, Edusport has struggled to make the business work due to restrictions put in place by the Home Office. Will the Minister meet me and Edusport to discuss how we can make this business work and continue to thrive?

**Nigel Huddleston:** As I have said, we will continue to work with the EU to try to reduce barriers that do exist. I cannot make a promise on behalf of the Home Office, but I note what the hon. Lady has said, and I will try to facilitate the appropriate meeting with the appropriate Minister for her.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** The fairness of imports and exports in Northern Ireland is hindered by the impacts of the Northern Ireland protocol. What steps are being taken to ensure that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which is sitting in the House of Lords like the *Mary Celeste*, as others have said, passes smoothly and efficiently to reinforce trading fairness for businesses in Northern Ireland?

**Ms Ghani:** Northern Ireland plays a full part in all our trading agreements, and I believe that a Northern Irish machinery exporter is involved in the Australia deal. My hon. Friend and I have spoken quite a bit about the Northern Ireland protocol in respect of the Bill I took through recently, and he will be aware of the sensitive discussions that have taken place with the Administration to ensure everything can be as smooth as possible. If needed, I will always be available to meet my hon. Friend.

**Mr Speaker:** I will have to suspend the House until 10.30. I am sorry nobody else wanted to come in.

10.27 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Governor of Xinjiang: UK Visit

10.30 am

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned visit to the UK of the Governor of Xinjiang.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty)**: We understand from the Chinese embassy that the governor of Xinjiang may visit the UK next week. To be very clear, he has not been invited by the UK Government or the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and we have no confirmation that he will, in fact, travel. Our expectation is that he will travel on a diplomatic passport, and therefore he has not yet been granted a visa. If he does visit, I assure this House that under no circumstances will he be dignified with a ministerial meeting.

China's actions in Xinjiang are abhorrent and we will not legitimise them in any way. However, robust engagement to challenge human rights violations and to stand up for the rights of the oppressed is at the core of the UK's diplomatic work around the world. We must be prepared to use diplomatic channels to achieve that end, hence officials would be prepared to offer him a meeting. In line with that principle, there is only one reason why such a meeting would take place—to make absolutely clear the UK's abhorrence of the treatment of the Uyghur people and to say that we will not relent from exposing the horrors to which they are subject. That point needs to be set out clearly to China. It is only right that people responsible for human rights violations are confronted on these issues.

The UK has played a leading role in international efforts to hold China to account on Xinjiang. In 2019, we became the first country to step up to lead a joint statement on China's actions in Xinjiang at the UN. Since that first statement, which was supported by 23 countries, we have worked tirelessly through our global diplomatic network to broaden the caucus of countries speaking out. Our leadership has sustained pressure on China to change its behaviour and consistently increase the number of countries speaking out. Most recently, our diplomatic effort helped to secure the support of a record 50 countries for a statement on Xinjiang at the UN third committee in October.

We have imposed sanctions on four individuals and one entity in Xinjiang, and have introduced robust measures to tackle forced labour in supply chains. We have consistently raised our concerns at the highest level in Beijing. Let me be absolutely clear that we will continue to emphasise at all levels that the world is watching what China's authorities say and do in Xinjiang. They cannot hide their abuses. The UK and our allies will not turn away.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith**: I find that response from my hon. Friend, for whom I have the highest respect, to be a very weak turn from the Foreign Office. The Uyghur region in north-west China has been the site of severe human rights violations, crimes against humanity and genocide for more than six years. In 2017, satellite imagery

confirmed that a network of internment camps had been set up throughout the region. Throughout this time, Erkin Tuniyaz has been responsible for the murderous and repressive policy, alongside its architect, Chen Quanguo.

Testimony from camp survivors—who are absolutely appalled to hear that a Foreign Office official will meet this individual—and leaked official Chinese Government documents, satellite images and drone footage indicate that the camps are sites of severe mass arbitrary detention and severe human rights abuses, including systematic sexual violence against women, torture and the forced sterilisation of many women. Reports of cultural and religious oppression, mass digital in-person surveillance, forced labour, mass sterilisations and abortions and a system of mass criminalisation and arbitrary detention are also completely documented.

The weak response from the Foreign Office hides something. It is not that it has invited him here, but it has made it clear that when he comes, he will be welcome to see officials. Whether or not the Foreign Office is tough, this is a propaganda coup for the Chinese Government. Governor Tuniyaz has defended the use of mass detention centres and doubled down and expanded their use. During his tenure, more than 1 million Uyghurs and other people from predominantly Muslim minorities have been detained in Xinjiang. A man who declares that nothing is going on is hardly likely to be bothered by a Foreign Office official telling him, "Now, now, you've got to stop this."

I remind my hon. Friend the Minister that in 2021, the House of Commons in this United Kingdom declared for the first time that genocide is taking place against the Uyghurs and other minorities in the Xinjiang region of China. Let us compare our response with that of the United States. The UK has sanctioned only three rather junior people. The US has introduced 107 punitive sanctions, five new laws, 11 specific investment bans and 10 sanctions on individuals, including Chen Quanguo and Erkin Tuniyaz. I call on the UK Government to rescind this invitation and sanction Erkin Tuniyaz and Chen Quanguo for their role in this crime against humanity and genocide. The place to deal with these individuals is in a tribunal or court of law, not in the quiet office of a Foreign Office official.

**Leo Docherty**: I appreciate sincerely the long-standing interest of my right hon. Friend in this issue, and he speaks with great sincerity and power. He draws a comparison with the sanctions regime in the US. The numbers might be different, but that reflects our desire and approach to use these opportunities to deliver a very strong and robust message. It is institutionally the judgment of the FCDO that we are better off not denying ourselves the opportunity to send extremely robust and strong messages of condemnation of the brutality that has been carried out by the Chinese state in Xinjiang. He alluded to that difference of approach, but we are confident in its utility.

My understanding is that, in advance of the suggestion of this meeting, the invitation was extended to human rights groups in the UK to afford them the opportunity to send a very strong message to this individual about their view of repression in Xinjiang. That was at the heart of what was judged to be useful about the prospect of such a meeting.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing this urgent question to the House. The issue of Xinjiang has been debated in both Chambers of this Parliament, and following a Back-Bench motion, Members of this House voted that genocide had occurred in this area of China.

In September last year, the UN high commissioner for human rights said that the treatment of the Uyghurs may constitute crimes against humanity, and this House has made clear its view that the treatment of the Uyghurs amounts to genocide. It is therefore deeply worrying to learn of the planned visit to the UK of the governor of the very province in which these outrageous and systemic acts have taken place. Has the Minister made an assessment of the relationship between Chen Quanguo, who is an international pariah, and this particular individual?

I am acutely aware of, and in principle agree with, the general points that the Minister has made about engagement. However, we have to be very robust with regard to human rights. Is the meeting essential to UK-China relations? I do not think it is. I fear that this planned visit to the UK highlights the serious lack of political leadership at the Foreign Office. The Minister knows the views of this House and should have made it clear that this meeting was ill-judged and inappropriate.

When were Ministers first made aware of the planned visit, and did it receive personal approval from the Foreign Secretary? What assessment has been made of the moral injury that this would cause to the Uyghur minority in this country, who have come to the Houses of Parliament to tell us of their suffering? Has this decision been informed by the moral injury that it will cause? Finally, will the invitation to visit the UK now be rescinded? What action will the Foreign Office take as a result of this urgent question?

**Leo Docherty:** I am grateful for the constructive tone and characteristic interest that the hon. Lady shows. Is this meeting essential? We judge that this might be an opportunity to send a very strong message to someone who is involved in the governance of Xinjiang. That is at the heart of the judgment that was made about this opportunity.

The hon. Lady asked when Ministers were aware. I know that Ministers were aware in the usual, routine way and made a judgment that, on balance, it was useful to endorse the prospect of officials engaging with this individual.

The hon. Lady makes a good point about the risk of moral injury. It is important to say that, with regard to this specific proposition, FCDO officials were keen to invite Uyghur human rights groups in the UK so that they have an opportunity to express their views to this individual as a means of delivering a very strong message of condemnation. That judgment was at the heart of the decision, but she makes a good point about moral injury.

The hon. Lady asked whether the invitation will be rescinded and, of course, it is not an invitation. The FCDO did not invite this individual. Our expectation is that he is travelling on a diplomatic passport. I am grateful to have been able to answer these questions, and I am grateful for her constructive spirit.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this urgent question but, Minister, I am afraid this is simply not good enough.

In Xinjiang, women are being forcibly sterilised and children are in concentration camps. There are forced labour camps and systematic rape, yet the Minister has just confirmed from the Dispatch Box that Ministers approved of this visit by one of the masterminds of this genocide. Worse, a Cabinet Office Minister claimed this week that the complicity of Chinese state-run companies, such as Hikvision, in Xinjiang is “contested.” Exactly what position are this Government taking? There is no legitimate reason to allow this man, Erkin Tuniyaz, into our country. The only meetings with him should be in a courtroom.

Will the Government now sanction Erkin Tuniyaz, as well as Chen Quanguo, the butcher of Xinjiang? We have to refuse to meet them. Like-minded EU countries have already announced that they will not meet this man when he comes to Brussels. We should not only refuse to meet him, as our like-minded friends have, but we should deny him a visa.

Will we now introduce a sanctions regime specifically for Tibet, where we are seeing the exact same thing? Millions of children have been kidnapped from their parents and put into concentration camps so that they can be assimilated and so that genocide can be committed against their culture. This is wrong. I am sorry, but the Government have to get a grip on China issues. We let Chinese officials flee this country, having given them a week’s notice, and now we are inviting them into the halls of Westminster. It is not good enough. We have to get a grip.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not think they will be coming to Westminster, as we would have to give permission. Let us not open that debate.

**Leo Docherty:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for her long-standing interest. She rightly mentions the suffering of women and children, specifically in Xinjiang, which has moved us all. Our judgment is that Erkin Tuniyaz is not travelling because of an invitation from the Foreign Office. Given that our expectation is that he is travelling on a diplomatic passport and will be here, because he is not sanctioned—

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Yes—he is not sanctioned. Why is he not sanctioned?

**Leo Docherty:** Because he is not sanctioned, we therefore judge that this is a useful opportunity to deliver an extremely strong message to this individual. Of course, colleagues will note that there is a differential approach with regard to the US sanctions regime.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am in the Chair. Members are meant to speak through the Chair, not face towards the back of the Chamber.

**Leo Docherty:** The judgment of Ministers is that such opportunities are useful in offering a chance to express a very forthright condemnation of the outrages in Xinjiang.

I think this reflects the Government's policy of robust pragmatism when it comes to China, which is at the heart of our wanting to continue such dialogue.

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

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) is absolutely right that the Government have handed a propaganda gift to Beijing.

In 2020, the Uyghur tribunal found that, beyond any reasonable doubt, China is responsible for crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide, yet today we find that someone at the heart of those crimes is coming to the UK next week—a man accused by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China of playing a central role in the persecution of the Uyghurs.

As we have heard, the Government's position on China has been appallingly weak and goes no further than to urge the Chinese authorities to change their approach. Given that, hitherto, they have failed to move Beijing one iota in its treatment of the Uyghur people, why does the Minister believe that allowing this man to come to the United Kingdom and to meet FCDO officials will suddenly change things? Will it not be exactly the same message that they have given before, and will the Chinese not treat it with exactly the same contempt? Given that that is what will happen, why does the Minister honestly believe that meeting this man will make the slightest difference to Beijing's approach?

**Leo Docherty:** The hon. Gentleman is questioning the utility of this kind of diplomacy, and it is a reasonable question, but our judgment, institutionally, is that opportunities to send strong messages to these sorts of individuals are useful and will be taken heed of by the state apparatus. I think the expectation of officials was that an invitation should be extended to Uyghur human rights groups in the UK to enable them to engage with this individual directly and send that strong message. I think that was at the core of the judgment that was made.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for making it absolutely clear that this man is not getting in here, even if the Minister is going to give him space in the office. But I ask you this, Sir: is not the very fact that an announcement of his intention to travel has been made—in the language habitual to the Government of China—"a provocation"?

**Mr Speaker:** That is more for the Minister to answer, even though I am tempted.

**Leo Docherty:** I think this is an opportunity to send a robust message from our side about everything we judge completely outrageous and unacceptable in Xinjiang. We therefore judge that there is utility in the prospect of officials meeting this individual.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Is this the best we can do? This country used to have a tradition—on both sides of the House, in both major parties—of standing up to tyrants, butchers, fascists and great persecutors. That seems to have been abandoned. Is not the only conclusion to be drawn in Beijing from the actions of this Government that we will do nothing to stand up to them?

**Leo Docherty:** We have stood up to China when it comes to Xinjiang. We have sanctioned individuals, and we continue to make the strongest possible representations. That is in line with our policy of robust pragmatism. We will be robust, but we will also engage and send a strong message when opportunities arise.

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): I welcome the question from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), and her reference to the actions of Europe. One of the key freedoms I thought we had secured by leaving the EU was the freedom to act and to lead. Indeed, yesterday we heard powerfully in Westminster Hall from the President of Ukraine just how much the residents of Ukraine appreciate that leadership of the international community's support for Ukraine. When this country speaks, the world listens, so can my hon. Friend explain why the UK Government appear unwilling to hold China to account with the same determination and vigour on this matter?

**Leo Docherty:** My hon. Friend is right to say that we have shown leadership on Ukraine, and we seek to show the same leadership on matters relating to our relationship with China and the travails and suffering of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. Of course, we may take a slightly different approach on the numbers of individuals or entities sanctioned in relation to Xinjiang. That is based on the notion that a greater degree of engagement allows us to send extremely robust and strong messages of condemnation, and that is at the heart of our approach in this regard. I should also put on record that, of course, this individual would not be invited into King Charles Street—into the FCDO. This would be an external meeting, if indeed it took place.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Well, that will really show them, won't it? There is really only one reason for having a meeting like this: to keep that man talking until the rozzers arrive with a stout pair of handcuffs. As I understand the Minister's position today, the approach of His Majesty's Government to sanctions for people like this is that they allow us to deliver robust messages. If that is the strategy—and it has been for some years now—can the Minister offer the House the list of areas where progress has been made as a consequence? In what way have things got better for the Uyghur population in Xinjiang?

**Leo Docherty:** We seek in a whole range of ways to condemn China's brutality in order that it might be lessened, and we also seek expressly to advocate for individuals. The utility of this sort of engagement is often on behalf of specific individuals. I will not comment on individual cases here, but I do know that thorough engagement is carried out in the interests of specific and individual human rights activists imprisoned in Xinjiang, and I am sure that advocacy is appreciated.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in China is absolutely outrageous—a genocide, and one that the whole House condemns. My hon. Friend is of course quite right that this individual is not sanctioned, but that prompts the question: why is he not sanctioned, given that he is the governor? I understand that the survivors of the camps

[*Bob Blackman*]

have actually applied to the Attorney General for permission for him to be arrested on arrival. Will my hon. Friend take back to the Foreign Secretary the urgent need to review the number of people who are actually sanctioned? In fact, if the governor of that province is not sanctioned, the question is: why not?

**Leo Docherty:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his questions and, indeed, for his long-standing interest. I am sure the Foreign Secretary will be taking note of these proceedings in the House today. We do not speculate about future sanctions, and we always keep these sorts of issues under constant review.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It would be helpful to understand exactly why this particular individual has not been sanctioned. Can the Minister give some more clarity on that point, not least because my constituents—and, I suspect, the constituents of everyone else in the House who has spoken or is going to speak on this urgent question—will be profoundly concerned about the level of human rights violations taking place towards the Uyghur community, for which this man appears to be very directly responsible?

**Leo Docherty:** I think colleagues will know that, when it comes to the metrics for such things, the judgment has been made that it is worthwhile maintaining the opportunity to engage with some of these sorts of individuals. Of course, all of these cases are kept under review. We will not speculate on future sanctions, but I think it reflects the approach of more engagement in order to deliver strong messages, rather than less, and therefore more sanctions.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What is happening in Xinjiang is an absolute disgrace, and the whole House clearly condemns it. The Minister says that inviting this gentleman over—sorry; not inviting, but allowing this gentleman over—will send a strong message, but what message is going to be sent that has not already been sent to the Chinese? The Minister also said that the meeting will not happen in King Charles Street—at the FCDO—so where exactly will it be happening? In the spirit of democracy, openness and the freedom to protest we have in this country, will he tell us where it is, so that those who want to protest can actually go and protest outside this meeting?

**Leo Docherty:** This is not organised by the FCDO, and our expectation, with the oversight that Ministers have, is that directors might meet this individual. The details of that are yet to be confirmed, if indeed it does happen. I think the opportunity therein was that they would give very strong messages, including on individual cases of human rights activists imprisoned in Xinjiang, and that was therefore the utility of such a proposition.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): The strongest action, the most forthright message, or the robust, would of course be for the Government to sanction this individual. That is the bottom line. Given how the Government are confronting this issue in Xinjiang, I fear for other parts of China. As a result of this soaking-wet response this morning, I fear even more for Hong Kong. The Government

have been sitting on a sanctions report since a formal submission in November last year, calling for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to involve himself in sanction moves against 16 individuals in China. When are the Government going to report back on that sanctions request?

**Leo Docherty:** I note the hon. Gentleman's question and he makes a good point in drawing a comparison with Hong Kong. I will not comment from the Dispatch Box about future sanctions, but we note the content of that report.

**Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this urgent question. I hear what the Minister says about us taking a different approach, but what assessment is the FCDO making about whether that approach is working? Surely the fact that this individual is going to come to the United Kingdom, when we know they would not go to the United States, is evidence that the approach is not working and we need to rethink.

**Leo Docherty:** The Government's approach is one of robust pragmatism, but we would always keep that under review and pay a great deal of attention to the actions of our allies.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am really struggling with the Minister's thinking on this. On one hand he says that what is happening in Xinjiang is abhorrent, illegal under international law and a crime against humanity, but on the other hand he is facilitating meetings with the governor of that province. That is not a sustainable position, and it certainly does not hold China to account. When will the Government get a grip on this issue, finally and definitely stand up for human rights and against crimes against humanity, and tell China that this is not acceptable and the governor of Xinjiang is not welcome here?

**Leo Docherty:** We will continue to send those messages, and my expectation is that directors, were they to meet this individual, would be sending exactly those messages. More broadly, we will keep our approach under review at all times.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister knows how much I respect him, as we all do in this House, but his answers this morning have been incredibly disappointing. I have to say that—I know it may not be his Department to answer, and he has been given the job. Two years ago Parliament voted to declare the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims to be genocide. Erkin Tuniyaz has not only had direct involvement in those activities, but is one of the lead offenders, directly responsible for implementing mass detentions, forced sterilisations, sexual abuse, slave labour and even organ harvesting. A person responsible for such crimes should never, ever be welcome on British soil.

**Leo Docherty:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question and I respect him enormously—he knows that. Of course we all share a deep sense of sorrow about the appalling abuses of human rights in Xinjiang, and that is at the core of everything we do in our advocacy for human rights. With regard to the current issue, of course we will keep this approach under review.



**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek through you a correction by the Minister of something he said earlier? He said that the Foreign Office had invited those who have fled Xinjiang and are here in the UK to meet this murderous man, but in fact they were never invited; they were only invited to submit their thoughts about this to the Foreign Office, or perhaps to meet one of the officials.

**Mr Speaker:** While the Minister is here he may want to put the record straight.

**Leo Docherty:** I am happy to accept that clarification, Mr Speaker.

## Capital Projects: Spending Decisions

10.58 am

**Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I have lost count of the number of times that we have had to drag Ministers from this shambolic—*[Interruption.]* To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities what is his assessment of the capital projects and spending decisions in his Department.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, I am glad we know what question we are being asked. Levelling up is one of the defining missions of this Government. Whether it is moving 22,000 civil servants outside of London by 2030 and backing overlooked town centres and high streets, or devolving power and money away from Whitehall and Westminster, this Government are delivering for the people of this country. There has been significant focus on the mechanics of government in recent days. Even if the question asked today was not that clear at the outset, it is absolutely the case that processes change and may apply at times in different ways.

We are working within a new delegation approach with the Treasury, which involves Treasury sign-off on capital spend. We will always work closely with the Treasury. We value its focus on value for money; it values and shares our mission to level up the country as a whole, and we will continue to do that. We are making good on our promise to spread opportunity across the country, with £9.6 billion of levelling-up funds announced since 2019, on top of the £7.5 billion commitment to the nine city-based mayoral combined authorities in England. That includes £3.2 billion of funding via the towns and high street funds, £3.8 billion from the levelling-up fund, £2.6 billion from the UK shared prosperity fund and £16.7 million from the community ownership fund.

There has been no change to the budgets of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, whether capital or revenue; no change to our policy objectives; no dilution of our ambition; and there are no implications for the Government's policy agenda. Four years ago, this Government promised the British people a stronger, fairer and more united country. It was a promise embodied in levelling up, and it is a promise we are going to keep.

**Lisa Nandy:** It appears that nothing is going right in this place today. I have lost count of the number of times I have had to drag Ministers from this shambolic, failing Department to the House to account for their failures—failures to deliver and failures to understand the impact of our money that is being spent. An extraordinary report in the *Financial Times* today suggests that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been banned from spending any new money on capital projects without approval from the Treasury. It follows a damning National Audit Office report, which provided evidence that the Department had no idea about the impact of the money that it was spending, and the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee made an assessment that billions of pounds of our

[Lisa Nandy]

money were being wasted, because the Government had engaged in a programme without any understanding of the impact of that programme.

If this report is true, we are in the absurd situation of having a Secretary of State who does not even have the authority to sign off on a park bench. Is this true? If so, what is the Government's assessment of what that means for the levelling-up agenda, of which a third round of spending has just been announced, and for tackling the housing crisis? Is it true that this decision by the Treasury was prompted by unauthorised spending commitments made by the Secretary of State at the convention of the north to spend money on improving appalling housing standards, after the desperate death of a two-year-old boy in Rochdale? I understand that the Secretary of State is in Rochdale today. How can he possibly tell housing associations to sort themselves out if he cannot sort out his own Department? We deserve to know whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer believes that a Secretary of State who is finally—belatedly—spending money on improving housing standards is a Secretary of State who has gone rogue, because that would be very serious.

The rumours are swirling that there is huge underspend in the Department. We are in the midst of a housing crisis, yet I understand that the affordable housing budget has not been spent and that there are levelling-up funds that have not been spent either, which will now be clawed back by the Treasury. Is that true? Will the Government publish the correspondence between the Departments about this matter? It is our money, and we deserve to know.

**Lee Rowley:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for her questions. There was a significant amount of hyperbole in there and a significant amount of suggestion and inference, but the reality remains, as I confirmed in my initial response to her question, that there has been no change to budgets, capital or revenue. There has been no change to our policy objectives, no dilution of our ambition to level up, and no implications for the Government's policy agenda. [Interruption.] The shadow Secretary of State does what she does best, which is to heckle from a sedentary position, but I will try to answer her questions. She suggests that there has been a failure to deliver. I would talk to the communities up and down the land that have been given these funds, opportunities and possibilities. We see delivery daily. I see it in my constituency; towns are being transformed through the towns fund, which has been providing funding since 2019.

The shadow Secretary of State asked a question about capital spending; I answered it in my last response. She also asked about the implications for the levelling-up agenda. There are no implications for the levelling-up agenda.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for answering this urgent question. Capital projects across the country may be slipping because they cannot be delivered immediately. Will he confirm that where there is slippage, the capital funds will still be available, and will not be clawed back by the Treasury, so that we do not lose the benefits of capital projects that everyone wants?

**Lee Rowley:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. My understanding is that where commitments have been made, they absolutely will be adhered to; that will be understood, and they will be provided for. In my constituency, there have been commitments of £25 million under the town deal for both Clay Cross and Staveley; we are still expecting that, and are spending. We will still realise the benefits of those two lots of £25 million, which will be spent transforming communities that were ignored for far too long under the Labour party.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the SNP spokesperson.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Members need only have attended Tuesday afternoon's Westminster Hall debate on this subject to realise that the levelling-up agenda is unravelling. There was an astonishing admission of last-minute ministerial interference from the Treasury, particularly in Glasgow, where it is reported that £500,000-worth of employee work hours were put into bids that were unsuccessful due to that last-minute interference.

The Treasury's decision to rein in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is far from being standard practice. So far, we have not received an honest reason why that happened. Have the Government given up all pretence of caring about levelling up, or do they no longer have faith in DLUHC to deliver it? Three of the five most deprived areas in Scotland have not received a penny of levelling-up funding. Is the levelling-up project now funnelling money from the poorest areas to the wealthiest? Given the astonishing admission on Tuesday afternoon in Westminster Hall that Ministers interfered at the last minute to take out any round 2 applications from areas that received money, no matter how little, in round 1, will the Minister apologise to the House, and to the local authorities that put so much time and effort into preparing the bids?

**Lee Rowley:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely incorrect to say that the levelling-up agenda is unravelling. Just last month we announced several billion pounds of additional capital spending on levelling-up projects bid for in round 2. As for caring about levelling up, communities up and down the land are getting the opportunity to transform their area, and to make good on promises that were not delivered under successive Governments for many decades. We in this place should celebrate that, rather than focusing on what is being focused on now. I gently say to him that if in Scotland, as in Derbyshire and elsewhere in the country, a number of areas have not been successful in getting funds that were on offer, are being provided and will be spent, I very much encourage those areas to apply when round 3 of the levelling-up fund opens in the coming months.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): As a great lady once reminded us, there is no such thing as public money, only taxpayers' money. Does my hon. Friend agree that we Conservative Members should never apologise for applying the most stringent checks and balances, so that every penny spent is spent wisely?

**Lee Rowley:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are seeking to transform areas, including mine, that were ignored for far too long, but are doing so in a way that works for the Government and for taxpayers, so that their hard-earned money is spent in the right place, at the right time, to the right effect.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on a valiant attempt at deflection. He has said that the budget and the policy had not changed, and they have not; what has changed is that the Treasury no longer trusts the Department to spend the money without Treasury approval. That is the change, isn't it? Normally, surely this would be a matter for conversation between permanent secretaries, or between the Secretary of State and the Chancellor—"Bring yourselves into line, and sort yourselves out." That presumably has been done, but now there is the strongest public condemnation from the Treasury of the Department's ability to spend money properly. How can the Minister ever again admonish a council leader, or hold them to account, for not spending money properly?

**Lee Rowley**: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee, my constituency neighbour in South Yorkshire and north Derbyshire, for his comments. We had a similar exchange yesterday on the local government finance settlement. I have already outlined what the change is and I understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making, but I have to reiterate that there has been no change to budget or to policy objectives. We continue to look forward to working with the Treasury, and with all other Government Departments, to achieve the outcomes we all want in this House, whichever Bench we sit on.

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Given the social and economic division created by the Government over 13 years, the announcement of levelling up led to a reasonable expectation that money would be directed to the areas of greatest deprivation. Having listened to several debates on the subject this week, I now have doubts that that is the case. Will the Minister confirm that the single criterion for the direction of funds will be based on deprivation? Will he publish the details?

**Lee Rowley**: The information about the distribution of levelling-up funds has been published. I have seen, across Yorkshire and north Derbyshire in the coalfields that the hon. Gentleman and I both represent, a significant transformative opportunity through the towns fund and the levelling-up fund, which will make a huge difference to those places that traditionally have been left behind and which this Government, and this Government only, have responded to in our policy agenda.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Colleagues will note that the Minister attempts to obfuscate through refusals to address the fundamental question of whether the approval process has changed. What supposedly drew the ire and frustration of the Secretary of State's colleagues was a speech in Manchester on 25 January suggesting that further funding would be available for some northern councils. What caused more angst in the Treasury: the fact that money was being spent in a rogue manner, or the fact that it went against the Prime Minister's long-standing ambition to divert money away from deprived areas back towards places such as Royal Tunbridge Wells?

**Lee Rowley**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for Stretford and Urmston for his point. He will know, because he has long experience in local government, that that would be a crude and inaccurate misrepresentation of what the Prime Minister said a number of months ago.

The hon. Gentleman's first point was about obfuscation. There was no obfuscation. I was absolutely clear at the beginning of my response about what has changed and why that is the case.

**Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): As other Members have noted, it has been reported that the Treasury has intervened in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ban new capital projects—on which the Minister keeps avoiding to give us an answer—because of concerns that the Department is not effectively managing public money. The Government's most recent decision to create four new Departments could, according to analysis conducted by the Liberal Democrats, cost the public an estimated £60 million. Does the Minister agree that the Government should get their existing Departments in order before making costly decisions to set up four more?

**Lee Rowley**: I refer the hon. Lady to my answers at the outset, which explained very clearly the changes and how there is no ultimate change to what is being spent in communities up and down the land to transform areas that have been left behind for a long time.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Let me put it in local government terms for the Minister. When a council is told that it cannot spend any more money without specific approval, it is called a section 114 notice. What is it like for his Department to get the equivalent of a section 114 notice?

**Lee Rowley**: Let me put it in terms of reality. This Government's budgets are not changing, this Department's objectives are not changing, and this Government's ambition is not changing on levelling up.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): The Secretary of State is not here, but I wonder if the Minister can talk to the Secretary of State so that he can talk to the Treasury about the importance of support for local authorities with capital for repair and maintenance of highly important, much-loved but also sadly rapidly dilapidating existing buildings, such as in Gateshead our leisure centre and swimming pools and even Gateshead International Stadium? The huge withdrawal of revenue support grant, which is of course revenue, has paralysed the financial capacity of local councils like Gateshead to support investment in existing buildings. What will the Minister do about that? Will he talk to the Secretary of State and ask him to talk to the Treasury?

**Lee Rowley**: Obviously, I will speak to the Secretary of State; we talk very regularly about some of the challenges that the hon. Gentleman highlights. I know that the hon. Gentleman will have seen yesterday's local government finance settlement, which makes £60 billion available to councils over the next financial year, both for revenue and for other activities. It is ultimately for councils to make decisions about how they spend that, but I absolutely accept his challenge. That is why we introduced the levelling-up fund and the towns fund: to try to respond to some of those challenges. That funding has already had a significant impact and will continue to do so over its delivery. However, I am happy to pass his points back to my colleagues.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Local councils, now and in the days and weeks ahead, will be going through their budget-making processes. The news that they may not be able to draw down on capital funding, whether it has already been agreed or is to be agreed, will put some of those budget-making processes at risk or add additional layers. I ask the Minister again: does his Department have the authority to release funds for current projects or authorise funds for future projects, or is the report in the *Financial Times* true—yes or no?

**Lee Rowley:** I explained the change at the outset: there is no change to the budgets that we have provided and there is no change to the local government finance settlement, which was announced yesterday.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): Let us be under no illusions: this is wealth redistribution, but not the wealth redistribution and investment practised by the EU. This is Tory wealth redistribution, taking from areas that need investment and giving to areas that already have it. My constituency missed out on the towns fund: its bid was rejected. Despite an excellent bid from the Caledonian Railway in Brechin, it got hee-haw out of the levelling-up fund, too.

**Mr Speaker:** I presume that that means “nothing”.

**Dave Doogan:** Will the Minister apologise for this grotesque “you can look, but you can’t touch” form of Tory funding?

**Lee Rowley:** We can always trust the Scottish National party to debate something that has already occurred and to take the situation back to the European Union. If that is the comparison that the hon. Gentleman wants to make, let me tell him that my constituency, North East Derbyshire, did not receive any significant money under the European Union in recent years, but as soon as we left the EU it received towns funding and levelling-up funding. That is because the Government have ensured that we are responding to the needs of local areas. We are actually trying to listen to and take heed of those areas that have been left behind, irrespective of the point about the European Union.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): The Minister’s Department covers some of the funds that are most vital to our communities. As it is, we do not have enough of them. He has been very clear that there is no change in the budget, but can he be absolutely clear that the Treasury will not stop decisions being made on important projects that we need in our communities?

**Lee Rowley:** It was only a few days ago that the Chancellor himself visited a successful levelling-up round 2 budget area, which demonstrates the commitment of the Treasury—just like the commitment of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—to deliver on what we say. We intend to do so, because it is so important for these communities to have the transformation that they need and want.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister has said in various answers that the ambition has not changed, the policy has not changed and the budget has not changed. The reality is that the sign-off process has changed: the Treasury now signs projects off for his Department because it does not trust the Secretary of State.

We are shortly due to move to stage 3 of the levelling-up fund. Stage 2 was a farce; stage 1 was a mess. What assurance can the Minister give that stage 3 will start delivering for some of the most deprived communities, including in my Ogmore constituency, which has had nothing?

**Lee Rowley:** Just for clarity, the Treasury signs off budgets across Departments without any issue, as it has done under the Labour party, the coalition and the Conservative party.

The hon. Gentleman asks about round 3 of the levelling-up fund. We have given out billions of pounds under rounds 1 and 2. Local communities are excited by the opportunities that the changes will bring. I encourage his area to apply for round 3; I hope it is successful, and I hope he can share in the transformation that will come, which is already being delivered elsewhere.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The first line of the policy paper “Levelling Up Fund Round 2: prospectus” states:

“Investing in infrastructure has the potential to improve lives”.

I am anxious to find out how such infrastructure improvement can take place on coastal roads, where the environmental impact of erosion is leading to the isolation of communities. Will the Minister commit himself to a dedicated levelling-up strategy to address this serious issue?

**Lee Rowley:** I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, along with the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), to discuss that further.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Patricia Gibson.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I know you have saved your favourite till last.

**Mr Speaker:** If the hon. Lady had not been complaining about my choices, she would not have been called last.

**Patricia Gibson:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister has talked repeatedly today about the transformative effect of levelling up, but because levelling up is not inflation-proofed, councils that secured funding last October are facing shortfalls of about 30% in funding for projects because of soaring costs. So projects cannot be delivered as was envisaged and so they cannot level up as was envisaged—which is what led to the success of their bids in the first place. Can the Minister explain why levelling-up bids are not inflation-proofed and therefore cannot deliver on the Government’s own criteria?

**Lee Rowley:** We are happy to talk to councils about the challenges that they face, and we are happy to accept that inflation is a challenge. This is one of the reasons we need to get inflation out of the system. The difficult decisions made by the Chancellor will allow us to do that and will allow the money to go further, not just in the levelling-up fund but elsewhere in government, and in the private sector as a whole.

## Business of the House

11.21 am

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):**

Before I do so, may I put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Leader of the House of Lords for facilitating the visit of President Zelensky yesterday, and my thanks to all Members for giving him such a warm welcome? May I also join the many people who have expressed sorrow at the terrible events unfolding in Turkey and Syria, and urge everyone to donate to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal today?

The business for the week beginning 20 February will include:

MONDAY 20 FEBRUARY—A general debate on Ukraine.

TUESDAY 21 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Social Security (Additional Payments) (No.2) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 22 FEBRUARY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

THURSDAY 23 FEBRUARY—A general debate on the future of the NHS, its funding and staffing. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week beginning on 27 February includes:

MONDAY 27 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business.

This week the news has been dominated by tragic scenes from the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. It is impossible to put into words the scale of human suffering, with people left out in the cold without food, shelter or medical supplies, and digging through the rubble with their bare hands to search for survivors. Earlier this week the Foreign Secretary seemed to be unable to answer questions about the reported cuts of between £6 million and £8 million in aid to Syria. Can the Leader of the House tell us now whether the Government plan to press ahead with them, and will she encourage the Foreign Secretary to return to the House and announce a longer-term plan for tackling this crisis?

I welcome the Leader of the House's announcement of the debate scheduled for Monday week marking almost a year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As she has said, it was an honour to be in Westminster Hall yesterday for President Zelensky's historic address to both Houses of Parliament, and I, too, want to put on record my thanks to all the staff who were involved. President Zelensky said that our two nations were together on a mission to defeat evil and secure peace. That reminds us all that we have a duty to stand by Ukraine, and we must. Perhaps a debate on the seizure of frozen sanctioned assets would therefore be timely. Labour supports plans to repurpose frozen Russian assets and

use them to rebuild Ukraine after the war, and to provide much-needed humanitarian aid to the country. The EU has already set out a plan to do so, and Canada has passed laws for this purpose. Why, then, are the Government lagging behind? May we have a debate on the steps that are still needed to ensure that Britain can never be a soft touch for corrupt oligarchs and warlords wishing to hide their ill-gotten wealth?

The Government's announcement of a holocaust memorial Bill is welcome. It will allow the building of a new memorial and learning centre, which will go such a long way in educating future generations about the holocaust. I offer the Government Labour's co-operation in getting the Bill through as quickly as possible, because there must be no delay.

Last week I raised the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). It would be the first part of a Hillsborough law and would introduce an independent advocate to represent bereaved families and survivors of public disasters. The Leader of the House said then that the issue was "a huge concern" to many in this House and to many outside it, and she was right. Why, then, 24 hours later, did her own Tory MPs block it for the 12th time? My hon. Friend will not give up. She and the Hillsborough families will have Labour's full support when she brings the Bill back in March; will they have the Government's?

Finally, the Leader of the House should not be surprised to hear me raise the long-delayed football governance White Paper again. The Government committed to an independent regulator of English football in the last Queen's Speech. We have had promises from numerous Culture Secretaries that it would be published—ahem—"soon". Wednesday's reshuffle seems to have delayed it yet again. This simply is not good enough. Labour has supported the introduction of an independent regulator for years. Clubs, players, staff and fans are fed up waiting for the Government to get on, do their job and actually govern. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the White Paper will be published?

Is it not the case that the Tories' tactics are not working? They lack skill, they are tired and they simply cannot keep up with the reds any more. They have tried changing the squad around but the never-ending transfer window just is not helping. There is certainly no suitable Tory substitute for the captain, as we have seen all season: changing the Tory at the top does not work. This week, they have even tried changing the formation, but it will make no difference: they have no game plan for Britain.

But there is still everything to play for. The Tories might be relegating themselves into opposition, but they will not relegate Britain. The next Labour Government—a team with a brilliant captain—will restore Britain's hope and optimism and help people through and beyond the cost of living crisis, repair our public services and support communities that have suffered from the sticking-plaster politics that has defined the past 13 years of Tory government. I say to the people of West Lancashire today, and the rest of the country whenever a general election may come: Labour's coming home.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks about Turkey, Syria and Ukraine. She will know that we have contingencies in our aid budget. On our ODA

[Penny Mordaunt]

score, it is not scored by us—it is an international definition. Although we have given some immediate support, that will be under review and we will of course look to see what more we can do. The Prime Minister has made direct contact with those involved in organising that.

On Ukraine, I have announced a general debate on Ukraine, at which I am sure that many issues, including those raised by the hon. Lady, can be raised. I welcome her remarks about the holocaust memorial and am glad to have her support for that. I will ask the relevant Department again about Hillsborough, which I know is extremely important to many, and I am also glad to have her support for the football governance review—

**Thangam Debonnaire:** Where is it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** It is coming soon. Members, who I know care about it greatly, will not have long to wait.

I am very sorry that the hon. Lady does not welcome the machinery of government changes. She draws a comparison between both parties with regard to modernisation and being what this country needs. I believe that those changes were right—any organisation that wants to be its best has to modernise—and I thought they might be something that Labour Members would be trying to understand, given that their team captain, the Leader of the Opposition, has been channelling the modernising zeal of Neil Kinnock. The thing is, he is no Neil Kinnock, because Neil Kinnock knew what the problem was: a few well-paid union leaders and their destructive ideology—outdated, rigid political dogma that is irrelevant to today's hard-working people.

Labour has been peddling the line to those hard-working people that what they care about and everything that is precious to them will be helped by going out on strike. The hon. Lady talks about the cost of living. What possible merits could come from trying to suggest that, by making ends meet, we drive those ends further and further apart? It is political cynicism of the worst order to encourage strikes, even if people do so by wringing their hands and avoiding being photographed on the picket line.

Those striking workers will lose pay from their pay packets. Even if their demands are met with an inflationary pay rise, they lose: inflation becomes embedded; every single taxpayer—every single household—pays an extra £1,000 in tax; learning for their children is lost; hospital appointments for their loved ones are lost; and investment into the UK is discouraged, affecting the very economy on which our NHS depends.

On every possible outcome, strike action hurts people and it hurts public services. The only beneficiary is the red team, the Labour party, but that is the point, is it not? Labour wants power at any price and it is happy that union members are collateral damage in that. It is the same old Labour that took the miners out on strike at the start of the warmest summer on record. It is the same old Labour that asks people to face huge hardships for no gain, and asks them to pay for that privilege through political donations via their union subs. Kinnock knew that this ends with the grotesque chaos of a Labour union handing out hardship payments to its own members with their own money. Britain's workforce

deserve better. I say to the hon. Lady: do not lecture us about modernisation and being fit for purpose to lead this country. Her party's vision for the future looks very much like its past.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Local football clubs such as Southend United are the beating heart of their communities, but many local lower-league clubs are struggling with the after-effects of covid and the cost of living crisis, leading to consequent tax liabilities. Like me, Southend United fans are deeply concerned about the club's financial viability. Please, can we have a debate in Government time on the future of community football?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of community football. I know that she is an avid supporter of Southend United, and that she has been working closely with the Shrimpers Trust to ensure that the voices of the fans are heard going into those negotiations with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. I shall happily support her with the experience that I have from Portsmouth. We had such a debate earlier this year, and as I announced earlier, the fan-led review on football governance and what will follow will not be far away.

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

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My thanks go to Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and staff of the Houses for the wonderful visit of President Zelensky yesterday. He is right: freedom will win.

I, too, extend deepest sympathies to all those affected by the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria and the humanitarian emergency. I have been contacted by constituents with loved ones in those countries who have asked me to encourage the Government to consider any possible means of help, including offering even temporary refuge here.

We have heard a wee update on last week: HS2 is now rumoured to be facing even further delays of up to four more years, which means that it will be 12 years later than originally planned and the overall costs have gone stratospheric from its original £33 billion estimate up to £100 billion. Meanwhile, the Government are apparently replying to press inquiries with a snotty, "We do not comment on speculation". Many in Scotland are furious to hear of this staggering overrun on a rail scheme that will offer us virtually no benefits. Surely the alarm bells are at ear-splitting levels, even for this Government. What can the Leader of the House do to encourage her colleagues in the Department for Transport to open up with a statement so that we can satisfy ourselves that it is only speculation and not cause for serious alarm? Can they come to the House before the Chancellor's announced plans for HS3, 4 and 5 get anywhere near the drawing board?

Let me turn now to yet another Government project that is really not going very well: Brexit Britain. Polls show a huge rise in the number of folks realising that the brilliant Brexit bulldog they were sold is, in fact, just a poor, sick pup on life support. The evidence is stacking up wherever we look. I see that a reformed Remainer has just been persuaded to take on what must be one of the least desirable jobs in politics—chairing the Conservative

party. Well done to the Leader of the House for giving that one a body-swerve, particularly now that we hear of the deputy chair's views on capital punishment.

I wonder, though, whether in the wee small hours of the morning any of them ever think back on Brexit with a tiny tinge of regret, particularly when we hear that biometrics will likely render those precious blue passports redundant and the giant poll today—in *The Daily Telegraph*, no less—suggests a next general election will see their party in third place? Can we have a debate, definitely in Government time, on Brexit buyer's remorse, where we might all finally take a good, clear, honest look at the many problems it has caused and the Government can tell us what they are doing to sort them out before everything swirls down the Brexit plughole? Thankfully, Scotland has a clear escape route available to us before then.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for what she says about Syria, Turkey and Ukraine. I am sorry she did not welcome the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) to the deputy chairmanship of the Conservative party. I am sure that many in her party like to refer to him as “30p Lee”, but I can tell her that his constituents and many people across the whole of the United Kingdom refer to him as “He stands up for me Lee”. I think it is a tremendous credit that he sits in this House with his background and experience and I wish him all the luck in his new position.

I congratulate Scotland on its Six Nations victory over England and thank both teams for a blistering game of rugby, which I very much enjoyed despite sitting next to the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is not a gracious winner. It was a pity, though, to learn this week that we may never see The Famous Grouse on their jerseys again or even the Guinness Six Nations tournament; indeed, the multi-million pound Johnnie Walker development in Edinburgh may be seeking a new name. I hope the Scottish Government will consult those iconic brands and distilleries and related industries, which are so important to the Scottish economy, and find a sensible way forward.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) made a double complaint, surpassing her usual complaints, about a scheme she does not want but very much wants to see happen and stories of an overspend on it. I am not going to deviate from what the Department has told her, but I would gently point out to her again that a little self-awareness goes a long way, because today we have learned also that the modest ambition of the Scottish people to have a few miles of the A9 dualled is unlikely to transpire, despite their having waited 11 years. I understand that the Minister responsible has blamed Vladimir Putin for the delay.

The hon. Lady talks about delayed projects and overspend, but this week we had to have the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions write to the Scottish Government, urging them to take up the powers on welfare that have been available to them since 2016. At the time, they said they could create an independent state by spending just £200 million, yet the assessments of their taking over the benefit system now sit at £685 million. Also this week—perhaps because the Scottish Government have difficulty managing projects and

budgets—we have learned of the need for the Scottish National party to receive loans that breached electoral rules.

We have seen more unexplained loans, the 19 complaints from SNP supporters currently being investigated by the police, allegations of fraud for around 600,000 missing donations, the former treasurer who quit due to the murk of the SNP's finances, along with three others on the Finance Committee, and, more recently, an SNP-led council that has called for another police investigation into those ferries. The SNP wants to raise tax, but not to spend it on public services; it wants to represent the people of Scotland, but does not listen to them, their views or their priorities; it wants to take authority, but with no responsibility. Scotland deserves better.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** The Department for Education announced in November 2020 that the new secondary school for the Hanwood Park development in Kettering would be a new free school, but for boys only. Understandably, there is much local support for the secondary school to be open to boys and girls. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Orbis Education Trust and North Northamptonshire Council on launching a fresh public consultation—under the guidance of the Department for Education—on the make-up of the new school, and in encouraging residents to submit their views by the consultation deadline of 5 March?

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is indeed good news. I congratulate my hon. Friend on what he has managed to secure for his constituents. It is important that local views shape that new school, and I thank him for getting that call to arms on record.

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

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business and Backbench Business debates in her statement.

In early March, we anticipate a day of debates on remaining departmental estimates. We will welcome applications from Back Benchers for those debates immediately after the February recess, so Members may want to have a think about that. We are still very much open for applications for debates both here in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall.

Could we have a statement on what the Government might do to support Syrian refugee communities and Turkish communities, among whom there are significant levels of shock and distress following this week's dreadful events in their homelands?

Lastly, although I very much welcome the suggestion from the Leader of the House that a White Paper on football governance will soon be announced, I think it needs to be more urgent than that because, in football, a spectre is haunting Europe. Yet again this morning, we have seen reports of the European super league being talked about in vigorous terms. It was in response to the previous iteration of the European super league that the whole question of remodelling football governance came about. I agree with earlier comments about the state of our lower-level game. I think it is more urgent than a White Paper; we need to get on with it.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. I know that this is an important matter. I very much understand the concern that many Members have, given my constituency and the experiences of Pompey. The White Paper will shortly come before hon. Members, and clearly, we will look to see if we need to legislate after it is published.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we have a great track record as a nation of supplying help and support, and we have some really quite unique expertise to help in the situation faced by Turkey and Syria at the moment. The emergency response teams—search and rescue, medical teams and so on—have already been dispatched, as he knows. There will be an ongoing assessment of need and asks. That is all being co-ordinated by certain non-governmental organisations working with those states. We will listen to those needs and see what more we can do, but as the Prime Minister has indicated, we will assist.

**James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con):** Yesterday's visit by President Zelensky was magnificent. For me, it showed the very best of politics, as politicians from all sides, and from the House of Lords, came together to sit and stand in Westminster Hall listening to that great man. Of course, we wish him and the brave people of Ukraine every success as they face the challenges ahead.

Yesterday was also a reminder for me of the fantastic work that is done here to keep us safe: the security effort by the police and the Doorkeepers, and the work of our clerical staff, catering staff, and everybody involved in keeping this place running. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking everyone for making yesterday happen and, more broadly, for keeping us all safe in Westminster?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for placing his thanks on record. A huge amount goes into organising such a visit, and this one was at comparatively short notice. I thank him for providing all of us in the Chamber with the opportunity to put on the record our thanks to all the staff of the House, not just for what they did yesterday, but for what they do for us all every day.

**Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab):** Over the past few nights, I have lost sleep after hearing about and seeing a horrific incident that took place in which a young black child was physically assaulted and abused by three young white children. I understand that a police investigation is taking place and that, because of parliamentary protocol, we cannot go into too much detail, but this incident has torn through the heart of so many communities, and they are in pain and outraged because of what is happening.

It is the responsibility of local government and central Government to make sure that this situation, which cuts across so many Departments, is being investigated fully. Will the Leader of the House speak to her Education colleagues to look into what safeguarding practices are and are not taking place in that school? Will they address the professional performance of the school's teachers? Will she ensure that justice has been served by speaking to her Home Office colleagues to make sure that the victims and their families are being protected and are receiving all the support they need? Finally, will she agree to come back to the House, after speaking to

her colleagues, and make sure that a statement is given to update the House on exactly what has happened and what is happening with this case?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about this shocking case. The hon. Lady correctly says that it is being investigated. Those investigations are separate from Government, and rightly so. The next questions to the Department for Education—the matter affects other Departments as well, but that is the prime Department—will not be until the 27th of this month, so I will write on her behalf to raise her concerns with the Secretary of State.

**Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con):** Will the Leader of the House please set aside time in this House for a debate on the international socialist concept of so-called 15-minute cities and 20-minute neighbourhoods? Ultra low emission zones in their present form do untold economic damage to any city. The second step, after such zones, will take away personal freedoms as well. Sheffield is already on this journey, and I do not want Doncaster, which also has a Labour-run socialist council, to do the same. Low emission zones cost the taxpayer money—simple as. However, 15-minute cities will cost us our personal freedom, and that cannot be right.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Whatever the motivations for this new policy that some councils are adopting, the lives of the hard-working people of this country are complicated enough, especially at the moment when we are trying to boost the local economy and to enable tradesmen and sole traders to boost their income. It is right that people raise concerns about this kind of policy, and where such policies are brought forward, local communities ought to be properly consulted.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** The prepayment meter scandal this winter was entirely avoidable. I have been contacted since the summer by Bath constituents with heartbreaking stories of confusion and hardship. According to Citizens Advice, 3.2 million people were left in the cold and dark after running out of credit. Can we have a statement from the relevant Minister about when the Government knew about the scale of the forced installation of prepayment meters, what they did about it, and why they are still opposed to an outright ban?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I know that this is an issue of concern to many Members across the House. Certainly we have seen, from the volume of warrants being issued at magistrates courts, that it has affected a large number of people. Anticipating that hon. Members would want to be able to provide good advice and support to their constituents who may have wrongly been put on a prepayment meter, I have already raised the issue with the relevant Department and asked it to put together a "Dear colleague" letter, so that where we find that vulnerable individuals have been forced on to prepayment meters, Members have the right information to ensure that the situation can be rectified swiftly. I shall make sure that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has heard the hon. Lady's comments today.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** I place on the record my concerns and condolences for all of the people affected by the terrible earthquake in Syria and Turkey.



Domestically, Royal Mail is reviewing customer service points to reduce markedly the number available. That will affect us all and constituents across the country, making it more inconvenient for people who are not at home when deliveries arrive to go to a customer service point and collect their parcels or post. Apparently, Royal Mail will not consult the public, just Ofcom, and will ask if it can reduce the service from six days a week to five. Can we have a debate in Government time on this vast reduction in service, which will be inconvenient for all our constituents?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for getting his concerns on the record. He is absolutely right that many people, especially the most vulnerable in our society, will be dependent on those services. I will make sure that the relevant Department has heard his concerns. Royal Mail often writes to Members when such concerns are expressed. I hope it will be in touch with my hon. Friend later today.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): You will remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that for many years I had the great pleasure of sitting next to Ann Clwyd, our former colleague in this House, who is now my constituent. She has written to me once again, you will not be surprised to know. Due to a difficulty with her leg, she recently had to purchase an electric bed in order to elevate it. Subsequently, she found out that it could have been subject to a VAT exemption. However, the shop that she purchased it from, Dreams, does not grant that VAT exemption on its beds, classifying them as entertainment rather than medical devices. She went on to survey all the shops in Cardiff and found that half of them offer VAT exemptions and half do not. May we have a statement from the Treasury on how people in that position can take advantage of the VAT exemption when they have medical needs, so that they can rest easy in their beds?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am glad that our much-loved former Member is still using her formidable campaigning skills and has not retired them. Ann and the hon. Gentleman have raised an interesting point, and I will make sure that the Department knows about it.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Two weeks ago today, 14-year-old Josh was killed while walking along Laughton Road between Laughton Common and Thurcroft. I know that the whole House will join me in sending our prayers and condolences to his friends and family. Sadly, such accidents are becoming more common. This morning, there was another accident on the same stretch of road. That road, like many connecting the towns and villages of Rother Valley, has no footpath or street lights, and is subject to the national speed limit. There are entire villages without lighting or footpaths, such as Morthen, which vehicles may legally drive through at speeds of 60 mph. May we have a debate on giving local committees and parish councils the powers they need to force local councils to put in place appropriate traffic calming and speed restriction measures, so that Rother Valley can avoid any more road-related deaths?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about this tragic case. I am sure that all Members will want to send their condolences and sympathies to Josh's family and friends. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that many

measures can be put in place. If local authorities do not act, it is very concerning to our constituents. The next Transport questions are on 2 March, but in the light of the circumstances, I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend's comments.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The long-awaited energy bills support scheme alternative fund is expected to open for applications on 27 February, but there is no clarity about whether the 200,000 park home residents who pay for their energy through an intermediary—the park home manager—will be eligible. Will the Leader of the House make a statement to provide clarity about the eligibility of park home residents to support with their energy bills? I have asked umpteen written and oral questions, and I am still unclear whether they will be eligible.

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is an incredibly important point. I shall contact the relevant Department after these questions and ask it to update colleagues, perhaps via a "Dear colleague" letter, given that we are about to go into recess.

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): Outdoor learning centres are an important part of my constituency, contributing jobs and visitors to the local economy. As importantly, they provide a unique and effective setting for young and old to learn not only about the outdoors but about themselves and to develop skills for life and work. These centres now find themselves squeezed by post-pandemic reviews, rising energy costs and tightening education budgets. What advice can my right hon. Friend give me about bringing the opportunities and challenges facing outdoor learning centres and the outdoor learning sector before the House and to the attention of Ministers?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, although skills are vital, all the other things that such facilities boost, such as attitude and confidence, are incredibly important to people. I would suggest two things. He has already done the first, which is to get his concerns on the record. I also know that he is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on outdoor learning, and if his APPG were to do a report highlighting the concerns of the sector, that would be an excellent subject to have a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate about.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and I have petitioned the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill Select Committee in respect of the impact that the Bill will have on the Metrolink line to Ashton-under-Lyne, where it will be severed and mothballed for the years of construction of the High Speed 2 rail line. We have had our petition to the Committee challenged by HS2 Ltd and now have to go before the Committee in March to argue why we should have our petition heard. I refer the Leader of the House to Standing Order No. 91B, "Right of Members of Parliament to have petition considered":

"Any Members of Parliament whose constituencies are directly affected by the works proposed by a Bill shall be permitted to have their petition against the Bill considered by the committee." Why do we therefore have to argue our case?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am in danger of completely agreeing with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues. It would be very unusual if Members were prevented or discouraged from doing that, and I would be interested to see what HS2 Ltd's grounds are for trying to block the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues from doing it. I will check the Standing Orders and ask my team to come back to his office with some advice.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): This week is National Apprenticeship Week. Across Keighley and Ilkley we have some fantastic businesses that go above and beyond to make sure apprentices get the best educational journey within their business. I have been lucky enough to visit a few—Spooner, A1 Roper, Fibreline, Teconnex, West Yorkshire Spinners and, of course, the mighty Byworth Boilers—but there are many more. We all know that investing in skills and development and helping young people discover their career path is so important, and the business sector plays a key role in that. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the business sector for the role it plays, and will she permit Government time for a debate on apprenticeships, which are so important in driving the skills agenda that this Government are so dedicated to?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his timely question and congratulate all those organisations in his constituency that are delivering on this agenda. He will know that the Government are increasing investment in apprenticeships to £2.7 billion. Since 2010, there have been more than 5.3 million apprenticeship starts, 3 million of which were among under-25s. We have also seen year-on-year growth of degree-level apprenticeships, with over 170,000 starts since their introduction.

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): I share the Government's concern about vulnerable women in the Scottish prison estate who are required to be incarcerated alongside men who self-identify as female, and who often have convictions for rape and other sexual offences. I disagree with their use of a section 35 order, but I would like a Government statement or a debate on the situation south of the border, which predates and dwarfs the situation in Scotland. According to the latest statistics from the UK Ministry of Justice, 230 such transgender people are in prison in England and Wales, 97 of whom have a conviction for a sexual offence, 44 of them for rape, and they are incarcerated in the women's estate. Can we therefore move from a constitutional question to the fundamental question of how we protect vulnerable women prisoners from abuse by predatory males?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very glad to hear the hon. Gentleman's position. If memory serves me correctly, the UK Government strengthened their position on this matter about four years ago, but I will ask the Lord Chancellor to look at the issues he raises.

On the use of section 35, there are many issues, including social issues, on which we should have regard to the whole United Kingdom when we legislate. The social fabric of the United Kingdom, and what it is to be a citizen of this country, is incredibly important. I wish the SNP had listened and thought about the consequences of its legislation, as it was warned before the legislation was passed.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Residents of the hamlet of Askett are dumbfounded by a perverse Planning Inspectorate decision to permit illegally developed plots on a field between Askett and Meadle, contrary to two previous Planning Inspectorate decisions, leaving the door open for a dangerous precedent to be set on open countryside that everyone believed to be a protected buffer zone next to the town of Princes Risborough. A petition put together in the past few days already shows that 84% of residents are opposed to this decision. Can we have an urgent debate in Government time on how we can much better hold the Planning Inspectorate to account, get consistency in approach and put residents first?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about these circumstances. My hon. Friend has clearly been able to identify the tremendous strength of feeling in his community on that point. This would be an excellent topic for a debate, and he will know how to apply for one in the usual way.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Next week our fantastic Angel of the North sculpture turns 25 years old. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the Angel of the North a happy 25th birthday? I pay tribute to the vision of Gateshead Council leaders, including my constituent Alderman Sid Henderson, who were so instrumental in making sure the Angel of the North came about.

I also congratulate the schools that are taking part in a heritage project on the Angel of the North, including, in addition to the schools in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), Birtley East Community Primary School and Kibblesworth Academy in Blaydon. Can we have a debate on the importance of public art to our communities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The Angel of the North will need one big birthday cake. I am sure all Members will join me in wishing the Angel of the North a happy birthday. The hon. Lady is right to give credit to all those who enabled the creation of this incredible piece of public art, and to all those educators and arts groups that are using it to inspire new generations.

**Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): The Padiham greenway in my constituency is used by hundreds, if not thousands, of residents for leisure and to get to work. However, since June 2021, the Padiham greenway bridge, which crosses the Calder, has been closed because of concerns over structural damage and mineshafts underneath it. I have been working with Sustrans, the Environment Agency and the Coal Authority to try to find a resolution so that the bridge can be reopened and residents can use it, but to date we have not managed to find one, and more inspections are necessary. Could I enlist the Leader of the House's help and also ask for a debate in Government time on the importance of local greenways for leisure and commuting to work?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. The bridge sounds like a vital route for his constituents, and I shall happily raise the issue with Ministers to see what assistance and advice they can give him. His assiduous campaigning has resulted in the

chief executive of the Coal Authority offering to meet him to discuss the issue further, and I wish him luck in those discussions.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** Can I add the alternative fuel payment to the Leader of the House's list? She has answered questions over a number of weeks, as have Ministers, about how constituents who are off the grid—particularly those who use oil—will receive the payment through their electricity companies, who will know that they are not on the gas network. I have received a number of complaints from constituents and businesses saying that their electricity companies have no idea that they use oil rather than the gas network for heating. Will the Leader of the House either arrange for a Minister to come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement about how these payments will work practically, or add it to her “Dear colleague” letter so that we can keep our constituents updated and, crucially, get them the money the Government have promised them?

**Penny Mordaunt:** In addition to raising these matters with the Department, as I mentioned before, I have looked at some of the statistics about who has had these payments. The bulk of people are getting them, but many constituents clearly are still in the dark about what they should be doing. I shall certainly add that to my list of things to talk to the Department about, and I hope we will be able to give colleagues the detailed information they need on the many schemes, so that they can give their constituents confidence.

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** As a former regular customer of Brittany Ferries, I am very familiar with the Leader of the House's constituency, and a fine corner of England it is too. Although she will agree that it cannot compete with the garden of Scotland that is Angus, one thing that links those two lovely constituencies is the problem of littering from cars. Her constituency in the bottom of England, mine in the north-east of Scotland and every constituency in between is blighted by littering from cars and by fly-tipping. Can we have a debate in Government time about how we can use the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency database to take much more severe action against littering from cars and particularly fly-tipping, which is a huge problem for my constituents and, I am sure, those of the Leader of the House?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which upsets enormous numbers of people. Of course, the bulk of the public are very responsible about not dropping litter, but new ideas are coming on stream about how we can better find the offenders who are largely responsible, particularly for fly-tipping. The next Transport questions are on 2 March, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to raise the issue then. Of course, he should also raise it with the local authorities concerned, as they will often be best placed to look at what camera infrastructure and so forth currently exists.

**Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab):** I represent a rural community with 23 separate villages, and there are 24,000 people in households with no access to a motorised vehicle. We are totally dependent on public transport, so yesterday's announcement in the media by the bus companies—which was not discussed first with me, as the local MP—that they intend to again cut services in the communities I represent will send a shudder of

fear through all those villages. Does the Leader of the House agree that the deregulation of buses has been a disastrous mistake for rural communities such as mine and many others throughout our country? Can we have a debate in Government time to see whether we can find a different way of operating public transport services, and particularly buses, in the future?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, and he is absolutely right: for many people in rural communities, those bus services are a complete lifeline and allow them to go about their daily business. He will know that we are providing up to £60 million over the next few months to assist with running those services and to keep fares down so that people can still use them, and we have also invested another £3 billion in such improvements. There are particular challenges, in part because of the fall-off in bus use during covid, but I shall make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** Some 300,000 people are missing out on the warm home discount to which they are entitled. Would it be possible to have a debate in Government time to discuss that, and also the confusing and failing Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which has not given the decent homes standard another funding uplift to cover the deep problems with damp and mould across the whole of the housing estate in the UK? If there was decent homes funding and we could unlock those 300,000 applications for warm home discounts, we could have more people experiencing a better winter during which they do not freeze.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Again, I shall certainly add the hon. Lady's name to my letter over to the Department concerned. A lot of this is about giving hon. Members detailed information about the many and quite complicated schemes, so that they can help their constituents and we can also best identify those people who may not have got what they are entitled to at the moment. Of course, we want to future-proof homes and make them as energy-efficient as possible. She will know about the schemes the Government have put forward for improving standards and insulating homes. Again, her local authority ought to have a plan for the particular housing stock that needs such attention.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** A constituent of mine, Keith, was born in the United States, but was brought to the UK by his British parents at 15 months old, and he has lived, worked and retired in the UK as a British citizen. So imagine his horror when he was opening a new bank account, and the bank told him he might be liable to pay taxes in the United States. If he does not provide the bank with a certificate that costs over £2,000, it will report him to HMRC. I am all for clamping down on tax avoidance, but can we have a Government statement on why UK banks are so beholden to the United States and on what steps the Government are taking to protect law-abiding British taxpayers?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's case. This is a classic situation in which Members of Parliament can make a difference, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will intervene and help his

[Penny Mordaunt]

constituent. If he has any difficulty in doing that and needs help from the UK Government, we will be very happy to assist him.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Healthy Start scheme is a vital source of income for low-income families with young children, particularly newborns. The price of food has increased by 16% in the past year, while the cost of the cheapest milk formula has risen by some 22%. There are distressing stories of parents desperately mixing flour into milk formula to make it stretch further now that the cost of that formula exceeds the weekly Healthy Start allowance. Could the Leader of the House tell us when the Government will advise whether they intend to freeze the Healthy Start allowance yet again this year, and will she agree to a debate in Government time on the merits of the Healthy Start allowance and the need for an increase at least in line with inflation?

**Penny Mordaunt**: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I hope he will have noticed the announcement today on family hubs and the local authorities that are particularly being focused on in that announcement. I would encourage all colleagues who have particular concerns about budgets to make representations to the Chancellor in the usual way, and I shall make sure he has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns today.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I raised a point of order last night, and the Deputy Speaker advised me to bring this forward as a business question, so I am doing so. Dáithí's law in Northern Ireland has the potential to save hundreds of lives of people desperately in need of organ transplants. All political parties in Northern Ireland agree on the need for this lifesaving legislation. The only thing stopping it is the mechanism for introducing the legislation, due to the current impasse caused by the Northern Ireland protocol. Twice now, the Government have taken action in this House to enact legislation—the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 and the abortion legislation relating to Northern Ireland—despite the opposition of political parties in the Northern Ireland Executive. Dáithí's law on organ transplants has the full support of all political parties in Northern Ireland and it will save lives. As our House's representative in Cabinet, will the Leader of the House raise this with colleagues and urge action on an issue that will benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I know that he cares passionately about this issue and will continue to campaign on it. He did note in his point of order yesterday that the UK Government had acted to put in place legislation on other matters when there was no Northern Ireland Assembly. This is clearly a positive and proactive thing, and the fastest way to get it to happen—he knows what I am going to say—is for the Northern Ireland parties to use the power they have to recall the Assembly, and they could then have the legislation in place in a matter of days. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister in the Northern Ireland Office know about the hon. Gentleman's campaign—I know he will continue it—but that is the answer for how to get this to happen in the swiftest possible way.

## Point of Order

12.16 pm

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to raise two points, about which I have given notice to both the Speaker's Office and to the hon. Member to whom I will refer.

First, on 30 January the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), responded to my written parliamentary question 131454 by directing me toward a previous freedom of information request. However, my office, the House of Commons Library and the Table Office have all been unable to trace this FOI reference, which is not in a recognisable format. I understand that the House authorities are consulting with the Treasury to investigate this further.

Secondly, on 17 January I took part in a debate on the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Order 2022, the sole purpose of which is to set a variable in the formula used to calculate the small business non-domestic rating multiplier for the coming year. I asked the Financial Secretary three times to clarify why this variable was increasing. I checked her final answer with the House of Commons Library, which said it did not think what the Minister said was “entirely accurate”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would be grateful for your advice, first, on whose responsibility it is to ensure that responses to written parliamentary questions are accurate; and secondly, on how the record can be corrected when a Minister inadvertently gives incorrect information in Committee?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. On his first point, it is not acceptable for Ministers to provide answers referring to material that is not accessible. Answers should be free-standing or at least refer to material that can be accessed relatively easily.

On the hon. Member's second point, Ministers and other Members, especially Opposition Front Benchers, sometimes take a different view about whether or not a response is accurate, and the Speaker cannot arbitrate about such differences. Ministers are obviously responsible for their answers. However, if a Minister accepts that a mistake has been made, they should correct the record. That is required of them by both the ministerial code and a resolution of this House. If the Minister does not accept that a correction is required, I am sure the hon. Member will find ways of pursuing his points in any event.

The hon. Member is very lucky that the Leader of the House is here and will have heard his comments, and I am sure she will take them back for consideration. I hope that any other Ministers this will be fed back to will have heard my response to the two issues, and I hope that they will help provide a more useful answer in the first instance and reflect on whether a correction is required in the second instance. As I say, the Leader of the House will have heard that as well.

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt)** *indicated assent.*

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Thank you. I also thank the Leader of the House for answering the business questions.

## Private Rented Sector

### DEPARTMENT FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. Clive Betts, Chair of the Committee, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. I emphasise that these should be brief questions, not full speeches or reflections. I also emphasise that questions should be directed to the Chair of the Committee, Clive Betts, not to the relevant Government Minister. Front-Bench Members may take part in questioning, should they wish to do so.

12.20 pm

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** I am tempted to note that perhaps if Members direct their questions to me, they might get slightly better answers than from the Minister—that is probably very unfair at the beginning of the statement, because the Minister came and helpfully gave evidence to the Committee and I want to put that on record right at the beginning.

The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee has published its report on reforming the private rented sector. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for a statement on that report. I also thank the staff of the Committee and its specialist advisers for their support and assistance with producing the report. I thank the other members of the Committee who, once again, agreed our report unanimously.

The Committee launched its inquiry following the publication of the Government's White Paper, "A Fairer Private Rented Sector", which sets out the Government's long-term vision for the sector, particularly on matters of security of tenure and housing quality. We have been told that the Government plan to implement the proposals in the White Paper this Session through a renters' reform Bill, and we look forward to that. We hope that the Government will examine our findings closely when finalising the Bill.

Some 4.6 million tenants in England are in the private rented sector today, representing 19% of households. Twenty years ago those tenants would typically have been students or young professionals saving for their first home. Today's tenants are on average older, perhaps living with children, and more likely to be on low incomes. In the course of our inquiry we spoke to organisations representing tenants and landlords. We found that too often tenants are afraid to complain when things go wrong, due to the threat that they may be evicted without fault.

We also heard how private rented accommodation is more likely to be of poor quality than homes in other tenures. Some 21% of private rented homes are classed as non-decent, and category 1 hazards, such as serious damp and mould, are present in 12% of rental properties. However, the majority of private tenants are satisfied with their homes, and the majority of landlords manage

their properties well. But any system of regulation has to deal effectively with those who do not—the rogues and, in extremis, the downright criminal.

In that context, the proposal to repeal section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, which allows for "no fault" evictions, is a welcome step in giving tenants the confidence to complain to landlords without fear of eviction. While the Committee recognises that the majority of private landlords have no desire or incentive to evict tenants without good reason, we concluded that the repeal of section 21 is necessary to stop unfair evictions and give tenants the security they deserve. Once section 21 is repealed, landlords will be reliant on section 8 of the Housing Act to evict tenants, particularly in cases concerning rent arrears and antisocial behaviour.

The Government intend to give landlords new grounds for possession when they wish to sell, or move themselves or close family members into their property. The Committee has identified that these new grounds could be exploited by bad landlords as a backdoor to "no fault" evictions. To avoid that, we recommend that landlords should not be allowed to sell or occupy their property during the first 12 months of a tenancy agreement, and that a property should not be marketed or re-let within six months of either ground being used.

Another challenge that risks undermining the Government's progress on tenancy reform is in respect of court hearings required under the section 8 process. As it stands, courts are already struggling to process housing cases quickly enough, and an increase in the number of section 8 possession hearings risks overwhelming the system. In our report we recommend that a specialist housing court be introduced. That repeats our predecessor Committee's recommendation from 2018. The Government rejected that recommendation at the time, saying that there are more effective ways to increase the efficiency and timeliness of the court process.

We are calling again for a specialist housing court to be introduced, as we have no confidence that court reforms will happen quickly enough. Either way, the Government must ensure that courts can process claims quickly, efficiently and fairly for all parties. That should include fast-tracking possession claims in respect of non-payment of rent, antisocial behaviour and serious cases of disrepair. Both landlords and tenants need that process to work effectively.

Our inquiry also considered the White Paper's proposal that fixed-term tenancies be abolished. While we found that that would go a long way towards ensuring security of tenure for most tenants, the Committee recommends one exception, which is that this should not apply to the general student private rented sector. Students will be all too familiar with the annual dash for accommodation, with many university towns and cities now seeing queues around blocks to view properties that are reserved within hours of being listed. Abolishing 12-month fixed tenancies for that group could make letting to students much less attractive for private landlords and exacerbate the problem. Most students expect their tenancy to mirror the academic year, so we recommend that fixed-term contracts be retained for that group.

On the White Paper's proposals on housing conditions, the Committee supports the Government's plan to introduce a legally binding decent homes standard. This will bring standards for the private rented sector into line with those of social housing. We also welcome the proposed

[Mr Clive Betts]

new property portal, which will serve as a central platform and information point with details of landlords and every property they let. That will support local authorities in enforcing the new standards, and will better inform tenants about prospective landlords and properties. However, we have heard concerns about the way the portal is being designed, in that it will only be a document-holding database. We were told that if effort is put into the design to digitise the documents it holds—particularly gas safety certificates, for example—that could be codified and automatically flag any issues, rather than tenants having to search for it.

The Committee believes that the cost to landlords of implementing the new decent homes standard is proportionate, given the £10,000 cap on costs that applies to most improvement works. However, the Committee has seen evidence that demonstrates a strong correlation between the energy efficiency of a property and its levels of damp and mould. We therefore recommend that the Government consider new financing solutions where works to improve energy efficiency may exceed that cap. If the Government are serious about raising standards in the private rented sector, they must ensure that local authorities are fully equipped to enforce the new regime. In the absence of extra funding, they must consult with local authorities to ensure that the regime can become self-financing, as well as address the shortage of qualified enforcement staff. Local authorities must be confident that they can collect appropriately large financial penalties imposed on those bad landlords who breach the standards, and get back the costs that they incur in taking court cases, which are often denied by the courts at the time.

Our report notes that data points to an apparent decline in the private rented sector, which may be associated with the rise of short and holiday-let markets. We heard that some smaller landlords believe the proposed reforms will drive them out of the sector. We urge the Government to review the impact of recent tax changes in the buy-to-let market. More broadly, the Government ought to make clear what role they wish the private rented sector to play in the wider housing mix in future, and assess their proposed reforms against that.

Although the Committee broadly welcomes the Government's proposals for reform—I repeat, we welcome what the Minister had to say when she came to the Committee—we have some recommendations for where we believe we can improve the proposals. In the end—we challenged the Minister on this—the White Paper fails to address the most serious challenge currently facing many private renters, which is the high cost of renting caused by the housing crisis. Simply put, there has been a decades-long failure by successive Governments to build enough homes. The affordability crisis in housing can only be remedied by a significant increase in house building. The Committee previously recommended that we should be building 90,000 social rented homes every year out of the 300,000 total we all want to be achieved. Although we recognise that that was not the focus of the White Paper, there are still many unanswered questions that we hope the Government will eventually address.

I thank everybody who gave evidence to the Committee as part of this inquiry, and I pay particular tribute to Paul Owen, our Committee specialist, for his work on

housing matters in recent years. I am sure that reform of the private rented sector is far less challenging than his new job in the House, which is something to do with Brexit.

It is my hope that the Committee's report will be considered carefully by the Government and our recommendations will be implemented in full through the forthcoming renters reform Bill. In the meantime, we await a timely response from the Government—that has not always been the case for most of our recent reports—and I commend the report to the House.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): I draw your attention, Madam Deputy Speaker, to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Is it the hon. Gentleman's estimate that driving relatively small landlords with a few properties out of the market is the intent of Government policy, or are we just collateral damage?

**Mr Betts:** I thank the hon. Member for his question, which is one that he must address to the Minister. Certainly, we had evidence that the reforms particularly hit smaller landlords who personally own their properties, rather than the larger landlords who own their properties through a company and can continue to offset their interest payments against their rental income.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I congratulate the Select Committee on another first-rate report, and I trust the Government will give the recommendations serious consideration as we look forward to the long-overdue renters reform Bill.

The Opposition wholly agree with the report's conclusion that the affordability crisis in the private rented sector can only be properly solved by a significant increase in housebuilding, particularly affordable housebuilding, with social rented housing as a large proportion of affordable supply. Given that we are going backwards in that regard, with the latest data released by the Department indicating a net loss of 14,000 social homes last year, what does my hon. Friend and the Committee believe the Government could and should do right now to arrest this loss and boost markedly the supply of genuinely affordable houses that the country so desperately needs?

**Mr Betts:** In the previous report, we did not look specifically at mechanisms for increasing housing supply. In this report, we recommended that 90,000 social homes are built a year and said that that could cost up to £10 billion a year, which is about £70 billion more than has been provided through social housing grant. The Government must give that serious consideration, because the housing crisis will not go away unless something significant is done. The worry is, and this is something the Committee is looking at, that housing associations and councils will start to build fewer homes because of the pressures from disrepair, particularly around mould and damp, and because they are fixing safety defects post-Grenfell, all of which are adding further demands on their limited capital resources.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): It was an absolute privilege to be the previous Minister who was responsible for the White Paper. As an accidental landlord myself, I

feel like I have a bit of a vested interest, but I am still evangelical in my support for the idea of a landlord portal because it will do two things: connect landlords to excellent advice available from the Government; and allow the Government to communicate directly with those 2.5 million landlords on environmental benefit schemes, reducing carbon emissions and so on. Does the Chair of the Select Committee feel my enthusiastic support for the portal and the difference it might make to local councils in driving up standards in the private rented sector under their control?

**Mr Betts:** This is probably not the first occasion that I agree with the hon. Member. The portal is an extremely important step forward, and it will bring that information together. We talked about the importance of how it is delivered, which will involve a lot of discussions with landlords and councils to get it right, digitalising some of the information so that it is accurate and proper. It also ought to help with the problems that many councils have in finding out who owns a property, as bad landlords often move it from one family member to another and the council has the challenge of chasing it round. I hope the information held in the portal will enable councils to enforce more appropriately in future.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Chair of the Committee will know that the gap between market rents in Bristol and the local housing allowance is among the worst in the country. The vast majority of private rented homes are simply not available to people on benefits. I note that the Committee was told that that was a matter for the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions, but does he intend to carry on pursuing this issue of the failure of the local housing allowance to keep pace with market rents?

**Mr Betts:** Yes, because it is a recommendation in our report. Wherever the reply to our report comes from—I presume it will come from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but no doubt it will come after consultation with other Ministers—the situation is one that the Committee will follow through. In the end, if there are so many properties in an area that are offered for a rent that someone who is working on a relatively low income cannot afford, and the housing allowance does not cover it, that is a problem that we simply must address. We cannot go on ignoring it, and that is what the Committee says. We ought to get back to the previous 30% decile position, and look at whether even that is satisfactory in some areas to make housing genuinely affordable.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In considering the report, one issue of concern is inadvertent consequences. Just abolishing section 21 evictions will almost certainly lead to more tenants being evicted under section 8, and with a county court judgment against them they will not be able to get another tenancy. Does the hon. Member agree, therefore, that when the Government finally come out with the long promised renters reform Bill, it is important that it is not only comprehensive but has pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee, to enable the Government to get it absolutely right?

**Mr Betts:** That would be a good idea because, in the end, how the court process and the ways of resolving disputes will work are key to the reforms. We ought to be able to talk through that before we get to a final conclusion. Something like the small claims court, with mediation embedded, might be the best way to resolve most of these disputes quickly, but there is nothing there at present that can do that.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) asked part of my question, but, while I welcome the proposed changes around section 21 and the end of fixed-term tenancies for all but students, does my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) have any concerns about the deliverability of the recommendations, given that we are now on our 15th Housing Minister in 13 years?

**Mr Betts:** It is not my job to select Housing Ministers, unfortunately. Maybe one reform we could introduce in future is Select Committees choosing Ministers, but we are not there yet. In any organisation, if someone is there for only a few weeks or months, it is harder for them to do the job. I am pleased that the existing Housing Minister has been there longer than a few weeks now. Hopefully that brings some stability and we can get the Bill through shortly to implement the reforms.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I am sure the Committee Chairman will recognise that there is not one single housing market, even in the private rented sector. The markets are different in different parts of the country and even within different neighbourhoods. Sadly, in many parts of the north and north-east, the private rented sector has become housing of last resort for far too many people. We have many negligent, absentee and rogue landlords who employee deliberately negligent managing agents. Does my hon. Friend believe that any additional regulatory powers are required to remove rogue managing agents from the sector?

**Mr Betts:** We did not specifically look at that, but my hon. Friend makes a very good point. We made the following recommendation: the Government propose one housing ombudsman for landlords, and a separate housing ombudsman, or system of mediation, for agents, but why cannot we bring those together, and have just one private rented sector ombudsman, covering landlords and agents?

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Select Committee and its Chair for their report. Private rents are rising dramatically—by as much as 35% or 40%, in some instances of which I am aware. For many renting in the private sector, that means that they could well be evicted. Tenants are betwixt a rock and a hard place. Did the Select Committee consider whether agreements should contain a proviso that would protect tenants from undue rent increases and the alternative of council accommodation?

**Mr Betts:** The issue of rent in the private rented sector is clearly important. We did not propose any change relating to the first time a tenancy is let, but we recognise that there must be some mechanism for agreeing

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rent increases once the tenancy is let. Otherwise, landlords could simply jack up the rent to an extortionate amount to get a tenant out. The Government propose letting landlords suggest increases, and tenants going to tribunal if they do not agree with them. We do not know why the Government resisted the proposal that there be built-in clauses in tenancy agreements—many agreements have such a clause—that say that rents can go up by a certain amount each year. The agreements could also include a break clause, so that there could be a reassessment every few years. Otherwise, we may find that the tribunal system, like the court system, gets completely overloaded. That would be another unintended consequence, which we want to avoid.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement, and for answering questions.

### BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary James Cleverly, Secretary Michael Gove, Mr Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary David T. C. Davies and Mr Steve Baker, presented a Bill to make provision to extend the period following the Northern Ireland Assembly election of 5 May 2022 during which Ministers may be appointed and after which the Secretary of State must propose a date for another election; and to allow the Secretary of State to propose a date for another election before Ministers have been appointed.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 20 February 2023, and to be printed (Bill 247) with explanatory notes (Bill 247-EN).*

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter; I gave Mr Speaker advance notice, as this has a bearing on the subject matter of today's business. I have been attempting since May last year to register my interest in a large-scale change of policy by the parliamentary contributory pension fund, which will now invest in renewable energy. Those investments

will amount to no less than 10% of the fund, but the registrar and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards have not allowed me to register an interest, citing a provision of the rules that says the pension scheme does not have to be registered as an interest because it is available to all Members.

You may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the rules also said that unremunerated directorships did not have to be registered; however, the commissioner has said that they nonetheless need to be, in view of the commissioner's assessment of the need to register anything that might reasonably be thought to be relevant. That is regardless of whether a link to the company to which the unremunerated directorship related was declared. There is large-scale investment in renewables by the parliamentary contributory pension fund, from which MPs benefit, at a time when there is a Government-mandated transition to renewables and huge subsidy of such investments. In my view, it is obvious that members of the public might reasonably think that the change to investment in renewables might influence MPs' actions or words, or be relevant, and the commissioner and registrar should allow MPs to register that interest.

I am grateful to the registrar and the new commissioner for the helpful dialogue that I have had with them on the issue; I believe that the latter has written to Mr Speaker. Perhaps you could help, Madam Deputy Speaker. I note that information about the renewable investment policy is not at all easy to find in the pension scheme documents that are available on Parliament's website, hence the delay in my coming across it. I wish to ask how you might ensure that this interest can be registered, so that there can be no perception of an undeclared interest, no institutional bias in Parliament towards policies favourable to renewable investment, and no attempt to cover anything up.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is independent, and it is difficult for the Chair to comment on what is a matter for the independent commissioner. However, the hon. Gentleman has put his views on the record. The Committee on Standards might like to take note of the issue. I am sure that his comments will be passed on, and if there is anything on which we need to come back to him, I will ensure that we do.



## Backbench Business

### Independent Review of Net Zero

12.45 pm

**Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Net Zero.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and should declare that I am the chair of the independent review of net zero that we are discussing. I thank the Backbench Committee and its Chair for agreeing to this debate. We had an excellent debate in the other place, led by Baroness Hayman, on the recommendations in the "Mission Zero" report, which was published on 13 January. Members may recall that the review was commissioned by the previous Administration, and the previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), in September 2022. The review's remit was to allow us to understand how we can transition to net zero in a more affordable, efficient manner that is pro-business and pro-growth.

Having been appointed chair of the review, I undertook what I understand is perhaps the largest ever engagement exercise specifically on net zero conducted in Government. We received 1,800 written responses to our consultation. I held 52 roundtables, virtually and in person. I toured every region of England and every devolved nation of the UK, and spoke in person to around 1,000 people to understand directly the challenges and opportunities of energy transition for the UK. In that consultation, the message that I heard from the overwhelming majority of respondents was that when it comes to the opportunities that net zero and energy transition can bring to the UK, Westminster, Whitehall and Government are falling behind the curve. Thousands of infrastructure projects are ready to take place, and thousands of businesses see the opportunity in net zero.

The opportunities are not just national; 2022 marked a tipping point in international opportunities for green technology. First, Russia's illegal war in Ukraine woke countries up to their dependency on foreign-owned gas and oil. We have to be able to provide domestic sources of energy in future. That is why interest in renewable and clean technologies has escalated. Not least, as the report was being prepared, the US passed its Inflation Reduction Act, which provides for \$369 billion of investment in green and climate technologies for the future, and sets out a clear direction of travel, and a programmatic approach to investing in carbon capture, utilisation and storage technology, hydrogen, renewable power and new nuclear power. At the same time, the European Union has taken forward its "Fit for 55" programme, and has provided further detail of how it will invest up to €1 trillion in the European green deal.

The review comes at a time when we are at a crossroads. On the one hand, we could continue on our trajectory as leaders on climate policy. We were the first G7 country to sign net zero into law. We could carry on showing leadership, as the only major industrial nation that has been able to reduce its emissions by 40%. Or we could take the other turning—a turning that is not zero and would see us resile from our climate commitments, and from the investments that we have made. Ultimately,

the choice of not zero will cost more than continuing in the direction of working towards net zero. That is the choice. I was the Minister at the Dispatch Box 43 months ago, taking forward legislation to ensure we could be the first G7 country to sign net zero into law. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) for his commitment and congratulate him on his new role. I understand that this is probably his first debate as a Minister in the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. It may even be the first debate that the new Department responds to. I am delighted that we have a new Department with "Net Zero" in its title. I hope he enjoys reading the "Mission Zero" report. I am sorry it is 340 pages. I am not holding him to having read every page for this debate, but hopefully it will form part of his weekend box.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie):** Recess reading.

**Chris Skidmore:** It needs to be sooner than that. Basically, we have an opportunity now for the Government to look at the recommendations in the report.

The report is divided into two sections. The first part is a new narrative on net zero. As the chair of the net zero review team, I put on record my thanks to my fantastic team of 22 dedicated civil servants who were drawn from across all Departments. I can see one in the Box now, who is working with the Minister. If it was not for the team, we would not have produced a report of such quality. We set out a new narrative on net zero. It is not some kind of eco-project or religion, and I do not stand here thinking that I want the imposition from the centre of top-down policies. I recognise that the challenge we face is to ensure that everyone in society is able to see the opportunities of the energy transition for the future. There will be challenges, and the report is open about those challenges and costs. At the same time, there is an international opportunity: we are now in a global net zero race. We can either continue to lead or we will follow, and the cost of following will always be greater than the opportunity of showing first mover advantage. There are no free rider opportunities here.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman said that he had been to all regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ascertain opinions for the independent review. Can he tell us what the opinions were in Northern Ireland? Were they similar to everywhere else, so we can go forward collectively? If we can do that, we can achieve our goals. We cannot achieve them if we are divided.

**Chris Skidmore:** I had a fascinating opportunity to visit Belfast to hold two separate evidence roundtables. The first was with Belfast City Council, which gave me the public sector perspective on the challenges of decarbonisation and the public estate in Northern Ireland. The second roundtable was with private business and industry, with the Belfast chamber of trade and commerce. What I took from that opportunity to speak specifically about Northern Ireland's concerns and opportunities was that there are challenges in Northern Ireland. In particular, it will probably achieve net zero later than 2050. On our overall UK net zero target, that is the case for both Northern Ireland and Wales. For Scotland, it

[Chris Skidmore]

will be a bit sooner, in 2045, as I am sure the Minister knows given that his constituency is at the forefront of bringing forward some of the green opportunities that will allow Scotland to go further and faster.

**Andrew Bowie** indicated assent.

**Chris Skidmore:** A really important part of the report, which I will come on to in the moment, is taking a place-based approach to net zero. We will achieve net zero in a more affordable and efficient way if we allow local communities, whether they are cities or rural areas, the opportunity to be more empowered to understand how to achieve net zero in a way that suits their local communities.

In Northern Ireland, I listened to concerns about how agriculture could be decarbonised. Northern Ireland wants a whole raft of new biomethane plants. At the same time, there is a new fleet of hydrogen buses in Belfast—it is really pushing forward on fully decarbonising public transport. There was a fascinating discussion on how Northern Ireland wanted to be a leader on green hydrogen. It may not have much offshore wind, but there is a huge opportunity for onshore wind and for the use of hydrogen to drive a whole new economy. Picking up all the pieces that come together that demonstrate the opportunities in every region is exactly what the report tries to reflect.

The report sets out the new narrative that net zero is the primary economic opportunity of this century, but if we do not invest now—that investment is primarily private sector investment, but it needs certainty, clarity, consistency and continuity from the Government on policy—we will turn our backs on a potential £1 trillion of investment by 2030 and turn our backs on up to 480,000 new jobs by 2035. In a way, the net zero review is a bit of a misnomer. I was keen to look at the targets that have been set and to understand how we will realistically meet them. The worst thing one can do in politics is overpromise and underdeliver; it completely undermines confidence in the ability to deliver on our climate commitments and the energy transition.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): First, I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the report. It is very welcome, and was very ably chaired and put together by him, so I put my thanks to him on record. On delivery, is it not the case that some kind of delivery authority is needed—a body that combines all the quite difficult and complex strands we face on net zero?

**Chris Skidmore:** Yes. I thank the hon. Member for that point. One of the key recommendations of the report is that we have an office for net zero delivery, which will be able to join all Government Departments to ensure they speak with one voice on the policy commitments that are needed. We have the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. That is fantastic news. I hope it will be given the powers and the mandate to enforce an understanding of what we need to do to achieve net zero across all Departments, because it is certain that Departments are falling behind.

On net zero, I am a realist. I understand that on delivery we must be able to provide public confidence in our ability to achieve some of the ambitions that at the moment are just words on paper. The document is very

much about delivery and implementation. I created a structure of six pillars to inform the report. The pillars strengthen the foundations of the pathway towards net zero by 2050, but also refer to some sub-commitments such as decarbonising power supply by 2035 and looking at our electric vehicle mandate by 2030. How will we achieve those targets if we do not get the basic under-the-bonnet issues right, such as infrastructure or grid? Delays in the planning system mean that current targets are way off beam and will not be achieved. Unless we are realistic now about what we need to do to unblock those problems and get, as I called it during the review, the debris off the tracks, we will not be able to reach our commitments in time.

Making decisions now is absolutely critical for this Administration. I include 129 recommendations in the report, but I set out 25 key recommendations for 2025, recognising that this Administration probably has about 300 legislative days left in Parliament until October 2024. That is not to say I would not urge them to take on all 129 recommendations. I understand that the Government will respond to the report by the end of March. Coincidentally, as I was taking forward the work on the review, the Government decided not to challenge the High Court judgment that their net zero strategy was illegal and they have agreed, in secondary legislation, to respond to the High Court judgment and the Committee on Climate Change by 31 March. I hope that their response to the judgment will also form part of the response to the “Mission Zero” report, but the more we can do now, the more we will reduce the costs of the transition overall. The report sets out that if we delay action on net zero by 10 years, we add on 23 base points of GDP to our public debt.

There are huge challenges to achieving net zero. I recognise that, which is why we set out in pillar 1 that securing net zero must be a priority—understanding how we will be able to have in place the materials, supply chains and skills to ensure we can deliver on time. The sooner we act, the sooner we will be able to achieve net zero in an affordable and efficient manner. Other pillars cover powering net zero. I asked each sector how it could achieve net zero in a better way. A third pillar looks at net zero and the economy, and how we could work with those hard-to-abate sectors, whether energy intensives or agriculture, to make sure they can also achieve net zero on track.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I am very grateful indeed for my right hon. Friend’s report. The House will remember my interest: I was the aviation Minister responsible for the jet zero strategy. My right hon. Friend referred to hard-to-decarbonise sectors, which include aviation. He also referred to economic opportunities, and sustainable aviation fuel springs to mind. Would he like to comment on that sector? If sustainable aviation fuel can be provided, if we have the feedstocks and if we provide price stability, there will be an opportunity for the UK economy, as well as an opportunity to decarbonise that crucial yet hard-to-decarbonise sector. Does he think it as important as I do?

**Chris Skidmore:** My hon. Friend’s point is very well made. Our mandate for 10% SAF by 2030 is one of our greatest opportunities to decarbonise in the short term to meet our 2030 nationally determined contribution. If we are to do that, we need to build out the supply chain

and take advantage of opportunities to use biogenetic materials and waste materials for SAF, so we need the processing plants in place. My point about what happens under the bonnet is vital to SAF. That is why a circular economy is one of the 10 missions in “Mission Zero”.

I have set out for the Government what I believe needs to happen now in order to unblock the immediate challenges and keep net zero on track, but if as politicians we are to succeed—both in government and as Members of this House—in delivering our long-term net zero goal over a 28-year period, we need to retain the cross-party consensus that it is the right thing to do not just to tackle the climate crisis, but to ensure the future of the British economy and to ensure that the UK plays a leading role in future transition.

I have set out ten 10-year missions, because I believe that tackling energy transition, just like tackling climate change, requires a long-term vision of programmatic certainty, ensuring that businesses and investors have the confidence to invest and to grow, because they know that things will not continue on a start-stop, chop-and-change, project-by-project basis. Germany has a 10-year plan for hydrogen and the US has just set out 10-year visions for its climate technology programmes as part of its Inflation Reduction Act. We, too, need 10-year missions. The ten 10-year missions that our report sets out would start in 2025, after we have got the basics right, and be carried through to 2035.

In writing the report, I took my role as independent chair very seriously. I nearly became an independent MP on the back of the fracking no-confidence vote that happened during the review. I had meetings with every political party, including the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, and several with the Labour party. Whoever wins the next general election and whoever forms the next Administration come 2024, I want them to see the report as a road map not just to delivering net zero, but to delivering it for the benefit of the British people and the British economy.

1.3 pm

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for his work on the report and for his speech, which will have given many people across the House and across the country a lot of hope—something that the actions and words of the Government leave to be desired.

Perhaps the most important constituency work that we do as Members of Parliament is meeting students from schools and colleges. Whether they are little ones in years 1 and 2, arriving in their hi-vis jackets, or sixth-formers who are passionate about the world on which they are about to have a say, it is a huge honour to speak to so many of them and to hear about their worries, their concerns and their hope for the world. The one message I always take away, above all else, is their absolute determination to ensure that as politicians we take the climate crisis seriously and, more importantly, that we act.

It is not enough for politicians to stand up and talk about the climate crisis; it is time to act. We have a responsibility to act, yet over the past decade of Conservative rule, we have seen an approach to the climate crisis that has too often put the need for short-term political gain ahead of the needs of our planet—the planet that our children and grandchildren will inherit.

The irony is that the review’s second conclusion is that the UK

“must act decisively to seize the economic opportunities”,

but as the right hon. Member points out, the UK is now dropping back from the economic leadership role it once had on climate change and net zero across the world. If only the Government had listened to that message over the past decade, the country might now be in a different position. On Heathrow expansion, for example, they have not ruled out a third runway, despite the undeniable climate impact of the project.

On onshore wind, British businesses have been leading the way in developing the newest turbines, yet because of the decade-long ban on further onshore wind developments, UK companies have been exporting that technology rather than building it for projects on the hills of the UK to join the ones we already have, like the one my brother can see from his house. The UK could have been a wind superpower by now. We know that more wind power means cheaper bills for our constituents, yet the Government did not act.

Home insulation is another example. Homes in the UK leak three times as much heat as those in Europe, which means that energy bills are far higher than they should be. That adds to the cost of living crisis that our constituents face. The last Labour Government rolled out a plan to insulate new homes and retrofit old ones, but thanks to the Conservative Government’s promise to cut the “green crap”, the programme was massively scaled back.

Almost a decade after coming to power, the Government realised the scale of the crisis and finally introduced a green homes grant programme. My constituents were overjoyed, as were local businesses, but what happened? The scheme was a disaster: it closed down early, and many small businesses lost a lot of money. No wonder the Public Accounts Committee wrote a report on the grant and called it a “slam dunk fail”—a fitting epitaph for the Government’s climate agenda, perhaps. The most frustrating part of that slam dunk fail is that I know from listening to my constituents that they want to see action on the climate crisis.

Electric vehicles are another example. My inbox is full of emails from constituents who want to be able to buy electric cars or vans for their business, but who face hurdle after hurdle. From blocks of flats and residential streets to the strategic road network, there are so many gaps in the EV charging infrastructure that the Government are taking too long to address.

There is inadequate support for local authorities and elected Mayors, who are doing their best. Let me give a couple of examples of good work that is going on. The Mayor of London’s ambition is to cut emissions and pollution and to move to net zero. It is useful to know that all new bus contracts in London include a requirement to use zero-emission buses. My council, Hounslow, has done a lot of work on climate change: all new council homes built will be ultra-low emission, for example. But local elected leaders need national leadership, they need tools and sometimes they need funding from the Government, and too many of them say that they are not getting it. Unfortunately, short-termism and austerity have been the Government’s approach to net zero, which is why I believe the UK has been failing.

[Ruth Cadbury]

I am sure Conservative Members will ask what a Labour Government would do. No doubt my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) will cover that, but I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has set out the bold action that a Labour Government would take to tackle the climate crisis. We would create Great British Energy to champion green and clean energy, we would invest in wind power, we would insulate 19 million homes, we would lower bills, we would improve our energy security, and, most important, we would work to tackle the climate crisis.

I think back to the dozens of students I have heard from throughout my constituency who are desperate for the Government, and indeed the world, to do much more to tackle the climate crisis. Many of them will be voting in the next general election, and the rest will vote in subsequent general elections. We owe it to them to go beyond words and to take action. It is nearly four years since the House declared a climate emergency, and I was proud to be an MP at that time. We know that we are living in a climate emergency: we see the flash floods, the displacement and the degradation of biodiversity across the planet, and we see the implications of all those developments. We can all see the damage that is being done. What we need to do is act now, but it is such a shame that action was not taken a decade ago.

1.10 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on an excellent report. It is also a very long report, and very comprehensive.

Net zero is all well and good. Of course we need to make effective use of our natural resources—everyone agrees with that. Cutting out waste from our society and using what we have in better ways has always been a sound conservative principle, so none of us can disagree with it. However, we need to approach these issues holistically, and avoid making huge errors that would set us back in other respects for the sole purpose of chasing the goal of net zero.

Let me give an example. Since the second invasion of Ukraine last year, we have realised how tenuous our food security is. The world food supply is incredibly delicate, and it makes no sense whatsoever to take good land out of agricultural use to build huge solar farms. I know quite a lot about this, because in my constituency there are applications to build solar farms on 10,000 acres of good agricultural land. Each of the panels will be 4.7 metres high. Those 10,000 acres that will be taken out of agricultural use could feed two cities the size of Hull every year. Vast resources, in the form of financial compensation, are going to a very few people. Someone who owns 1,000 acres could receive £2 million a year, but tenant farmers, unlike landlords, are being put out of business.

This is a serious issue, and I hope that when people chase goals like net zero, they will try to think creatively. The report rightly says—on page 9, I think, and I have read it—that we must do much more to put solar panels on the rooftops of schools, factories, and logistics and distribution centres. We have millions of acres of flat-roof warehouses where they could go, but cutting the amount

of land that feeds our families and communities is surely nonsensical. By all means have as many solar panels as you like and have them within scale, but the applications in a single district that I represent, West Lindsey, cover an area greater than the whole of the east midlands. Whatever anyone says, ultimately the consumer will not benefit from lower prices; the rewards will go into very few pockets indeed.

The excellent report refers to—I like this phrase—“a clean and endless supply of wind blowing across the North Sea.”

In Lincolnshire, I can stand behind my house, on the top of the Wolds, and see in the distance huge arrays of wind farms in the North sea. They are built with virtually no objections, and we are becoming—perhaps already are—world leaders in this regard. However, when it comes to onshore windmills, while I assure the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) that I understand what she is saying, the ones for which there have been applications in my constituency would be taller than Lincoln cathedral, which for 400 years was the tallest building in the world. None of these huge windmills will be built in Brentford and Isleworth, I am afraid. If they were, there would be such fantastic opposition that it would never happen, so they will all be built in rural constituencies.

**Ruth Cadbury:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I mentioned the hon. Lady, so the least I can do is give way to her.

**Ruth Cadbury:** There are actually at least two windmills in my constituency, one on Ormiston Wire in Isleworth and the other, a large one that a great many people see when they see drive in or out of London on the elevated section of the M4, on Sky Studios.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Well, if I am wrong I am wrong, but I do not think there is much enthusiasm for building windmills as tall as Lincoln cathedral in urban areas. We can say that in theory we are in favour of onshore windmills, but I assure the hon. Lady that every time they are proposed, there is a gruelling process of public inquiries and fierce opposition lasting many years. How much better it would be to concentrate our resources offshore. As I have said, we are world leaders in offshore wind, and there is never any objection.

The report also refers to achieving net zero through better public transport. It talks of the importance of getting more people to use sustainable public transport rather than making individual car journeys. When I am down in London I hate using a car; I would much rather use the tube, the bus or even a Boris bike. However, it is different in rural areas such as Lincolnshire, where we have been calling for better public transport links for decades. Little has been done; indeed, the services have become worse and worse. Too often, we have fallen victim to service cuts when budgets from central Government have been reduced.

If services for people who live in less built up areas are only two-hourly, or even once a day—or indeed, in the village where I live, non-existent—those people have to rely on cars, not just to socialise but for essential activities such as working and shopping. If the Government are serious about net zero in public transport, they must

radically upgrade our rural transport links, and that includes the frequency of service. However, that is never going to happen, because it is so fantastically expensive, so I am afraid we will be reliant on cars for decades, or perhaps forever in rural areas such as Lincolnshire. By all means reduce the carbon footprint of buses—put solar panels on them if you want—but a net zero bus that arrives only once a day will not be of much use to you.

It is now 2023, but the sale of all conventional cars is to be banned from 2030, and the sale of hybrids by 2035. Lincolnshire measures 2,687 square miles, or 1,719,600 acres. The Government need to make clear how they are going to roll out charging points across such a vast area, because it is simply not going to happen by 2030. Are they in touch with the energy supply companies? Have they had discussions with rural councils about the transition? I put it to the Minister, who represents a Scottish constituency, that this is simply not practical in rural counties, and we need to think very seriously about it.

The excellent report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood points out that the UK's housing stock is much older than that of most similar nations. More than 50% of homes in England were built before 1965, and almost 20% before 1919. As the report says, that has a huge impact on energy efficiency. I live in an old house, and I know very well how difficult it is to heat such houses. Nearly 50% of low-income households in England are in homes with energy performance certificate ratings of D or lower, and on average they use 27% more gas and 18% more electricity than higher-rated homes. These are the least well-off people, but there is no point in our preaching to them about the value of heat pumps, which they cannot afford. Lower-income households simply do not have the disposable income to pay for this kind of investment, unless we are prepared to devote massive resources to helping them.

We are also paying the price of decades of failure to invest in clean nuclear energy. In the wake of OPEC and the oil crisis in the 1970s, France's Gaullist Prime Minister Pierre Messmer realised how vulnerable his country was, and ordered a huge upscaling of French nuclear energy. As a result, France now has a cheaper, cleaner energy supply, and is selling the surplus to needy countries such as ours.

As I said, we need to approach this issue holistically. The UK's contribution to carbon emissions is minuscule on the global scale. I am not saying that is an argument for doing nothing, but it is a fact. If we achieve net zero, the gain for the planet can be wiped out by a tiny percentage increase in China's or India's huge carbon emissions. These are growing developing economies. Let us be realistic about it: they look at us telling them to cut their emissions and think we are cheating them. They both have complex relationships with the west. We are very friendly with India, but we are the former colonial power there. The rise of Hindu nationalism makes that relationship even more complicated and difficult.

As for communist China, it views us with disdain. Judging by China's actions, it is not wholly convinced by environmentalism. If people view the world from a totally materialist utilitarian perspective, as a communist Government do, why would they be as environmental as we claim to be? They would see all the leading developed

and industrialised nations such as ours, which were totally reckless when we were industrialising, lecturing them. Now that we are on top, we tell developing countries to toe the line and not do what we did to get to the top—that is their view. They view our preaching as hypocritical on the one hand and patronising on the other.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I am about to finish, but I will give way to the hon. Lady.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Is the right hon. Gentleman not making an excellent argument for why we should lead by example? We cannot tell others what to do unless we show leadership ourselves.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Yes, of course we should lead by example. I accept everything that is in the report and we must lead by example, but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood, who was an excellent Minister and has written a wonderful report, accepts that some of the points I have made about being realistic, particularly in terms of rural areas, should be taken into account. That is the point I wish to emphasise.

1.21 pm

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), because it is important to hear where people's concerns are. The report sets out the fact that we must overcome our concerns because we have no option: we need to reach net zero. The House knows how passionate I am about making sure that this country reaches its net zero targets.

While recent news has overwhelmed us with the tragedies of war and natural disasters, the climate emergency continues to threaten our global future. We have to act together, in solidarity. I welcome the independent review of net zero. It is uncompromising in its demand that the Government get a grip and actually deliver on the targets they have set themselves. Last year, the Climate Change Committee made a similar point: tangible progress now lags badly behind the country's net zero ambitions.

We are on course to overshoot our target level of greenhouse gas emissions twofold. The CCC had previously set the Government several targets for 2022 to stay on course for net zero by 2050; only a fifth of them have been achieved. This is an unforgivable underperformance and shows that the Conservative Government's commitment to net zero is lukewarm at best. We need to do a lot more persuasion. It is about winning hearts and minds, not just in this House but in our local communities, to persuade people that we need to get to net zero. The commitment has to be more than lukewarm: it has to be hot and passionate. We want to get to net zero.

Too many people still treat our net zero targets like a bus that we can miss and then catch another. We must understand that there will be no next time if we do not reach net zero by 2050—and that means net zero globally. Climate change is already leading to chaotic consequences in our societies. Since 1950, the global number of floods has increased by a factor of 15 and wildfires have increased by a factor of seven. We have seen droughts

[Wera Hobhouse]

and famine across east Africa, floods in Pakistan and a heatwave in the UK. The dangers of missing net zero are staring us right in the face. The difference in limiting global warming to 1.5°C instead of 2° would save around 420 million people from exposure to extreme heatwaves.

Our Government should be leading by example—I say that for the third time now. We are an advanced economy. We cannot tell economies that are less advanced that they have to get to net zero but our contribution is so tiny that it does not matter. It matters that we lead by example. I am so glad we have a report that says that net zero is not only good for the planet but makes sense economically. We will miss out hugely if we do not really get to grips with this and deliver on the targets. We must set ourselves ambitious targets and be very passionate and hot about them, not just lukewarm. What message does it send to the rest of the world when our advanced economy does not meet its obligations in the global fight to keep temperature rises below 1.5°?

The independent review recognises that the Government's tepid approach to net zero means the UK is losing out on green investment. This concern is shared by the Confederation of British Industry and many renewable energy companies, such as Equinor, SSE and Vattenfall. The USA and the EU are developing huge financial packages to encourage green investment, and China is currently the biggest investor in renewable energy, while our Government are still playing to the tune of the oil and gas giants. The UK lags behind all but one of its G7 counterparts in investment in green infrastructure and jobs. It is a massive missed opportunity.

We are in a cost of living crisis because of our reliance on gas and oil. The Government fail to recognise that the fastest and cheapest way to guarantee energy security is to phase out oil and gas rather than invest in more exploration and extraction. I welcome the fact that we now have the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero—that the two have been put together—because so much of energy security depends on our getting to net zero and phasing out our reliance on gas and oil.

I am pleased that the net zero review recommends that the Government support the Local Electricity Bill. The lack of growth in community energy in the past seven years is a significant missed opportunity. Its major strength is its connection to people and places. It engages people in energy systems and makes that important connection so that we win hearts and minds and people see the advantages of changing. I absolutely agree that change is difficult and we need to get people behind the net zero agenda.

In my Bath constituency, Bath and West Community Energy has installed enough renewable energy to power nearly 4,500 homes. Many of the projects are installed in local school and community buildings. The energy is net zero and far cheaper than gas and oil, but the huge potential for more community energy cannot be realised because current energy market and licensing rules mean that community energy schemes face high grid-access costs.

The Local Electricity Bill would reform the energy market to empower community-owned and run schemes to sell local renewable energy directly to households and

businesses. It would make new community energy businesses viable, and those businesses would keep significant additional value within local economies by bypassing large utilities. It is incomprehensible to me why the Government are dragging their feet on enacting this vital change to help an industry that has so much potential not only in reaching net zero but in doing exactly as we are doing with this debate—aiming to win hearts and minds and make people and politicians aware of how important net zero is and how deliverable and advantageous for our society it will ultimately be.

The transition to net zero must be at the heart of every Government policy if we are to hit our targets. The Climate Change Committee has criticised the lack of joined-up thinking on net zero in the Government. Last year, I spoke to a group of sub-national transport bodies that noted the lack of synergy between the Department for Transport and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in the development of sustainable land planning principles. That is just one example of siloed thinking in the Government.

I agree with the review that there needs to be a group with actual power that can work across Government to ensure that net zero is considered in every policy decision. A net zero delivery authority, as outlined in a recent Policy Connect paper, could do exactly that. Such a public body should be placed on a statutory footing and operate at arm's length from the Government to provide assurance to business and people about its longevity and clout. It would be tasked with monitoring and accelerating the delivery of key net zero strategies.

The Government would set the authority's objectives, rules and principles of operation and the authority would then be responsible for delivery within that framework. I am glad that we have already discussed that this afternoon. [Interruption.] I hope the Minister is listening, because he might be involved in setting up such an authority. I am looking forward to progress with that.

A net zero delivery authority would co-ordinate the delivery of Government strategies between local and national Government. That, too, is incredibly important and has already been mentioned. The delivery of many of our net zero targets should be devolved to local areas, because local people know best, and the delivery of net zero can be so much better achieved through local authorities. The authority would gather information and understanding about local delivery from local government and businesses to inform the national strategy. It would work with partner organisations and national bodies to inform both national and local delivery strategies for decarbonisation.

However, a net zero delivery authority is not enough, which is why we, as Liberal Democrats, are proposing a net zero action plan, backed by a £150 billion public investment programme to fire up progress to net zero and help the UK become a global leader in future technologies. What a net zero delivery authority could do is avoid policy inconsistency and ensure total focus within Government on the climate emergency.

The net zero transition will impact every aspect of our lives. The evidence is clear that the costs of combating the climate emergency are dwarfed by the consequences of inaction. We must all work together to deliver the net zero transition as efficiently and sustainably as possible.

If we do not do so, we risk losing the battle to preserve our climate, the future of our country and the wellbeing of our people.

1.31 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) and his team are to be congratulated on carrying out the herculean and timely task of reviewing the UK's legal commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Generally, I agree with his findings and recommendations, and I urge the Government to consider them carefully and to respond to them proactively. This must not be a document that gathers dust on a bookshelf, or to which occasional reference is made in preparation for debates such as this. Instead, it must mark a sea change in how we set about ensuring that the UK realises the full potential of the growth opportunities that net zero presents.

My right hon. Friend's review calls for action on the "key 25 for 2025 recommendations". Each of these proposals warrants a debate of its own, but what I shall briefly do is home in on one subject that is not only very important to delivering net zero, but already bringing significant job opportunities to areas such as Waveney and Lowestoft and, with the right policy framework, can deliver even more. What I am talking about is the offshore wind industry.

Offshore wind has come a long way in the past decade. At the outset, 10 years ago, there were many Doubting Thomases questioning whether the industry had a future, saying that, as a technology, it was way too expensive. However, the industry, working with Government, has proved them wrong. It is now an undoubted British success story, with everyone wanting a slice of the action. As a result, the Government have set very ambitious targets for 2030 and 2050 for the amount of electricity that offshore wind will generate.

The industry has brought significant benefits to East Anglia, with half of the nation's offshore wind fleet anchored off the Suffolk and Norfolk coast. Its construction is being project managed from ports such as Lowestoft, where ScottishPower Renewables and SSE Renewables also have their operations and maintenance bases, and where Associated British Ports has obtained planning permission and is designing its Lowestoft Eastern Energy facility.

This success can be attributed to a combination of the ingenuity of business and the foresight of Government, who, in the Energy Act 2013, set down a policy framework that has been an undoubted success. However, times change. In many respects, offshore wind is a victim of its own success. The scale of the Government's vision for the future of the industry means that a more strategic approach to its future development is now required. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing global gas crisis mean that other nations, in particular the US with its Inflation Reduction Act 2022, are upping their game in developing their own renewable energy strategies. All of a sudden, the UK, which is still the No. 1 world leader in offshore wind, is at risk of being an also-ran. Energy is a globally footloose industry, and it is vital that we respond to ensure that the UK retains its pole and premier position.

I shall briefly outline how I believe this can be done. First, there is a need to streamline the planning process. A more co-ordinated and efficient planning system is

required if we are to achieve the 50 GW 2030 target. The establishment of the offshore wind acceleration taskforce will help achieve that, but its reforming work does need to take place at a greater pace.

Secondly, and in the same vein, we need to speed up the development of the grid system, so that offshore wind projects can be delivered more rapidly. We require a new model of grid development where critical investments are accelerated by Ofgem and the transmission owners. To deliver this step change in grid development, the Government should reform the remit of Ofgem through an amendment to the Energy Bill, as recommended by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood and his team.

Thirdly, there is a need for a stable and attractive fiscal framework that enables businesses to make what are enormous investment decisions with confidence. It would be wrong to get into a bidding war with the US, the EU and other nations, but we do need a taxation regime that encourages investment through a compelling range of capital allowances. I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to introduce these in the forthcoming spring statement.

Fourthly, although the framework set down in the Energy Act 2013 has served us very well, it does need considered reform to take account of the harsh new global economic reality. Due to inflation and supply chain constraints, it is necessary for Government to adjust the parameters for future contracts for difference auctions, both with regard to their overall budget and the strike prices that are set. In the longer term, it is necessary to reform the contracts for difference allocation process so as to better balance price and supply chain considerations. In doing so, we will be able to maximise the opportunities that offshore wind presents for economic regeneration and job creation in places such as Lowestoft.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Does the hon. Member agree that one of the biggest problems that we encounter is not so much the CfDs, but the delay that is caused by grid access? The National Grid cannot develop new grid infrastructure until projects have come on board.

**Peter Aldous:** I agree with the hon. Lady. The industry faces a whole range of challenges. The contracts for difference one is very important at the moment, with developers putting forward their bids, but the grid is an important issue. As I have said, the industry has been a victim of its own success. The point-to-point approach to making connections into the grid, which we have had up until now, is, I fear, no longer sustainable and we need to move on to that more strategic approach.

My fifth and final point is that it is important that the Government act as a catalyst for investment in key infrastructure, particularly in ports. That is vital in order not to deflect investment overseas. Such leveraging could include revenue guarantee support for investors for a limited period, to overcome the risk gap at the time of final investment decisions, and looking to see what the UK Infrastructure Bank can do to crowd in private investment.

In conclusion, as I mentioned at the outset, offshore wind has come a long way over the past decade. In many respects it is now the UK's star player in mission zero. It provides hope and opportunity for communities all around the UK. The existing partnership between

[Peter Aldous]

business and Government, which culminated in the sector deal signed in Lowestoft nearly four years ago, has served us well. However, the regulatory and policy frameworks now urgently need reviewing if the UK industry is to retain its premier position. If we do not do that—my apologies for this metaphor, Madam Deputy Speaker—there is a risk that we will have blown it.

1.40 pm

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I appreciate being given the opportunity to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on compiling this review—an impressive feat in such a short period of time since it was first requested of him. The focus on this issue is long overdue. This place and this country need far more urgency and purpose in trying to achieve our net zero ambitions. I absolutely respect him; he is a decent individual and, while I have not read the entire review, I am sure that all 129 recommendations are sensible and well-founded.

For me, net zero is not just the right thing to do, something that is critical for our society, our future and our civilisation, but economically important. That is why I am so struck by the failure in recent years to grab that opportunity. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well in the internal discussions on this review; certainly I fear that the Government perhaps have not engaged as much with Lord Deben and the Climate Change Committee in recent years, which is a real shame.

I think back to the signals we have had for many years now, going back to 2006 and Lord Stern's report and the international work of people such as Al Gore, speaking about the inconvenient truth that we face and the lack of urgency in recent years. That was in 2006. We are approaching almost 20 years since then. Funnily enough, it was in the same year, 2006, that I approached my local district council, wanting to convert a building into a low-carbon property. Sadly, I was refused permission—to be fair, it was a minor change of use from a storage building, although it had been used as a house in times past—so I went to the Planning Inspectorate and appealed. The planning inspector found in my favour and I was given permission to convert that building. I wanted to prove what could be done in terms of developing a low-carbon building.

I appreciate that in the last 24 hours the Government are now refocusing on the importance of net zero with the restructuring of the departmental teams, but we are only really going back to where we were in 2010, when we had the Department of Energy and Climate Change, in recognition of the work of Lord Stern, Al Gore and so many others. That recognition led to the world-first Climate Change Act 2008, passed by Labour in government, which I think was a fantastic piece of work. Even though I was nowhere near this place at the time, I had a huge amount of respect for the work being done.

Sadly, in the intervening 12 to 13 years, we have seen massive retrograde actions by first the coalition Government and then successive Conservative Governments, when there was an enormous economic opportunity for us. I will come back to some of those opportunities later, but the decision to do away with the zero-carbon homes legislation was one of the most retrograde acts that they

could have committed. We are now seeing why building new homes with gas dependency was such a wrong decision, first because of increasing demand for gas, but secondly because it was not the right thing to do to combat climate change.

As I am sure other colleagues across the House do, I visited a new housing estate a couple of weeks ago. There were 130 properties on the estate I visited, and of those none had EV charging points, solar photovoltaics, solar thermal or heat pumps. Those are brand-new houses that have not yet been completed. When I asked why those things were not being done, the builders said, “Well, it didn't need to be done, to be fair, and the owners can always retrofit them.” Trust me—having been through building a house, I can tell hon. Members it can be quite challenging, but if a house is being built from scratch, it is much cheaper to install those things there and then. The fact that we are not installing such basic things, or even making provision for energy storage units in those properties, is a massive failure of the system. That should have been going on all this time; it would have happened under Labour had the party been returned to power in 2010.

The issue of existing homes has also been discussed and mentioned by a couple of hon. Members. I appreciate that we have a much older housing stock, but we could have been taking action over many years to change properties through secondary glazing, triple glazing and so on. When I visited properties built in the late 1950s in Germany, which had had double glazing and underfloor heating installed back then, I was struck by just how far in advance of us other nations have been on this.

There is an economic opportunity on insulation schemes, where we can not only reduce households' dependency on fossil fuels, but also significantly reduce their energy bills. To the naysayers who say there really is very little advantage for an individual or a household, the gas consumption in my property in the last 13 years has been 130 cubic metres. When hon. Members next look at their gas meters and see how much they have used in the last year or the last quarter, they will realise how staggeringly low that figure is.

On power generation, I am afraid I do not share the views of the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who has sadly just departed the Chamber. I believe there is an exciting opportunity in the field of power generation to introduce much more onshore wind, and offshore wind as well. Those of us who have the apps on our phones will have seen that for many months now, offshore wind-generated power has typically produced 40% to 50% of UK electricity energy. That is a fantastic result and just shows what can be achieved. Domestic solar is also a good and important thing that should be installed as a matter of course, not just in new build, but retrospectively, and then of course there is the opportunity for localised modular reactors to supplement power generation across the UK.

Power distribution is another important part of the equation, as the right hon. Member for Kingswood was saying. National Grid, which is headquartered in Warwick in my constituency, is central to that. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was up in the Wansbeck constituency, where there is a National Grid site with two cables coming ashore from a plant in Norway. Those are the interconnectors about which hon. Members may have heard, whereby hydroelectric power is generated and comes into the UK as renewable energy.



To visualise that, at that diameter, those two cables provide 3% of UK electricity. That is just how extraordinary those connections can be. Of course, more are planned, not just from Norway, say, but from Denmark and France. Those cables work both ways: we can bring power from Norway, but we can also supply power to Norway from the excess generated in the UK. That is why they present such a great opportunity. I appreciate that there is an issue on the planning side of distribution. We have to be much more joined up in the way that we approach it. Without localised power distribution, we will not be able to supply much-needed electric power to households and businesses.

One of last areas that I will cover is transport, on which we are really behind the curve. The EV industry is frustrated by where the Government are on this. It is easy to set targets, but we need to give the industries and sectors frameworks and structures against which they can deliver those targets. They recognise that those targets are challenging, and they want to achieve them, but they need more than just the setting of a target. Currently, we do not have an EV gigafactory at scale in the UK other than Envision up in Sunderland, which is very small. We need to get many more built in the UK. Other nations, including France, Germany, the US, Japan and China, are already manufacturing, while we do not even have a spade in the ground. Unless we do that, we will miss out big time on the economic opportunity.

Linked to that is the charging network. I mentioned the distribution of power; what we do not have is an overall strategy for the delivery of charging points across the UK. Again, we are way behind our international partners. The other point to mention on transport is the importance of the insistence on transport hubs across our towns and cities to encourage active travel.

The report that the right hon. Member for Kingswood has put together gives hope. Every time I visit a school, there are one or two issues on the minds of the young people there, and climate change is absolutely the foremost. They do not expect us just to talk about it; they demand that we act and deliver for their futures.

There is, as I say, an economic opportunity, and not just with gigafactories. I remember that the solar thermal unit I bought was manufactured in Scotland. I do not even know if that plant still exists, but I would be surprised if it does after the changes in 2010 and the green whatever-it-was that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) referred to. That change in legislation meant that we lost a lot of good businesses and manufacturers in the UK that could have been supplying to this economic opportunity. Even Alternative Energy Technology, a small business based in Atherstone in Warwickshire, which installed all the kit in my property, fell by the wayside because of those changes.

I commend the right hon. Member for Kingswood for this substantive report. He spoke of challenges and opportunities, and he is absolutely right. I see huge opportunities, and we need to minimise the challenges. I appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) about how planning needs to be addressed across Departments if we are to speed it up. It is so, so slow. I hear his point about “not zero”. If we do not do this, we will miss a huge economic—as well as critical—point in our history. Many people talk about this stuff, but I think the right hon. Member for Kingswood is absolutely sincere, and I welcome his report, for which I thank him.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We come now to the wind-ups. I call Alan Brown.

1.54 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I commend the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for the work he has done, and for securing the debate. I thank the hon. Members who have taken part. As always, I tend to disagree with the contribution from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I certainly agreed with most of the others.

There is certainly much to like in the report, with stuff to debate and, of course, some stuff to disagree on. Given that the review was commissioned by the previous Prime Minister, after her ill-informed leadership campaign in which she pledged to remove levies from bills and alluded to net zero as a costly commitment, I welcome the fact that the report was undertaken purely independently and did not go down that rabbit hole. The key thing now is what the Government do with the recommendations, especially in the short term, given that implementation for 25 of them is recommended before 2025. That is critical because existing carbon budgets are off track. We need re-alignment if we are to hit net zero by 2050.

I note that the term “Scottish Government” is not used once in the main body of the report. Although I accept that there is engagement, and that some good practice from Scotland is mentioned in the report, I would have expected more references to and understanding of where the Scottish Government are taking a lead, including on the roll-out for electric vehicle chargers, interest-free loans for EVs, the embracing of onshore wind, peatland restoration, woodland planting, the just transition commission, the £500 million low-carbon fund for the north-east, energy efficiency measures and the roll-out of zero-emissions buses. There is a lot of good practice in Scotland that the rest of the UK could learn from. More consideration is required of devolved Governments’ inability to deliver because of funding constraints and, in the case of the Scottish Government, strict borrowing powers. That also needs to be debated.

What is abundantly clear in the report is the need for stable and consistent long-term policy to be matched by funding. The Treasury cannot be a blocker. As the right hon. Member for Kingswood said, other countries are now taking the lead in investment. The Inflation Reduction Act in the United States is making it a more attractive place for investment in renewables.

The folly of previous chopping and changing, and the cutting of solar and onshore wind from the contracts for difference auctions as part of David Cameron’s “cutting the green crap” agenda, has meant eight years of investment lost overnight from one policy decision. That has stopped the deployment of the cheapest forms of renewable energy. At least I can say that I am glad that we in Scotland continue to embrace onshore wind. We have made it integral to the decarbonisation of the power sector. The fact is that Scotland generates the equivalent of 100% of gross electricity consumption from renewables. That should be held up as a fantastic achievement and an example for the UK Government to follow south of the border.

At least the deployment rate of solar is now recovering and will soon stand at 1 GW installed per year. That means that, in a period of just three years, the solar equivalent

[Alan Brown]

of a Hinkley Point C will come online. Solar is quicker, cheaper and can be deployed where required, providing greater grid stability. I agree with the recommendation for a plan to get a road map for 70 GW of deployment by 2035.

I also agree with the right hon. Member for Kingswood about the need for a re-envisioned road map for carbon capture, utilisation and storage to be delivered this year. The report rightly points out that the investment landscape for CCUS and hydrogen is currently unclear, and that needs to be remedied as soon as possible.

Additionally, the track-2 clusters need to be expedited. It is outrageous that the Scottish cluster remains a reserve when it is probably the most advanced of the CCS clusters and is likely to be delivered quickest. Acorn represents the worst example of the UK Government chopping and changing policy and withdrawing funding. The reality is that the Scottish cluster needs to commence for Scotland to meet the 2030 target of a 75% reduction in emissions.

The new Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), obviously knows how important the Scottish cluster is as part of the just transition, and how important it is for jobs in the north-east of Scotland. I hope to hear a more positive response, rather than holding with the mantra of, "It is okay, Acorn is the reserve." Being the reserve is not good enough, and it needs to commence sooner rather than later.

For the record, I agree with the detail on pages 67-68 that we will still rely on North sea oil and gas as we transition towards net zero. Where I fundamentally disagree with the report is in its continued blinkered approach about new nuclear. New nuclear does not form a great deal or a big part of the report, and there is not much evidence, yet it still comes out as a key recommendation and one of the suggested 10 missions. I disagree with applying the phrase "no-regrets option" to the concept of new nuclear.

The report rightly identifies that four of the five remaining nuclear plants will go offline in the next few years, before Hinkley Point C will come on stream. If the UK grid can cope with that scenario, fundamentally we do not need new nuclear as this mythical baseload. It proves we can cope without nuclear. Nuclear is not flexible enough and is relatively incompatible with intermittent renewables. There are still the issues and costs associated with radioactive waste. If we look at long-term performance, we see that nuclear is not necessarily there when the wind does not blow. Over a 10-year period, each nuclear reactor is shown to be offline for roughly a quarter of the year, so it cannot be depended on to be there when it is needed. The reality is that we need to invest in other technologies, particularly storage, to balance intermittent renewables.

The reality is that the nuclear market has failed, because it is too expensive and too risky. There is not a successful operational EPR plant in the world, yet despite that and the ongoing performance issues at Hinkley Point C, the Government seem hellbent on signing up for Sizewell C and using a regulated asset base model that will transfer risk to bill payers. Some £700 million of taxpayers' money has already been thrown

at the development of Sizewell C. That money could be better spent elsewhere. Capital costs for Sizewell C will be at least £30 billion. Think what that money could do if invested in other technologies and in particular in energy efficiency. I welcome the recommendations about aggressive energy efficiency targets going forward. Not only will that make bills cheaper, but it means healthier homes, healthier lifestyles and demand reduction.

Finally on nuclear, the report highlights elsewhere the issue of rising sea levels. It is madness to propose building a new nuclear power station in an area subject to coastal erosion and at risk of rising sea levels. Also, the report demonstrates that nuclear energy has never got cheaper cost-wise, whereas all other technologies, including battery storage and power-to-X fuels, are now cheaper than nuclear. Figures 1 and 2 from the report make the case that we do not need new nuclear and should be investing in other technologies.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that the Conservatives embrace so wholeheartedly dirty, outdated technologies, such as nuclear energy, and refuse to fully embrace tidal energy, which has so much potential for our renewables industry, certainly in Scotland, but right across the United Kingdom?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Before you respond, Mr Brown, just remember the timings that were agreed.

**Alan Brown:** I will aim to be brief. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, and I would like to see the Government set a 1 GW target for tidal stream. We need to follow through on the recommendation of the report and set a clear plan for investing long-term in CCUS, hydrogen production and pumped storage hydro, for supporting a carbon floor mechanism and for replacing the EU funding for the European Marine Energy Centre. I hope the Minister will work with us on planning consents for major infrastructure projects. Section 33 of the Electricity Act 1989 is reserved to Westminster, and there is a sign-off process for Scottish Ministers. If we are going to speed up the consent process, we need to work with the UK Government to do that. Hopefully the Minister will work with us on that with the Energy Bill going forward. There is so much to welcome in the report. I wish we had more time to debate it further, but I commend the right hon. Member for Kingswood on it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Kerry McCarthy.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Hear, hear.

2.4 pm

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West for that enthusiastic endorsement. May I welcome the new Minister to his place and thank the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), another constituency neighbour, for authoring this important review? As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, it was a Herculean task, and I know how much effort the right hon. Gentleman put into it and how many meetings he had to have. I also thank

him for being so open to briefing MPs from all parts of the House about the report's contents since it was published.

The hon. Member for Waveney also said it is vital that the Government act as a catalyst, so I hope he listens avidly to what I have to say a bit later in my speech about what a Labour Government would do with our green prosperity plan. I certainly agree that this Government could do more to act as a catalyst. I might leave it to the new Minister to respond to the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who does not like solar on agricultural land, does not like onshore wind, and says there is not much point doing anything because China is not doing anything. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) pointed out, that is not quite the case. I point out that we are hoping that the Government will produce a land-use strategy before too long, which will hopefully thrash out some of these issues, such as the balance between making sure that good agricultural land is used for food growing and having solar.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about the local context, how enthusiastic young people in her constituency are, the impact of Heathrow and the fact that new social housing should be low carbon, as well as electric vehicle charging infrastructure, which is a subject dear to my heart. She said that local leaders need support to deliver this agenda. The right hon. Member for Kingswood will know what Bristol is doing on that front in trying to lead the way in becoming a net zero city. Again, I thank him for his support on that as a near Bristol MP.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) mentioned the creation of the new Department, which I welcome. I just hope that the net zero and climate change side of it does not get too swamped by the energy side, because the Government have made pretty good progress on decarbonising the energy sector. Much more, however, needs to be done in other sectors, and as the report we are discussing today says, there needs to be faster progress on that. It cannot just be seen as the energy Department with the occasional reference to other aspects of achieving net zero.

This report makes clear what we have known for some time now: this Government are failing to grasp the economic opportunities that come with net zero. I am pleased that the report is so unambivalent about the benefits that can come from a transition to a greener economy. It calls it

“the economic opportunity of the 21st century.”

We know this report was originally commissioned to take the heat off a Government who were hellbent on doubling down on polluting expensive fossil fuels, regardless of the cost to the taxpayer or planet. The then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) desperately needed political cover while she tried to push through her attempts to bring back fracking and ban new solar developments. Thankfully she did not stick around for long enough to do that.

We hoped that the next prime Minister would learn from the mistakes of his predecessor and embrace climate action as the huge economic opportunity that we know it to be. However, what were his first moves in office? He sacked the President of the COP26 climate summit, tried to duck out of attending COP27, attempted to resurrect the ban on onshore wind and was whizzing

around the country by private jet, which I gather he was at again this morning. Those are hardly the actions of a climate champion.

Given that context of two Prime Ministers who, let us be frank, clearly could not care less about the climate, I am pleased that this review is not the greenwash many of us expected it to be. It does a comprehensive job of highlighting the many areas where the Government are falling woefully short in getting us to net zero. It makes clear that constant U-turns and lack of continuity make it impossible to plan and invest. All the businesses that I speak to in my role are telling me that time and again. They do not care about the politics of who is doing it; they just want that certainty, stability and sense of direction. It is clear also that the Government are not doing enough to make green technologies affordable for ordinary households. It is clear that this Government's decision to axe support for home insulation in 2013 is the reason for plummeting energy efficiency improvements. It is clear that this Government have failed to set out a proper plan to restore nature or balance land-use pressures. It is crystal clear that we are falling behind in the global race to seize the economic opportunities of net zero.

That last point is particularly important. The review states that we must act quickly

“to cement the UK as a prime destination for international capital”.

Economic opportunities are being missed today because of weaknesses in the UK's investment environment. The right hon. Member for Kingswood mentioned falling behind the curve—we are in danger of doing that.

These missed opportunities are blindingly obvious to anyone paying attention. We have lost Britishvolt in Blythe, the electric Mini in Oxford and Arrival's electric vans in Bicester, and we are losing our steel industry piece by piece. It was worrying to hear the new Business and Trade Secretary being asked this week whether Britain would retain a steel industry. She said:

“Nothing is ever a given.”

We need to green and retain our steel industry here. Other nations are not facing the exodus of jobs but are actively encouraging their own green industries. They understand that green investment pays for itself. The United States has just announced unprecedented support for green industries through the \$369 billion Inflation Reduction Act. Much of that support is linked to support for domestic green industries and designed to attract investment from overseas, too. The European Union has been quick and clear in its response to that Act, with more support for green industries that need it, and proposals for a net zero industry Act and a critical raw materials Act.

How has the UK responded? With a deafening and perplexing silence. I tabled a named day question on the first day back in January asking what our response to the Inflation Reduction Act would be. I keep being told that the Government are not ready to reply. I asked about that at International Trade questions this morning and I think the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) had a slip of the tongue and replied that she was talking to green lithium companies about investing in the US. I suspect that she meant the UK. But there was not a concrete response to IRA and there needs to be if we are not to be left behind.

[Kerry McCarthy]

We should be seizing the initiative, not sitting on our hands. The Government should work night and day to ensure that we do not lose a penny more in green investment because of the failure to make the UK attractive to green industries, especially those at the cutting edge of innovation. The companies doing something new and taking the risks really need that Government support and catalyst that the hon. Member for Waveney talked about. I hope the Minister tells us whether and how the Government are planning to respond to the huge international investment in green industries. Or have they simply given up?

As much as I welcome the report's findings, it has only told us what we already know about the Government's progress towards net zero. We are simply not going far or fast enough. The right hon. Member for Kingswood is far from alone in that opinion. His report is merely the latest in a string of scathing assessments of this Government's record on climate change. The Climate Change Committee said in last year's progress report that the Government's climate strategy "will not deliver" net zero. The High Court said that the net zero strategy is unlawful and inadequate. How many times do the Government need to be told that before they get their act together? Given the repeated warnings about the snail's pace progress towards net zero, the huge uncertainty for investors and the staggering lack of ambition on crucial policy areas, I have little faith that the Government will finally step up a gear. I hope that the creation of the new Department is a sign that it will, but we will be there to hold them to account if they do not.

If this Government do not act, the next Labour Government will. We have put forward a transformative agenda for Government, with a fairer, greener future at the core. We will invest £28 billion per year to tackle the climate emergency through our green prosperity plan, which will allow us to insulate 19 million homes within a decade; to deliver a clean power system by 2030; to establish GB Energy, a publicly owned clean energy company to ensure the benefits of our green investments are returned to the taxpayer; and to set up a national wealth fund to invest in those green industries that the Government seem happy to ignore and drive overseas. That means investment in new gigafactories, renewable-ready ports, green steel plants, green hydrogen, net zero industrial clusters and carbon capture and storage. It means good green jobs and growth for every corner of the UK. That is the kind of vision that this report makes clear is necessary. It is the kind of vision that British industry and this country are crying out for.

2.14 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie):** I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for publishing the report and pushing for this debate.

Before I move to the subject of the debate, it will not have escaped the notice of Members—in fact, it has been referenced a few times—that I stand here as a Minister on behalf of the brand-new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. As my right hon. Friend suggested, this is the first debate for this new Department,

on my second day. I hope that demonstrates our commitment to net zero. The Department's laser-like focus will be on securing a long-term energy supply, bringing down bills and halving inflation, giving the UK cheaper, cleaner and more secure sources of energy—something covered in great detail in part 2 of this excellent report.

The report and the creation of the Department align wholeheartedly with the great strides the UK has already made in our actions to tackle climate change. In 2019, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood and the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), ensured that the United Kingdom became the world's first developed country to set a legal commitment to reach net zero by 2050. That was followed by our 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, published in November 2020. We built on that momentum in October 2021 by publishing the net zero strategy, which set out a detailed pathway to meeting our carbon budgets and net zero targets. That was followed by the British energy security strategy in April 2022, accelerating our ambitions on cleaner energy.

As Members will be aware, since publishing the net zero strategy, the economic conditions have changed significantly, due primarily to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Energy prices and inflation rose sharply—the former to record levels. In the light of that, in September last year the Government appointed my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood to chair an independent review of our approach to meeting our net zero 2050 target, to ensure that we deliver on our legal commitment to reach net zero by 2050 in a way that is pro-business and pro-growth, given the change in the economic landscape.

I am delighted that the results of my right hon. Friend's independent net zero review were published on 13 January 2023. I wholeheartedly thank him and congratulate him on his work. This is a substantial and thorough report. I assure him that I will read it in full very soon, and that a full Government response will follow later this year. As we have heard, the independent review of net zero heard from businesses, academia, individuals and local government across the country that net zero is creating a new era of change and opportunity. It confirms that the Government have understood that the benefits of net zero far outweigh the costs and have acted on that for some time. It explains the opportunities and benefits of net zero for individuals and the economy, and specifies the action needed in individual sectors of the economy, through to how we enhance the role of local authorities, communities and the individual to deliver a just transition. [Interruption.] If those on the Opposition Front Bench would listen rather than chuntering from a sedentary position, I said I would read it in full. I have read the report, but I will read all 120 recommendations in full and we will reply in full later this year.

Furthermore, the report reconfirms that the 2021 net zero strategy is still the right pathway, based on modelling on the most cost-effective net zero energy system in 2050, and that the policy should go ahead.

**Alan Brown:** Will the Minister give way?

**Andrew Bowie:** I will not, given that I have made a commitment on time.

The review of net zero recognises that we have all made a great deal of progress through leveraging our international leadership in COP26. The proportion of

the world committed to net zero has risen from 30% of global GDP to 90%. His Majesty's Government have committed more than £2 billion to support the transition to zero-emission vehicles. That funding has focused on reducing barriers to adopting such vehicles, including offsetting the higher upfront cost and accelerating the roll-out of charge point infrastructure.

I take issue with the tone taken by the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who claimed that the Government had done nothing on climate. It was a Conservative Government who legislated for net zero. It was a Conservative Government who hosted COP26, and we look forward to working with the UAE as it looks to deliver COP this year to carry on that excellent work. It was a Conservative MP who brought forward the legislation for net zero—indeed, the same MP who wrote the report that we are debating. It was a Conservative Government who hosted the green trade and investment expo in Gateshead last year.

Unlike the Opposition, I am proud that we are leading the way in developing and exporting green technology. There were 430,000 green tech jobs in this country, worth £41.2 billion, in 2022. Companies like Catagen in Belfast, which I visited late last year, are developing green hydrogen and the e-fuels of the future. The hon. Member for Bristol East talked about onshore wind but completely ignored offshore wind. We are the world leader in offshore wind. We have the four largest offshore wind farms in the world off the coast of this island right now.

Despite all that, we are not resting on our laurels. We are raising our ambitions to ensure that we deliver net zero and realise the benefits. In last April's British energy security strategy, we raised the ambition to deliver up to 50 GW of offshore wind by 2030, including 5 GW of floating offshore wind. We have already invested millions in offshore wind, securing many jobs and up to £320 million of Government support for fixed-bottom and floating wind ports and infrastructure.

To accelerate a reduction in energy demand—*[Interruption.]* If those on the Opposition Front Bench listen, they might learn something from what we are announcing today in response to the report. To accelerate a reduction in energy demand, the Government announced a long-term commitment in the 2022 autumn statement to drive improvement in energy efficiency to bring down bills for households, businesses and the public sector, with an ambition to reduce the UK's final energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15% by 2030, against 2021 levels. That will be supported by an additional £6 billion commitment to 2028 and the launch of a new energy efficiency taskforce, further details of which will be announced in due course. By 2030, 95% of British electricity could, if we work together, be low carbon, and by 2035 we will have decarbonised our electricity system, subject to security of supply.

I turn to the concerns raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). As a Member representing a vast rural constituency with a similarly vast road network, I hear the concerns about the EV charging network and the protection of farmland for food security. The Government take this incredibly seriously, and in due course the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and our Department will publish plans for how we speed up the roll-out of the EV charging network and ensure food security while meeting our net zero ambitions.

We continue to build on the strong progress we have already made. We have many exciting policy announcements in the coming year. The Energy Bill, which is going through Parliament right now, will deliver an energy system that is cleaner, more affordable and more secure. We are committed to publishing an update to our green finance strategy early this year, setting out how we will mobilise finance for the UK's energy security, climate and environmental objectives, and maintain our position as a leading green finance hub. We will set out the next steps of the United Kingdom's emissions trading scheme in response to last year's consultation. We have committed to adopting a zero-emission vehicle mandate, requiring that a percentage of manufacturers' new car and van sales be zero-emission each year from 2024.

**Alan Brown:** The Minister is talking about green finance. What about the key recommendation that the UK Government have to do more funding-wise, particularly to offset the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States? We have the electricity generator levy here. The US is incentivising investment in renewables. Will the UK Government address that?

**Andrew Bowie:** This Government are committed to incentivising investment in renewables across the piece, working with the energy sector and others. In the full response to this report, which I assure Members will come later in the year, we will set out more plans in that regard. The hon. Gentleman is right; that is something we need to do.

New technology will be critical to the transition, and this comes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about phasing out fossil fuels. Of course we need to move away from a reliance on fossil fuels as our energy baseload. That is why we are transitioning. That is why Offshore Energies UK has its "Vision 2035" to make the North sea the first net zero basin in the world. We continue to work with the oil and gas sector as it produces the energy we require and will need for many years to come, and as it invests in the new technologies of the future, including carbon capture and storage—a technology in which there are many projects across the country.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Is the Minister not aware that the biggest investment is still in oil and gas exploration and extraction? How does that fit with what he just said?

**Andrew Bowie:** Exploration and drilling will continue. We will be reliant in some way on oil and gas for years to come. At the same time, we are working to increase our investment in renewables, as well as new technologies, including the developments in hydrogen and e-fuels that I have seen myself. This is a transition. It is not a case of simply turning off one form of energy and turning on another. We need to transition away from fossil fuels. That is why it is really important that we work with the oil and gas companies operating in the North sea to achieve that, as well as increasing our investment in new technologies being developed in this country.

We are a world leader in green and clean tech, as I saw just last week. We are delivering green and clean tech to countries across the world, but we must also work with our existing industry. The net zero research and innovation delivery plan will set out the Government's

[Andrew Bowie]

current portfolio of research and innovation programmes that are backing Britain's most innovative businesses to develop the next generation of technologies needed to deliver net zero. We expect to set out the next steps in a range of other critical areas, from energy efficiency to carbon capture and storage, very soon.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that part of the overall package needs to be improvements in connectivity for new solar farms to improve the roll-out of solar across the country?

**Andrew Bowie:** Yes, that will play a major part in where we move to, as we take forward the ambitious agenda that this Government instigated by legislating for net zero and that has been reinforced by this report, which we will reply to in full in due course. Extending and improving connectivity for solar farms is, of course, important.

As I have set out today, our net zero target remains a Government priority. I assure the House that we will carefully consider the recommendations proposed in the review and in this debate, and provide a full Government response later in the year.

2.25 pm

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank the Backbench Business Committee again for granting this debate and all Members who have spoken in it. The debate has demonstrated that, while Members may disagree on some of the contents of the report and its recommendations, as should be the case, the overall narrative of the review—that net zero is an opportunity and not a cost, and that we must seize this opportunity now and not delay—is overwhelmingly welcomed by all parties in the House. I stand ready to brief any political party that is willing to continue to look closely at the recommendations in the report.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) spoke about the Stern review, and it would be an honour if this report was seen in the same bracket in terms of its ability to influence future policy innovation.

Mention was made of the length of the report and the fact that it was done in three months. I am grateful for the incredible work that was done by the wider net zero review team in Government. Three months is 1% of our journey to net zero. We do not have time to waste. It has been 43 months since I, as the Minister, signed net zero into law. There are 323 months left until

we reach net zero by 2050. The net zero clock is ticking. This year alone, that window is vanishing in front of our eyes. To borrow the analogy used by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), the bus is already at the stop and is about to depart, and we have to decide now whether we want to get on it or leave it behind. We need to look at this change this year and move as soon as possible.

When John F. Kennedy introduced the moon landing mission in 1962, he said that we do these things “not because they are easy, but because they are hard”.

It will be hard to get to net zero, but let us all work together across parties to recognise the scale of the challenge. This challenge must reflect the whole of society. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, we must not leave any community behind. When it comes to net zero, we should not impose this on communities, but work with them and the wealth of views and opinions on how we can deliver on decarbonisation for the future. I hope that this report is not just the beginning but is a blueprint for a new Department on how it needs to move forward as soon as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Net Zero.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for granting this point of order. I would welcome your advice. I wrote in both December and January to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to press him on the status and costs of the Rosalind Franklin laboratory, otherwise known as the mega-lab, in my constituency. Three weeks ago, it was announced that it would be closing, with a loss of 670 highly-skilled jobs, with four weeks' notice. I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), two weeks ago, and she told me to write to the UK Health Security Agency. I am not sure what I should do now, but surely the responsible Department should reply to me directly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Mr Speaker has made it clear that he believes any parliamentary written question should have a timely response. I am sure those on the Treasury Bench have heard the request and will pass on the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and our concerns, that he has not yet had a proper response from the Department.

## Parliamentary Services for MPs

[*Relevant document: First Report of the Administration Committee, Smoothing the cliff edge: supporting MPs at their point of departure from elected office, HC 209.*]

2.30 pm

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Parliamentary services for Members.

Before I get to the substance of my speech, it is worth referring to the Administration Committee's meeting earlier this week with officers of the parliamentary contributory pension fund—we regularly meet the House's excellent Officers. The fund's documentation is almost impenetrable to normal human beings. It is 284 pages long, and those who started reading it 10 years ago are about halfway through. The officers tried their best, but the upshot of our informative meeting was a joint letter from the chairmen of the 1922 committee and the parliamentary Labour party asking the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for greater clarity on the technicalities of the McCloud judgment. That is how the Administration Committee makes progress on a weekly basis.

We are debating House services, and I will focus most of my remarks on the Administration Committee's report, published yesterday, "Smoothing the cliff edge: supporting MPs at their point of departure from elected office." Before I move into the substance of the report, it is important that I thank the Clerks who wrote the report and gathered the evidence. I have been a Select Committee Chair for 10 years, and it is remarkable that, wherever I go, I am always given the best Clerks. I said to my wife, "What is it about me that means I always get the best Clerks in the House of Commons?" And she said, "It's because you require close management." I am not sure that is entirely what I wanted to hear, but I have wonderful Clerks. All Clerks in this House serve us brilliantly, day in and day out.

I am alive to the public and media cry that we need better MPs. We have heard the cry in its various guises: "We need better MPs," "All MPs are rubbish" and so on. When I was in business before coming to the House, I always welcomed conversations with colleagues who said, "We need to make this company more profitable." That was not the end of the conversation but the beginning: "Okay, so we need to make the business more profitable. How will we do it?" If people genuinely want better MPs, that is the start of the conversation and we need to ask ourselves how we will do it. That is what the Administration Committee—we have members of the Committee in the Chamber today—set its mind to doing when we embarked on this report. The Committee started taking evidence about four months ago.

Most members of the Administration Committee have a business background, which is a hugely valuable resource. We learned and appreciated that Parliament is in a war for talent, and it is an employer like any other. If we want to attract some of the best and brightest 30 and 40-year-olds from their successful careers, we need to compete with business, academia, science, the arts, healthcare and education. All these wonderful careers are now not just nationally focused but internationally focused. These talented young people are working on not only a national stage but an international

stage. We need to convince them that a vocation in Parliament is worth undertaking. That is now very difficult because, increasingly, a vocation in Parliament is linked to career jeopardy.

I speak to young people on both sides of the political divide—Labour and Conservative, and Scottish National party when I am up in Scotland—and they say, "That's all very well, Charles, but we love what we do. We love to discuss politics and think about politics, but you would be mad to think that we will step out of our career to take part in politics." I hear that too often.

As we move towards the 100-hours-a-week MP, where we expect Members of Parliament to focus every waking hour solely on their constituency, the gap between the career they have left, their vocation in Parliament and their future career—the difficulty of accessing and reintegrating with a career—becomes wider and wider. That is what we start to address in our report.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I spoke to you earlier while you were in the Chair. Every single Member is prepared to make sacrifices to serve their constituents. Some of those sacrifices are very large, and some of them are far too large. I look across at the shields on the Opposition side of the Chamber, which I know will soon be joined by another shield on the Government side of the Chamber.

We address that career cliff edge in this report. Wherever people come to Parliament from—Scotland, Wales or England; Labour or Conservative—they serve their constituents with diligence and with every ounce of energy, but there is a career cliff edge when they leave this place. Employers say, "It is all very well that you've been a Member of Parliament, but what skills do you have? What can you bring to our company? You are all very remote, aren't you? That's what we read in the newspapers." We need to address that, because we want people who serve here to be able to take their amazing skills—I will address the skills that people secure in this place—to future employers.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): It has been a great pleasure to serve on my hon. Friend's Committee. Does he agree that, for Members of Parliament, there is a difference between working here and working in a company? Generally, one leaves a company either because one has not performed well and is sacked or because one chooses to make a different career choice. Many people leave this place not because they have behaved improperly or because they did not do the work well, but because the general tide of national politics sees them go. We saw that in 2019, when many good Labour MPs lost their seats. That was not a reflection on them, just a reflection of the national tide. Is that not why we have a duty of care to these people?

**Sir Charles Walker:** My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point that gets to the crux of the report. I was going to say that he encapsulates the report in a short sentence, but it was a brief intervention of more like three sentences. I will address his points more directly in a moment.

We did not just sit down and write this report. I did not grab a pen, drag my colleagues into a room and say, "Let's just write a report. Let's put down on paper the first thing that pops into our heads." No, we went out and consulted academics, leading headhunters, outplacement specialists, retired senior Army officers and senior officials from Sport England. We went out

[*Sir Charles Walker*]

and talked to people who know how to transition people from one all-encompassing vocation or career to another, and they all said that the way an institution treats people at their point of departure impacts that institution's ability to recruit bright and talented people. That is because people watch this place closely now—30, 40 and 50-year-olds watch closely—and they know what is going on here. We also took evidence from former colleagues, who, as my hon. Friend said, largely lost their seats through no fault of their own.

Although we have a wonderful parliamentary democracy in so many ways, it does not score highly when it comes to the way it treats departing Members, so the Committee came up with a number of key recommendations, and I will go through them briefly—our report is actually brilliantly short, and while many Select Committee reports are 200 pages, ours is a little more than 50.

First, Members of Parliament should be preparing to leave this place from the day they arrive. That is a really difficult thing to get your head around. When I was elected in Broxbourne and handed the envelope that the winning candidate gets, I went white with fear, but never once did it occur to me that I would ever leave this place. Now I have announced that I am going, and I am preparing for my departure, but I wish I had thought about it a little harder over the past 17 years.

I am lucky, because I am leaving voluntarily, from what is notionally a safe seat, although if we read Electoral Calculus at the moment, that may not be the case. The average tenure of a Member of Parliament is nine years, but this is an uncertain career and vocation. However, even if a Member of Parliament serves for just one Session—for two, three, four or five years—they build up a huge skillset: mediating, negotiating, communicating and dispute resolution, to name just four. The Committee's report suggests that those skills are not just captured but accredited by top-flight universities—in a sense, they are micro-qualifications. In this busy and complicated world, those are just the types of skills that industry needs. Members of Parliament are brilliant at juggling a whole range of complex issues and seeing a way through quickly. I am talking not just about those at ministerial level, but about what we do day in, day out with competing interests in our constituencies. So there is the issue of micro-accreditation and micro-qualifications.

Secondly, Members of Parliament must have access to ongoing career advice while they are here, and to outplacement services before, during and after their point of departure. That is absolutely critical. When I say “point of departure”, I do not mean the ballot box—I do not mean just those MPs who lose at the ballot box in a general election. I mean that all Members of Parliament need access to good, ongoing career advice and outplacement services. Again, the Committee did not make that up; it is what all the expert witnesses told us. They said, “You need to support people out of one workplace into another.”

Thirdly—there is no way of dodging this for an easy life, and I do not want an easy life—there should be better financial support for those leaving Parliament. Winding up a parliamentary office with tens of thousands of bits of casework does not take a couple of months; it can take many months. The way we financially support leaving Members is, again, an area where we score really

badly. We score really badly against the Scottish Parliament. We score really badly against the Senedd in Wales. We score badly against almost every major, mature western democracy.

Let me put this into perspective. Since I announced I was leaving, I have had—possibly this is a slightly made-up number, because I have not kept a close record—511 conversations with people who know that I am leaving. Two of those were extremely positive: “Oh my word, Charles, you're leaving. You're going to be a huge success at whatever you do.” The other 509 have been, “Oh my word, what the hell are you going to do when you leave? What can you do?” It will be no surprise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, because you know these two people, that the two positive conversations were with my mother and my wife. The other 509 were with people who are quite worried for my future welfare. It is that difficult. I am smiling, but I am making a serious point.

Although I cannot prove this, I suspect that some, although by no means all, long-serving Members of Parliament would love to leave, but are frightened and put off leaving because of the financial uncertainty—the financial cliff edge—and the career cliff edge they will face if they do go. With perhaps six months' resettlement grant and some outplacement advice and career advice, we could actually free up seats, which would be to the benefit of those who want to leave and certainly to the benefit of their constituents.

The Committee's fourth key recommendation—it makes me extremely sad that we had to make it—is to do with the security of Members of Parliament. In most cases, when you leave this place the personal risk to you—I mean you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as well as me and all colleagues in this place—diminishes very quickly. However, for some it does not. In the past, as soon as someone ceased to be a Member of Parliament, responsibility for their security was handed to his or her local police force. That is not ideal. We took some powerful evidence in private from Members of Parliament and ex-Members of Parliament who faced an ongoing and real risk. I was really pleased that we had the head of House security before us, and we are definitely going to do something on this issue—and we need to.

Fifthly and finally—there are more recommendations after five, but this is the final one in my speech—we need to give MPs better advice throughout each Parliament about Dissolution, winding up their offices, the expectations placed on them, the expectations they can place on the House, and the support services they will be able to access. All those things need to be thought about. I know we do not like to think about leaving, but we must have the opportunity to think about it and to understand what is expected of us and what we can expect of the House. Provision for that needs to be updated on a six-month basis and regularly notified to not just Members of Parliament but their office managers.

I want to touch on something briefly. There was a sentence in the report—I think the shadow Leader of the House knows where I am going with this, because I can see her smiling—suggesting that Members of Parliament should receive a medallion from the Speaker in recognition of their service to democracy. This has been positioned as a medal of the type that changes one's name or means one gets letters after one's name, but that is not what we are suggesting; this is about



workplace recognition. A decade ago, I was awarded the president's medal by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. It gives me no standing anywhere, and it does not mean that I get to the front of the queue anywhere. It gives me huge personal pleasure and satisfaction to know that the royal college recognised my contribution to mental health, and I may just wear it if I am invited to one of its events. That is what I meant, and what the report and my colleagues on the Committee meant, about a medallion of service. It is something that we could be presented with by the Speaker, and that would mean something to us.

**Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend for such a powerful speech. He is reminding me of the medallions that my councillors wear—perhaps former mayors, aldermen or people who have served with distinction—and surely what he is talking about is similar to that. Many hundreds or thousands of people have those sorts of medallions.

**Sir Charles Walker:** That is exactly what I am talking about. It is a nice and kind thing to do, and there is nothing wrong with being nice and kind. Workplace recognition is a good thing. I received a lovely pen when I left my first substantive job. I received a lovely decanter from the 1922 committee to mark my 11 years of service to it. Is it going to change my life? It is not going to change my life at all. Is it something that I will enjoy and that, I hope, my family and children will enjoy? Yes, it is. I just wanted to put that into context.

Treating people well is important, and it will encourage good people to run for office. As I have said, I entirely concur with the idea that we need better Members of Parliament. I suppose I should not be surprised that, when the Committee and my wonderful colleagues on it went away and thought about how we could do that, they got criticised for having done it, but the people criticising them are the very ones saying that we need better Members of Parliament. Excellence in this place should be the norm, not the outlier.

I will conclude by saying this—

**Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** Before my hon. Friend concludes, may I just put it on the record that I would like to think on both sides of the House there could be no better Member of Parliament than he has proved to be during his time here?

**Sir Charles Walker:** I absolutely thank my right hon. Friend for that. He and I have been friends since I got here, and that means a huge amount to me. I thank him.

This is what I want to conclude with. We will never in this place struggle to attract the shrill, the loud and the raucous. We will always be inundated with the practitioners of the clear thinking of the totally uninformed. That is what makes this Parliament so wonderful. There are those who believe there are simple solutions to complex problems. If there were, we would have found them, Mr Deputy Speaker. I promise you that we would have found them. There is always space for that, and at times I have been one of the raucous, the loud, the shrill and the emotional—I celebrate that. But we also need the thoughtful, the considered and the intellectually inquiring. Their numbers really are thinning, and we in this place have a duty to reach out to them.

We have a duty—not just to ourselves, but to future generations of Members of Parliament—to make this place the greatest Chamber with the greatest vocation someone can pursue in this country. A President came yesterday, welcomed by literally thousands of people, and he referred to our Parliament as the greatest in the world. I take great comfort from that, and I want to prove him right day in and day out.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Before I call Dame Maria Miller, may I too put something on the record? Many of you will not know this, but when I was a rookie Member of Parliament, I employed a young Charles Walker as my researcher. I knew then that he was a bright lad, and I was thrilled when he became a Member of Parliament. He has been an outstanding Chair of the Administration Committee. I salute your bravery, Charles, in the way you have promoted mental health issues at a time when it was a taboo. You have been remarkable. I am so proud of you.

2.53 pm

**Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** On my very first day in Parliament, I decided to sit next to this blond-haired man whom I had never met before in my life. He stood up, and I will not repeat what he said to the assembled masses because it would embarrass him, but my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) was entertaining, informed and, above all, principled right from the start. He has been a great colleague for the last 17 years, and we will miss him.

It is therefore a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend, who has clearly set out how parliamentary services must change to help our democracy, and particularly to recruit the brightest and the best to Parliament. I would like to take that one stage further and talk about how we can broaden the debate to consider how parliamentary services must work even harder to ensure that this place functions in a way that can protect our democracy into the future. We have already mentioned that amazing visit yesterday from Volodymyr Zelensky, who is fighting for democratic freedoms for his nation, and the way that he talked so affectionately about our own Parliament. It made me feel, even more than ever, that we cannot take these things for granted, even in western Europe. That is why I am so grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to the staff of the Administration Committee for all the work they do in helping us with the running of this House.

I also pay tribute to those who sit in the Chair you sit in, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is easy in this place to come in, be important and talk about important things that happen to our constituents and to the nation, but very few people take the time to think about how this place runs, and how they can play their part in making it better. Too few come forward to sit in that Chair and do the sorts of things that you do, Mr Deputy Speaker, and that your colleagues do in the Speaker's Office. It is important that we acknowledge that. It is always behind the scenes, but it is what makes one of the most important and central institutions of our democracy work. Probably the people sitting in front of you also have a bit of a role in that, but we won't go there.

The last two Speakers of this House were appointed at times of crisis, which is an interesting thing to reflect on. Our current Speaker—I will not refer to the previous

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

one—was recruited to the role in the midst of a behavioural and cultural crisis in this place. I think that our Mr Speaker's focus on security, culture and behaviour change has been exemplary, and led to a rapid change in a way that many people would not have foreseen. We also saw the way that the Speaker and staff rapidly changed the way our Parliament worked during the coronavirus pandemic, and the way that Mr Speaker has changed attitudes towards the security of Members of Parliament. We know that individuals in the Chair you are sitting in, Mr Deputy Speaker, can change the way this place works, but I suggest that we cannot rely on individuals alone, not least because we have had some recent Speakers who have not been entirely unflawed characters. We have to think about the governance of the institution, and the way it creates the right framework for the running of this important place.

The services provided by Parliament are crucial to MPs being effective. We are elected to come here, to scrutinise, and to get things done for the people we represent. We do that with the support of the House of Commons; we cannot do it ourselves. There is an army of literally thousands of people, from cleaners to Clerks, police to chefs, and subject experts in the Library to dedicated constituency staff, who are all there to help us be effective. Being effective MPs requires the right services to be in place—not just the same services that were there 40 years ago, but the right services for today. Even the most time-poor manager of a small business ensures that they have the right services in place for their business, and that is why this debate is important.

It is important that we discuss these things to explore whether parliamentary services are delivering in a way that helps MPs to be effective, and delivering for the way that we need Parliament to run. Effective MPs are not just a good thing in their own right; effective MPs help to build trust in the House of Commons; they help to build trust in Parliament and so they help to build trust in democracy. It could not be more important, particularly for those who believe that we have a responsibility to strengthen democracy in our time here.

Let us also remember that the staff of this place, whether they are extremely specialised, highly intellectual people drafting bits of legislation, the people who keep us safe as we enter this place or the people who service our meals when we are here late into the night, choose to be here. They choose to be in Parliament, not because it is just another place to work but because they want to be part of the democratic function of this country—what makes it so special.

Like much of Parliament, the provision of services is organised through Committees, predominately the Administration Committee, which my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne chairs incredibly well. Unlike other Committees, these are House Committees and, for the most part, they are advisory. When members of the Committee, including a number of Members present, raise issues around how this place is run or that they would like to see done differently, such as the quality of the wi-fi, the availability of mobile phone chargers in the Tea Room, as I was reminded a few minutes ago, or concerns about the perimeter security, these concerns can be voiced and they will be heard. However, we have absolutely no power whatsoever to get any action taken.

We only usually get action taken because of the vivacious character of our Chair. That cannot be enough; things need to be more structured than that. Only the Commission has oversight of all these issues and can take action—a Commission, I remind everybody, that has no process to elect its members.

When it comes to planning ahead and the issues that the administration might want to consider because there are problems on the horizon, we have no ability to do that effectively either. The Administration Committee is strictly limited in what it can do. Of course, when it comes to the provision of services, the Procedure Committee and our Finance Committee are also crucial, but there is no structure in place for these Committees to work together. For example, if we have something like the uncertainty of sitting hours, which can go late into the night, there is no way of viewing how that might affect members of staff who are employed to run the services in this place.

The Leader of the House has been clear in her vision, such as in her recent speech to the Institute for Government, that the House of Commons should be the best legislature in the world. I could not agree more with her sentiment, but to achieve that not just noble but essential ambition, our parliamentary services also need to be the best in the world. They need to fit into that vision of a modern workplace, with modern procedures, adequate finance and accountability, and an ability to plan for the future and to respond to events. We have made huge strides under Mr Speaker's leadership, but I am concerned that our governance and structures have changed very little, that they are not as good as they should be and that we need to look at them more. Indeed, some experts would say that the governance of the House of Commons is opaque, lacks accountability and is complex to understand. Those are not the attributes of an organisation that I would like to work for. To make provision for parliamentary services for MPs to be their most effective, Parliament needs to look at these things in detail. It needs to look at the governance and structures of how we can be a trusted institution into the future that reflects an organisation not of yesterday, but of tomorrow.

There are some notable examples, of which I am sure other Members will be aware, of where the inability to change things and evolve the way we work have received the full glare of publicity. Not least of them is the recent example of where we tried to set up a nursery in this place, which took three debates, two papers and a lot of behind-the-scenes work. Some of the hon. and right hon. Members involved have been in this place even longer than I have, and they still could not work out how we could effect that change. That is a salutary lesson; it shows that we cannot evolve services to meet the needs of Members. The result will be that we cannot attract the right Members to this place. We cannot then expect this place to be the world-class legislature that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House would like it to be.

How do we make sure that parliamentary services are effective, and are what our MPs, and our democracy, really need? Some straightforward changes could easily be made that would make a real difference. It would be quite a revolution if we ensured that House Committees could work together and take a common look at how this place is run. We should evolve their role from a "take note" or advisory role, to a strategic one of the sort that Select Committees perhaps already have, so

that they do not merely rubber-stamp decisions after the event, which, as colleagues on the Administration Committee will remember, was what happened in the case of the removal of the trees in the atrium of Portcullis House.

We should make the House Committees, which are fundamental to how the place runs, accountable through elections. They are the last area of Parliament in which Members are not elected to posts. We are appointed to our posts, and that simply does not pass the sniff test. We need to change that; the way that people gain positions on those Committees should be similar to the way that Select Committee members gain theirs. That would increase accountability. Our meetings are already transparent, but let us look at ways of opening them up even more, if they are so fundamental to democracy.

Scrutiny of the House of Commons Commission should be firmly in the remit of the House Committees. Just as Select Committees scrutinise Government, House Committees should scrutinise the Commission. That would be a very simple change of our role, but it might increase transparency about how the Commission runs, so that more Members can understand it, and can understand how decisions are taken. For too long it has felt as though the House of Commons is run from behind closed doors. Perhaps it is easier that way; that is what I have been told when I have asked why that is. There are concerns that scrutiny will undermine trust in this organisation. My argument is that a lack of scrutiny has already done that job for us, so let us have that change.

We cannot continue to rely on individuals, rather than governance, structures and systems, to ensure that this place is run well. I am told that it is Members who decide, when it comes to the running of this House, but I am afraid that those are hollow words to me when I think back to the debacle over the establishment of a nursery in this place. “It is for Members to decide!” No, it really was not, because there was no way for us to crystallise the decision and ensure action.

As a result of this debate, I hope that people not just in this Chamber, or listening in Parliament, but from outside start to call loudly for the changes that I have outlined. It has taken a year to get this debate, so I can already feel that this is not necessarily a debate that people in this place want to have. The issue is important because we need to support MPs, so that they can be their most effective. We need this to be a modern workplace, where both MPs and their staff can function at their best. We must attract a diverse cross-section of society to stand for election. We will not do that unless this place works better, and we have to start taking that far more seriously.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you, Maria, for your very generous and kind words. I will make sure that Sir Lindsay hears them. Those thanks are on behalf of Sir Lindsay, his entire team, and the Clerks. Thank you very much for your generosity.

3.9 pm

**Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** I was fascinated by the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) about the transparency of this organisation, because in many ways it is not transparent. I rather suspect that she has been waiting a long time for the opportunity to say all those things. I am not sure that I agree with all of them, but her point

that this place must have transparency was very clear. All of us on the Administration Committee feel frustration at times with the fact that when we do not agree with something, we let it be known, and the Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), lets it be known, but then it happens anyway. That sometimes causes members of the Committee, and members of the Finance Committee, to think, “Why are we even serving on the Committee?” But you know what, Mr Deputy Speaker, that does not actually have anything to do with the report. The report, which the Chairman spoke about in so much detail, is entitled: “Smoothing the cliff edge: supporting MPs at their point of departure from elected office”.

A lot of praise has been heaped, quite rightly, on all the people who work here. At the risk of being accused of gross sycophancy, I am going to mention the Whips on both sides of the House. I think people outside this place think that all the Whips do is impose discipline, but that is not the case. What they do is partly HR with attitude, as a former Whip once put it. They are also, talking about my former career, the floor managers of this place. If it were not for the Whips—I am looking at Labour, Conservative and SNP Whips—people would not turn up on time and debates would not finish on time. Mr Speaker and Mr Deputy Speaker might try to arrange that, but they are in the Chair. It is the Whips who go scurrying around, making phone calls and sending messages to ensure that Ministers and shadow Ministers are there on time for the work to be done. I am only singling them out because they were not mentioned in all those marvellous comments that my hon. Friend—he should be right honourable—spoke about.

This is an odd place. We want to get people of the finest ability to work here and there are many different types of people who come here. My hon. Friend talks about the loud and the raucous. Occasionally, it is rather nice to be loud and raucous in this place. When I first became an MP—I joined at the same time as you, Mr Deputy Speaker—I remember standing up in the Chamber and giving one or two earnest speeches and asking one or two earnest questions. A marvellous former Member of Parliament in the Press Gallery, Matthew Parris, then a sketch writer for *The Times*, said, “Michael, why are you like this in the Chamber? You must never forget that this place is theatre. Be theatrical, make your points. Be yourself.” And since I have done that, I have never been promoted! [*Laughter.*] No, no, I have. It is important that people should be themselves, but we have to be able to attract them in the first place.

**Sir Charles Walker:** My hon. Friend is raucous and wonderful, but he also does himself a great disservice. He is an expert in technology and has a background in radio. The Committee works so much better for having someone who knows not just how to plug in a PC, but how turn it on.

**Michael Fabricant:** This is turning into a mutual admiration society, but what is wrong with that occasionally, Mr Deputy Speaker? It is all about friendship, too. That is important in this place.

It is true, and I raised this point with my hon. Friend when he gave his excellent and passionate speech, that we have a duty of care to one another generally in society—there is such a thing as society—and we have a

[Michael Fabricant]

duty of care to Members of Parliament. I was there, I think, for all the evidence sessions—correct me if I am wrong—but reading the report again, drawn up by excellent Clerks, one becomes aware of how distraught and empty people are when they leave here in an involuntary way. Sometimes people leave voluntarily, as my hon. Friend is doing, as in any other organisation. Sometimes they leave because they have performed so badly here that the electorate decide to get rid of them. But more often than not they leave simply because of a national swing which is no fault of the individual Member of Parliament.

There is a rather lovely quote in the report:

“For some Members, coming to terms with their departure, whether through choice or not, could be similar to the grieving process. Dame Jane Roberts told us how ‘That loss...is akin to grief. That is true about all work but...leaving Parliament involves an intensity of emotion that does not often apply to other jobs’. She noted in her research how the majority of those that she had interviewed ‘had grieved the loss of political office in some way, often intensely. In adjusting to a very different life, most had experienced a sense of dislocation. They had initially struggled to find a new narrative about who they were and what they did, and a number had struggled to find employment.’”

It is not that these people are unemployable, as I sometimes say, or that they came here only because they could not get a job anywhere else; it is that if they have dedicated their life to a political ideal or to helping others, they will be emotionally invested in this place. Because of that investment, the movement away—the wrench—is as extreme as a torn muscle or worse, or the bereavement of losing a close relative.

Nick de Bois, a former Member of Parliament, told us:

“Sensitivity is lacking in the whole process.”

We heard evidence of people turning up and being told that they had to clear their office within two weeks. We know why—they have been replaced, and the House authorities have to decide how to deal with the House’s property—but when someone loses their seat after being here for many years, being expected to clear their office is a huge burden when they are grieving over the loss of a lifestyle.

What about staff? We heard evidence from staff who were completely at a loss as to whether they would be able to get a job with another MP. Colleagues already know all this, but it is worth saying. You never know: somebody might read *Hansard*. Many years ago, a former Chief Whip—a great friend of mine who is now in another place, with whom I had dinner last night, as it happens—said to me, absolutely rightly, “Michael, if you want to keep a secret, say it in a speech in this place and it’ll still be a secret.”

Assuming that somebody will actually read this speech, however, let me say in case people do not realise it that it is Members of Parliament who choose their staff. Members’ staff are imbued with huge trust: trust that they will keep constituents’ secrets and trust in how they help Members. What if there is a big change? In 2019, there were staff who had worked really hard for Labour Members, and it would have been difficult for them to get a job with a Conservative MP. We have a duty of care to them, as well as to Members of Parliament.

One Member said:

“You come out of an election when you are losing the thing that you have given your life to, for however many years. I have taken that as an experience of how I would not want to treat my

employees today. It was an experience of what not to do rather than what to do. You immediately had your pass removed. You had to be escorted everywhere, whether it is around that centre or around the building. At moments, it felt like you were a criminal.”

Nick de Bois said that there is

“a huge gap that...the party needs to address”.

I think it is a gap that the House of Commons needs to address. He also said that

“you are cut off overnight. Your phone stops ringing pretty quickly”—

actually, to me that would be a relief. He went on to say:

“Friends are there, but there is not the support that some colleagues need.”

**Dame Maria Miller:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the impact on departing Members. Does he share my concern that that impact, which he is describing so eloquently, may also be a massive disincentive for right-minded people to stand for election? As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) has been saying, we need to attract the brightest and the best to this place, but such people generally do not want to set themselves up to fail, or to be in an environment where they may end up being treated in not the most respectful way.

**Michael Fabricant:** I agree with my right hon. Friend, up to a point. I would argue that the problem is not one of people coming to this place, because they came to this place knowing that it was a risk. You do not become a Member of Parliament thinking you are here as of right. What concerns me more is that people who come here should think that they will be treated decently and that their staff will be treated decently, and that means being treated with kindness and compassion.

That brings me back to something that impressed me hugely. The duty of care is a great principle in English law: “Neither through action nor through inaction should someone cause someone else to be damaged.” We heard about it from members of the armed forces who gave evidence to the Committee.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con) *rose*—

**Michael Fabricant:** My hon. and gallant Friend wishes to intervene, and I will let him do so in a moment.

Those members of the armed forces talked about the continuing treatment that people who join the forces are given right from the very beginning. The Chairman of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, also talked about that in his excellent speech. It is the sort of treatment that we should be giving MPs, and perhaps their staff as well—again, right from the very beginning. We should be giving them knowledge that they can use when they eventually leave, and we all leave at some point. What was it that Enoch Powell said? I am looking at my friends on the Front Bench now! “All political careers end in failure.” It may not be true, but I think it probably is: “failure” in the sense that one leaves a ministerial career eventually.

**James Sunderland:** I commend my hon. Friend for his outstanding and thought-provoking speech. As Members will know, I served for a long time in Her Majesty’s forces—in the Army—and then left at very short notice to become an MP.

I will be honest: at times I have grappled with comparisons between the two organisations in which I have served. I think that Members do sometimes behave badly here—perhaps there is a lack of team spirit, perhaps people are uncompromising, perhaps people do not behave in the right way—but I am absolutely convinced of the sanctity of what politicians do, and I am also clear in my mind that the vast majority of Members on both sides of the House behave impeccably, are here for the right reasons and always operate in good faith. So my question to my hon. Friend is this: how do we convince people more broadly that politicians are a force for good? How do we convince them that we are here doing a very important job, that we work very hard, and that, actually, our intent, most of the time, is pure and honourable?

**Michael Fabricant:** I have an answer to that question, deep as it was. Stop watching Prime Minister's Question Time; instead, watch [parliamentlive.tv](http://parliamentlive.tv), and see the work that goes on in Committees and in debates like this, among others. Often there is huge consensus and co-operation between the parties on either side of the House.

The other day, I was present when some legislation was going through Parliament. The Liberal Democrats had tabled an amendment, and it was not a bad amendment, and we accepted it. I was rather amused, I have to say, that the Liberal Democrats looked more shocked than we were. They all started waving their Order Papers as if it were a victory—but the victory was that they had come up with a good idea and the Government had said, “Yes, it is a good idea. We will incorporate it in law.” And they did. That is the sort of thing that people need to see: that Parliament is a thoughtful place, and that on the whole, as my hon. Friend has just said, we strive to work together, and we strive to do what is best for the British people, and indeed for others, too, outside the United Kingdom, whether it be in war-torn Ukraine or in developing countries elsewhere in the world.

Nevertheless, the House has a duty of care to ensure that Members of Parliament can do their job as best they can by restructuring the existing systems, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke so marvellously explained, and by attracting people here by showing care for the time when they will eventually leave this place. The *Daily Mail*, and one or two other newspapers and one or two broadcasters were saying, “This report says we should be giving hundreds of thousands of pounds to Members of Parliament when they leave.” No, the report does not say that. But redundancy rules do exist for ordinary companies and for those who work in the civil service. For all the reasons I have explained, our job is far more volatile than those careers, because we can lose our job for reasons that have nothing to do with our own ability, or lack thereof.

Our redundancy payments should be the same as those in other sectors. Is that unreasonable? The press might say so; I would say it is just natural justice, and that is all the report asks for. I hope that people will read it and that the House of Commons Commission—we do not know what exactly it gets up to—reads it. I hope that Mr Speaker, who is very imaginative and for whom I have the highest respect, reads it. More importantly, though, I hope that something is done about it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We come now to the Front-Bench contributions, starting with Deidre Brock.

3.26 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) and the rest of the Administration Committee on securing this debate. It really is important that Members have an opportunity to reflect on how we can best ensure that the House's services and facilities are equipped to help us carry out our roles as representatives of our constituents and as legislators. My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who is a member of the Administration Committee, is very sorry that she is unable to be here today herself.

Some might wonder why an SNP Member is concerned about the running of this Parliament, when one considers the fact that our dearest wish is to be away from it as soon as we possibly can be. However, we have to serve our constituents to the very best of our abilities, and we of course want to see addressed anything that might constrain that or reduce that impact.

**Michael Fabricant:** The hon. Lady mentioned her colleague who could not be here; the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) is a superb example of what my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) asked about. She provides huge amounts of information and ideas to the Administration Committee. Regardless of whether she is SNP, Labour, Conservative or whatever, we all love her and wish she could be here today. That shows the degree of constructive co-operation that goes on among the parties in this place.

**Deidre Brock:** Well, I will certainly make sure that my hon. Friend hears that comment. I know she will be pleased that her efforts are appreciated. She is a very effective parliamentarian, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and would always be intent on making sure that services run as effectively as possible. I am sure she appreciates the admiration expressed by the hon. Gentleman and, I am sure, by other Committee members as well.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne spoke of the importance of holding this conversation about improving not just House services, but the quality of representation and, indeed, representatives for our constituents. He made the fair point that this place needs to be aware of the competition it faces from so many other sectors in today's world. He spoke about the uncertainty of this role and the fact that that can prove unattractive, as well as about the skills needed for the role, from spinning lots of plates to diplomatic skills—for most of us, anyway. He also touched on security, which I agree is a vital issue, particularly in the light of the dreadful circumstances of the deaths of two Members of this House in recent years.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne mentioned the provision of better advice for Members. The information available to Members on how this place works has improved vastly, even since I was elected in 2015. I thank all the House staff for their long and hard work on that. I spent some time being interviewed by them and passing on my thoughts, and I know that many other Members have done so as well. I know that the staff are looking to make even further improvements to that information. The workings of this place can be really quite impenetrable at times, so the information is a really big help to anyone coming here for the first time, and I am pleased to see that that work will continue.

[Deidre Brock]

I agree with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) about the need for more transparency around the decisions of the House's Committees, including the suggestion that Members should be elected to posts. It will be interesting to see how that conversation develops and how that might actually work, especially when it comes to ensuring that we get sufficient numbers of Members interested in taking on those roles. As I know from the work of the Administration Committee, there is quite a lot of work involved. We need only look at the work in the report, and the reports from previous Committees, to see what is involved. She also talked about the need for greater scrutiny of the House of Commons Commission to increase insight into what happens behind closed doors.

I am on the Commission myself and wish to pay tribute to Mr Speaker and his team for the focus that they bring to the work. I know that he is intent on further professionalising the Commission and the work that it does, which is really starting to pay off—certainly from what I have seen in the short time that I have been on the Commission—especially on things such as the recent report from Lord Morse, the recommendations of which were accepted by the Commission.

**Dame Maria Miller:** I thank the hon. Member for referring to the comments that I made. May I draw her a little further on the role that House Committees could have in scrutinising the work of the Commission? Is that something that she feels that she might support?

**Deidre Brock:** I have only just heard about that from the right hon. Lady. Certainly I am sure the Commission would be prepared to consider it. We have a meeting coming up fairly shortly, so we might be able to put that into “any other business”.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) mentioned the duty of care to our teams. That is so important, because when a Member loses their seat for whatever reason, they are left scrambling to find work. I am really pleased that this has been raised. We all know how vital those members of staff are to our work, and how trusted and valued they are, and they deserve nothing less than the best that we can do for them.

I thank colleagues and predecessors on the House of Commons Commission who last year agreed the next House of Commons service strategy for the period 2023 to 2027, which, of course, we will continue to monitor. I have been in this position for only a relatively short period of time. I was a councillor in Edinburgh Council for some years. That is a large public body in itself, but sitting on the House of Commons Commission and seeing the work entailed in keeping this particular parliamentary duck swimming along, even while underneath the waterline we know the feet are pedalling furiously, has still been something of an eye-opener. I have been so impressed by the dedication of those who report to, or work for, the Commission. I must mention in particular Clerks Gosia McBride and Ed Potton, who have been immensely helpful in interpreting some of the more obscure points made in some of the papers put before us.

I wish to commend all the staff of both Houses and the Commission—from Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and their offices to In-House Services—who, across so

many different areas, do an absolutely exceptional job of keeping this place running smoothly, very often in trying circumstances. That was especially evident during the pandemic, but also evident in the events around the late Queen's passing and in the sudden efforts required for President Zelensky's very successful visit yesterday.

I must also pay tribute to Sir John Benger, who has just announced that he will end his tenure as Clerk of the House in the autumn after four years, although after many years in total in this place. On behalf of the SNP, I wish him all the very best in his new role. However, his departure raises concerns about possible costly delays to the restoration and renewal programme as a result, so I look forward to hearing of a suitable replacement as soon as possible.

I gathered some views from colleagues and staff members before I prepared for this speech. One point raised with me, which I am sure is of paramount importance, is that Members be given assurances that the R and R project will take full account of the potential impact on the health and safety of staff. This is an iconic and historic building, a world heritage site, but we know it is decaying in key areas and often falls short of what is required in a modern workplace.

Wi-fi infrastructure can be unreliable—although I have nothing but high praise for those in the Parliamentary Digital Service, who are always remarkably responsive and incredibly patient with those of us who are not completely IT literate—many of the windows are single-glazed and do not open or close, which we know adds up to a giant carbon footprint, the lifts often break down and there are problems with the heating, to give just a few examples raised with me. We are told and we hope that the issues will be resolved once R and R is complete, but the urgency of addressing them should be emphasised on behalf of the many staff who spent so much of their lives here.

I also need to pass on views received from staff members that less maintenance and procurement work in the building should be contracted out. One member of staff I spoke to felt that, for example, electrical and plumbing services were not carried out quite as well or as cost-effectively as they might have been with more oversight from the House, and others have spoken to me with exasperation of overly complicated procurement systems.

Another issue raised with me, which is certainly dear to the heart of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, is accessibility. Some hon. Members have highlighted the problems of too few adapted offices for disabled folk. Due to the present system of allocating offices after an election, suitable rooms are often not available for those who really need them—and it is worth bearing in mind that anyone can become disabled at any time. I ask what the House can do to ensure adaptable offices can be kept in reserve for Members and staff who have or develop disabilities.

**Dame Maria Miller:** I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady again; she is being gracious in giving way. She referred to issues some people with a disability have in getting into this building, a concern I share with her, which highlights the issue we have with a lack of read-across between the House's Committees. The Procedure Committee considered whether we should have the ability to participate in proceedings in this place remotely.

All those opportunities were cut as a result of a recommendation from that Committee, but it strikes me that if one of our number were to become unable to enter this building because of a disability, or had a member of staff or constituent who wished to visit, they would not be able to participate at all, simply because the Procedure Committee, for another set of reasons, had decided to stop all remote participation. It feels to me that we need more read-across between the House Committees, so that we are not making decisions in isolation.

**Deidre Brock:** I agree, and I am about to go on to make that very point. I know that proxy voting has been improved recently, and I really welcome that as an important development, but there are other ways we should look to adapt and modernise this place, particularly as a workplace. For example, we know that in summer 2021 the Commons Executive Board agreed that, as an employer, the House and Parliamentary Digital Service would positively promote flexible and remote working. I also note that in the Leader of the House's speech to the Institute for Government last month, she acknowledged that the systems that were built during covid demonstrate the range of options available and stated that "slow and dull" would no longer do. I think that is a fair point. I look forward to hearing what more she might present to us today and what proposals might be brought forward.

I was interested to see the Administration Committee's report on supporting MPs—and, indeed, their teams—at the point of departure from elected office. The report's contribution to improving the accountability and preparedness of the House service and IPSA for future elections is an important one. I look forward to reflecting on it further.

3.39 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow so many great contributions from across the House, including that of my SNP Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and, before her, that of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). It shows me that there are points of agreement across all divides in this place when he and I can agree on such an important matter as appreciation for the Whips Offices and how well they organise us all.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) took us through her vision for improving many aspects of how we run this place. I particularly appreciated her example of the effort, time and perplexity that people went through to get the crèche set up. We now think, "How was it not a thing before?" It is extraordinary to think that it was once a bar, especially for those of us who have arrived recently—I know that the memories of some are long. I am glad that we have the crèche, but it is astonishing that it took so long. Many of the points she raised are worthy of further exploration.

I am grateful to my friend the Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), for his—as always—thoughtful, witty and entertaining but provocative contributions on how we appreciate Members and why it matters. I look forward to discussing it with him further. I thank him and his Committee for their important report. It was published after this debate was secured, so I will focus on parliamentary services, but we have a lot of work to do in picking up on his comments.

I put on record my gratitude and that of the Labour party for the thousands of members of House staff who support our work across an enormous range of professions and services, from the Clerks to the cleaners. We need their quality services so that we can best serve our constituents in our constituencies and represent them here.

The country, and indeed the world, saw the very best of the House service throughout the pandemic, during the lying in state of Her late Majesty the Queen, and, I would add, just yesterday for the very sudden arrival of one of the most important Heads of State in the world. On all those occasions and more, House staff have done Parliament proud; they carry out their duties with great distinction. The public possibly never realise just how hard the Doorkeepers work to ensure we are going the right way and are in the right place, for instance, but we see all those people do those things every day, and I thank each and every one of them for it. I also challenge us all to show our appreciation and our respect. Yes, they are there to help us to serve our constituents, but they are not our servants; they are our colleagues. We are grateful to them all.

Whether we are scrutinising the Government, making laws or debating the issues of the day, everything we do is for the benefit of the people we represent. That is what this debate boils down to. I cannot speak to every parliamentary service—colleagues who have trains to catch may be glad to hear that I will not—but I will pick out a few of current relevance.

First, I congratulate the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on his appointment. He advises as well as adjudicates on the rules that govern us. I am glad that he has prioritised improving the quality of information in the guidance. I also think it important for the public to know that those rules are there. Given some of the high-profile cases, it is no wonder that the public sometimes think that there are no rules or that nobody is bothering to enforce them. Yes, there are rules; yes, they are being improved; and yes, there is a body of people, led by the commissioner, whose job it is to hold us to them. It is to the merit of the commissioner that he is engaging with so many of us.

I do not think that we have ever had a golden age when everybody thought politicians were completely trustworthy, but people should be able to trust that there is a system around us to hold us to account when we fail. That connects to the work of those in the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, as well as to our Domestic Committees and the House services that support them, which I thank.

I also welcome the commitment of the commissioner and his team to work on improving everyone's understanding, so let me ask the Leader of the House a quick question. Would she support me in ensuring that at least one physical copy of the rules is sent to every MP's office, and that copies are made readily available in every Vote Office, clearly labelled to show when the code is coming into force and so on? Let us make it easier for everybody—the public, Members and staff—to know what the rules are.

I understand that the Parliamentary Digital Service is hard at work on a new platform to bring accessibility and transparency to the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to make it easily searchable. Clearly we need that—it is long overdue, and I thank PDS for updating me recently on that, and I urge it to press

[Thangam Debbonaire]

ahead. I welcome the move to bring Members' interests together in one searchable digital place. I would like some reassurance from the Leader of the House that there will be the opportunity to include gifts and hospitality that Ministers receive on the same register, or to have some method of linking between the two.

I put on record, slightly stretching the debate from parliamentary services, my appreciation for MPs' staff. That gives me an opportunity to thank all those unsung heroes, and in a personal way, I thank my long-serving office manager, Arthur Girling, who will shortly be leaving my office, after seeing me through Brexit, covid and many more crises. He has served me and the people of Bristol West well, and I am very sad to see him go, but I wish him all the luck in the world in his new role. Thank you for indulging me on that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The wide range of skills that MPs' staff use as part of a busy small team is impressive. While we are working here for our constituents on legislation, they are in our constituency offices providing direct assistance and being our frontline, often dealing with complex and heartbreaking situations. It is not on that they have to deal with the brunt of online and actual abuse. It may be directed actually at us, but they take the brunt of it. On that, I draw attention to another parliamentary service, the wellbeing service. I encourage all colleagues to make use of it and to look at how they use their wellbeing budgets to enhance the wellbeing of their staff.

I also thank the Library service and the Vote Office and Table Office staff, who are invaluable in helping us and our staff to serve our constituents. They are our primary service. They need support, and I thank the Members' Services Team with their HR service, pastoral support and free training for staff and MPs. Again, I encourage colleagues to show our leadership and be proactive in taking up that help, searching out what is available for our staff and ourselves so that we can, as Speaker's Conference is looking at, be the very best we can at being leaders of our teams.

We are elected to be leaders—and not just political leaders, but team leaders, community leaders and campaign leaders. In order to do that as well as we can, I encourage all colleagues to make use of what is there, but I would also like the Members' Services Team and the Speaker's Conference to consider what else the team might do proactively, such as they do when an MP sadly dies in service, where proactive contact is made with MPs' staff after that tragic occasion. I would like the Members' Services Team to be considered for other tasks. I know that the survey of the 2019 intake will be useful for informing that.

Several House services have a role in helping us and our staff to feel safe. The introduction of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme was a mark of great progress, and we are much better than we were when I came into this place, but there is room for improvement. Too many cases take too long, and I know the ICGS knows that, and I have spoken with the current director. I look forward to seeing the recruitment of more investigators helping to speed things up.

I also give a note of appreciation, as well as a challenge, for our magnificent security staff, who put themselves on the line every day to protect us and to allow us to come to work unimpeded by threat. We have lived through many threats over the past few years, including,

as the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) has mentioned, the murder of two of our colleagues, but I will never forget the ultimate sacrifice made by PC Keith Palmer, killed in the line of duty protecting us on that terrible day in 2017. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to remember him when we pass his memorial in Parliament Square. I support the police and security services on the screening and diligence work that they know they have to do and keep doing.

**James Sunderland:** The shadow Leader of the House is making an important speech, and I agree with everything she is saying about security. We are well looked after here as MPs; we have great security, great police and she rightly commended those who look after us. Does she agree, however, that there is work to do on security governance and how we look after MPs—our colleagues—off the estate?

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I do. It is interesting that there is such a degree of concord across the House on this subject. The security is not just for us but for our staff and it is so important, particularly in the light of several recent high-profile cases, whose names I will not mention because I do not want to dignify them. We have a challenge with officers who have served here, though only for a short time. We need to know the greater risk of their serving on the police force, and I think we have had that assurance that our security and police services are working on that. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to do much more to make sure that we are doing that off the estate, too.

There are too many services to name them all, but I will try to rattle through them. I encourage everyone to show their appreciation for the staff who go above and beyond by using the STAR staff recognition scheme on the intranet—if any Members are puzzled, they should have a look. I have certainly used it, but probably I could do so more. We should use it to show our appreciation for the security staff, cleaners, Clerks and Doorkeepers. If someone has gone out of their way, please use that.

We have the Governance Office, the Finance team, Select Committee staff, the People and Culture team, the Research and Information team and the House of Commons Library, who I have already mentioned. I have used Speaker's Counsel many times for advice on points of law. There is *Hansard*—I see them up there. There was a rueful grin earlier when the hon. Member for Lichfield asked whether anyone actually reads *Hansard*. Yes, actually. Even if it is just us, we need them to do that. If I want to hold Members and Ministers to account, I need to know what they said. If I am to learn how to improve my speeches, I need to read what I actually said rather than what I scribble down and cannot read.

**Dame Maria Miller:** Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), the shadow leader is an appointed member of the House of Commons Commission, so she is in charge of running the services that she has just been talking about. Will she join me in calling for House Committees to be given the opportunity to scrutinise the work of the Commission? I am sure that, as a member of that body, she would want to ensure as much transparency as possible and an ability to improve the decisions made there through the scrutiny process?



**Thangam Debonnaire:** I agree that commissioners should always strive to improve how we conduct our business. An interesting point of tension could arise because those domestic Committees advise us, so I will look at the right hon. Lady's proposal in more detail. We might need to work out the lines of accountability. I thank her for that intervention.

**Michael Fabricant:** I will not be quite as philosophical or learned as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller). I will simply say that given this is a sort of Oscar ceremony where we are praising everyone—I already praised the Whips—we should also mention the Serjeant at Arms department, which looks after the work in the Chamber. People do not realise that it also looks after security within the boundaries of the Palace of Westminster.

**Thangam Debonnaire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. It might have been the In-House Services team that I had not yet mentioned, and I am happy to concur. As well as having a bit of a love-in today, some of us have offered challenges to one another and to those House services that we love and respect but also need sometimes to improve.

I want to finish by saying that we thank them all. We should all strive for improved services for Members because it is in the interests of the public, of democracy and of the constituents we serve. That may mean looking at how we support Members who are leaving or working out whether we are taking care of our cleaners properly. I ask all Members to think about what we could do better, so that we can serve our constituents and, most of all, democracy to the best of our ability, and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

3.53 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** Let me start by congratulating the Chair of the Administration Committee and member of the Commission, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker). I also thank the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing this debate. I am grateful to all Members who have spoken. I would like to add my thanks to the staff of the House for their support and the services they provide, which allow all Members and our staff to go about the business of representing our constituents. If anyone is from a department that has not been mentioned by name this afternoon, we are thinking of them too.

As Leader of the House of Commons, while I am focused on getting our legislative agenda through Parliament, I also want to focus, in whatever time I have in this job, on how to make our legislature the best in the world. It is really important that we hold debates such as this, to give all Members the opportunity to raise issues and have confidence that their views will be heard. I say that in part because some members of the public will wonder why we are talking about ourselves today, but it is important. Although there is no job description for a Member of Parliament, one thing we can say is that we are all here to empower our constituents. If we ourselves have agency and are empowered to represent them, make good laws for the land and help sort out their issues, our constituents and the citizens of this country will become more empowered.

I thank all contributors to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne may take close management, and may indeed be difficult to manage, but he is also the voice of gumption and kindness and the champion of being effective and excellent. He spoke about a war for talent, as well as the career jeopardy and the opportunity cost that come with serving in this place, and he is right to point to that. We also need to place on record that we are all here because this is a fantastic job; we very much believe that. When I am asked to go to recruitment events to get more women involved in Parliament, I no longer give speeches; I just read out the list of the things we have been able to do and the very rewarding casework we do, sometimes saving lives and dealing with incredibly emotionally powerful situations.

It is a fantastic job, but there are unique stresses to it that affect Members of Parliament, including those who become Ministers. I am very pleased that we have been able to make some progress on setting up a proper HR function for Ministers in Whitehall. That is incredibly important. I shall not go into detail now, but I think it will make a massive difference to supporting Ministers. Sometimes we ask them to juggle chainsaws with little support. That needs to be rectified, and it will be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne spoke about the Administration Committee's report. He told me about some of the harrowing evidence that he and his Committee heard from ex-Members of Parliament who had been the victims of severe abuse when they were in this place. It is incredibly important for us to ensure that when Members leave this place, they are still supported by virtue of the job they did.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke is right about the need to ensure that this place is the best it can be. I thank her for her encouragement and for the insights she gave into the international dimension to this place. Although some Members may not belong to a particular body or all-party parliamentary group, they may want to network with those in other Parliaments, and we should look at the support we give them to do that. She is right that in all these things we need to get a blinking move on—it takes us a long time, several debates and a lot of pontificating, and sometimes we can learn as we go and stand up and improve these services.

It is incredibly important that there is accountability. I spent the Christmas recess reading the governance reports and restructures of the last 20 years in this place. Important though they are, we sometimes disappear down a rabbit hole of detail and committee structures, whereas we need to be focused on what we are trying to get done and the practical things that need to happen to enable us to do it.

**Dame Maria Miller:** I will chance my arm with yet another member of the House of Commons Commission—there are four members of the Commission in the Chamber today—as the Commission is responsible for the delivery of parliamentary services. Although I agree with my right hon. Friend that we must not disappear into navel gazing, it is important that any changes are part of a governance structure, which means they are bigger than the individual in post at the time. Will she, therefore, undertake at least to consider supporting my urging that a House Committee takes on direct scrutiny of the Commission? Even if we need to invent yet

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

another body to take on the advisory role that the shadow Leader of the House mentioned, scrutinising the Commission would put some grit in the oyster and perhaps make the changes that the Leader of the House wants to see happen even faster?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I have a great deal of sympathy for what my right hon. Friend says. We need to look at the relationship between the three main Committees working on House services and the other things that enable us to do our job. We also need to look at the work of the Commission, and I am sure my colleagues on the Commission would say that we want the Commission to work better. That is what we need to focus on. Scrutiny is obviously key, with the caveat that there are sometimes sensitive issues that have to be kept confidential, but I am all for greater scrutiny.

The Speakers of both Houses, the noble Lord True and I are very keen to ensure that the House of Commons Commission and its equivalent in the other place are much more effective and that we have much more confidence in how this whole place is run, whether by parliamentary services or in the financial accountability running alongside them. I am happy to continue those discussions with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke.

My right hon. Friend and other colleagues touched on standards, and I have urged the House to invite Sir Cary Cooper to come and look at our standards landscape—again, not disappearing down the rabbit hole but looking at the overall situation of the many standards bodies we now have—which is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is a veteran of the Whips Office. He gave a very good speech and spoke kindly about staff. Of course, one of the unique pressures when we run for re-election is that we are not only concerned for our own future. If we lose our job, our staff do, too. Again, that brings unique stresses. During Operation Pitting, I remember that many Members and their staff were on the phone to people who were in the crowds outside Kabul airport and begging for a lifeline. These were incredibly dramatic things to go through. There are stresses on Members of Parliament, but there are stresses on our staff, too.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) also paid tribute to all House staff. I can assure her that one of the core principles of restoration and renewal is that health and safety and wellbeing are part not only of what we are creating but of how we create it. I thank her for putting on record her thanks to the Clerks of the House, which I am sure everyone echoes.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire), the shadow Leader of the House, paid tribute to many staff, and I echo her comments. I completely agree that the landscape of rules that people have to follow can be complicated, and that it is much easier to pick up a booklet containing everything we need to know. The Commissioner for Standards thinks so, too. Physical copies should be readily available; we should make these things as easy as possible for people to understand.

I gave the hon. Lady an update yesterday on the encouraging news about the database for ministerial gifts and hospitality. As of yesterday, we are on track to

meet the deadlines I set when we debated the issue on the Floor of the House. If we meet those deadlines for establishing the database, we will obviously be able to link the House and Government databases, although it will take a little longer if we want a combined system. Certainly by the summer, however, anyone who wants to find out about the hon. Lady's interests or my interests will find that much easier to do, and that will apply whether they are looking at Ministers or not.

I thank the hon. Lady for again reminding the House of the ultimate sacrifice made by PC Keith Palmer. It was a shocking day for everyone who was on the parliamentary estate, but we cannot begin to imagine what it was like for his colleagues. We should never forget the risks they take to keep us safe in here.

I want to tell the House about a couple of things that we are going to do to make some of this ambition a reality. The House delivers a range of support to Members so that they can carry out their responsibilities effectively, but I feel strongly that many Members will have ideas about additional services that they need. For example, many colleagues run mini-businesses from their offices—social enterprises and so forth—and the role of an MP has changed quite dramatically over recent years, so colleagues will clearly have ideas about how certain services can improve.

I am working with the House, through the House of Commons Commission, to bring forward a survey in the next few months to look at what additional support and services we can develop to enable right hon. and hon. Members to do their jobs better. The survey will build on the work the House has done in seeking Members' views on how to improve services and in considering whether additional services need to be offered. I hope that that will ensure that the rebalancing of the House's new strategy towards prioritising Members' services becomes a reality. I encourage all Members to respond to the survey when it comes out, and I suggest that they fill it in alongside their staff. It will look at the issues raised today, including not only Members who are coming into the House but Members who will be leaving it.

In addition, and to make sure that we really are the best in the world, I am keen to benchmark ourselves against our equivalents—initially in the G7. I have been working with the House to look at the services that those other Parliaments provide to their Members, and I have commissioned a research briefing on the standard of services that MPs in those Parliaments receive.

To conclude, many of the matters we have discussed today are ultimately a matter for the House rather than the Government, but I am working closely with the House of Commons Commission, the Administration Committee and the other Committees of the House to ensure that we make good progress. Finally, I again echo all the thanks and gratitude that many Members on both sides of the House have expressed to staff for the excellent services they provide us with.

4.8 pm

**Sir Charles Walker:** We have had an eclectic debate. We started by talking about the McCloud ruling, pensions and the fact that the respective chairs of the 1922 Committee and the parliamentary Labour party had written to IPSA asking for greater clarification, which shows that there is great cross-party support for action.

I then talked about the Administration Committee report on how we can treat Members better when they leave this place.

We then had some fantastic speeches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) demonstrated her amazing intellect in demanding that the House demand greater accountability from House services and the Commission. We had fantastic oratory from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). It is so sad to think that his glory years in the Government were wasted as a Whip, when he could not speak, and we missed out on his fluid words and all the speeches he would have made if he had been on the Front Bench as a Minister during that time. I would like to thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), an ex-Army officer who served his country in the Army for 30 years and is now serving it in this place. I would also like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) for his kind words, which were very much appreciated.

I thank the respective Front Benchers. It is really nice that we have had the A team here. It would have been easy for the respective Front Benchers—the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and the SNP spokesperson—to delegate responding to this debate to one of their more junior colleagues. I am sure each of those junior colleagues would have done brilliantly, but it is lovely to have the parties represented by the principles of my right hon. Friend and the hon. Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and I thank them for the effort they made in attending.

Finally, I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; we have been doing a lot of thanking today. You were responsible for putting me through on to the candidates list about 25 years ago. Your predecessor in the Chair this afternoon gave me my first job here, and a few years later you put me on the candidates list, so if anybody watching the Parliament channel takes great offence at my presence in this place, they know who to blame. Anyway, thank you very much, and I wish all colleagues a happy constituency Friday.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I clearly have a great deal to answer for. I say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) that I heard the tribute paid to him by Mr Deputy Speaker Evans, and I endorse his words wholeheartedly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of Parliamentary services for Members.

## Business without Debate

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

*Ordered,*

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

## Accountability in Financial Regulation

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

4.12 pm

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** It is a pleasure to be here for this last debate before recess to discuss such a crucial topic, and one that the House should find of the utmost interest. My background in finance comes from the self-regulatory age, but I have watched developments over the past 20 years with great interest.

The context is that the UK needs to raise its sights and raise its game to ensure a bright sovereign future. That necessitates taking significant and essential steps to make the UK competitive for the next generation as an independent country. For that, it must first complete Brexit by replacing the Northern Ireland protocol with sovereignty-compliant arrangements. That would reinstate the legal effects of the Good Friday agreement by removing the stain on the rights of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. We should not shy away from using the Parliament Act on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, if necessary, to do the job of protecting the EU's border on behalf of a reluctant EU. Secondly, we must address the small boats issue to control our borders by taking surgical steps to remove the effect of the European convention on human rights in cases of illegal arrival. Thirdly, we must remove all unnecessary EU-inherited law and replace what remains with regulations drafted in the common-law style that are appropriate for UK conditions and best able to enhance our future.

However, the reversion to our common-law approach, which will be a huge competitive advantage in the long term, will not be complete unless we address a significant problem that has crept into our system over the last decades, including, most significantly, for the financial industry. This is the problem of our regulators lacking sufficient accountability under the law. Almost all of those who spoke in the Lords debate on the Financial Services and Markets Bill agreed that this is a problem. We must seize the opportunity to fix it as part of its passage.

The Bill devolves the inherited EU rulebook to the regulators to manage and adjust, so that they can rewrite it quickly in the common-law style and remove unnecessary provisions. A major problem, however, is that at present there are no mechanics for ensuring that regulators draft clear rules and apply them predictably and consistently. Parliament, through the Treasury Committee, oversees the regulators at a high level. That Committee should be capable of ensuring that the rules are appropriately calibrated. In the Lords, a proposal to expand the arrangements to comprise a Joint Committee of both Houses has much to commend it. However, parliamentary oversight alone cannot address the validity of individual decisions. For that, the only solution is our judiciary, since only the courts or tribunals provide an independent review of regulatory action, using accepted methods of analysis and reasoning. Lord Lilley has tabled a number of what seem to be excellent amendments, which would resolve the overall problem. I wish to speak in favour of those amendments, and ask that they be adopted by the Government.

First, I should say what these proposals are not. They are not, it seems, designed to introduce yet another administrative fix in an attempt to insulate our regulators

[*Mr Marcus Fysh*]

from our courts, tribunals and lawyers. The reason is that such fixes will not work here. No administrative solution could ever address the need for firms and senior managers to be able to question individual decisions in an independent forum where their arguments are properly heard. No quango can be set up to achieve such sophisticated levels of justice. Only the courts and tribunals can provide the solution. If we shunt aside our courts and tribunals, we will be ignoring the grain and the lessons from our entire political and administrative system.

Our political life in Parliament involves debate and finality, where distinctions are made as a result of arguments, and put to a vote. Our approach to matters of law is similar. Facts and arguments are presented to our courts or tribunals, leading to a final reasoned judgment. The quality of the reasoning behind those judgments means that our system is commonly accepted as providing world-leading justice. What our current arrangements do not recognise is that regulation is a form of law. It is not some *sui generis* thing that is exempt from legal discipline. Over the past few decades, regulation has become a core part of our legal arrangements, whether we like it or not, and regulation needs to be stitched properly into those arrangements so that it operates at the necessary levels of sophistication.

Without the availability of courts or tribunals, firms and senior managers who are subject to regulation and supervision inevitably feel that they are subject to arbitrary decision making. Their arguments, when they arise, currently have no way of being properly heard. Unfortunately that is where we are now, but how did we get here? The current system evolved while we were in the European Union. The critical disciplines found elsewhere in our legal system have not been developed to match the growth of regulation. Instead, our system relies on our unquestionably excellent regulators acting at their best at all times. However, no system is perfect, and without independent checks and balances over individual decision making, the system as a whole is weaker than it should be.

Of course, we do not want a system where firms are constantly questioning the proper judgments of our regulators. The regulators' judgements need to be respected when validly formed and within reasonable bounds. Neither do we want an overly expensive or time-consuming process invoked more than occasionally, which soaks up the time of our regulators in unnecessary disputes. However, it would be a mistake to accept that those imperatives mean that we cannot and should not tolerate the involvement of our courts or tribunals in any meaningful way. That is to give up on building a system with the necessary disciplines, and would instead involve placing inordinate trust in an institution that we are about to endow with huge new powers. No Government are given such trust, and neither should our regulators be given it.

A blind faith approach would not only be an objectionable deviation from our constitutional principles; it would doom our financial markets gradually to decline in competitiveness, and trend towards the competitiveness of those systems that operate on the continental code-based legal systems. In fact, we would most likely do worse than those systems, since our administrative machine is

not tuned to run such processes to the level of quality of the code-based systems. The core magnet of competitiveness for the UK is our common-law approach to the rule of law and the trust and confidence that that engenders, and that I, when I was the Minister responsible for exports, was keen to ensure was front and centre of our global export offer.

Lord Lillie's proposals would enhance the way in which the upper tribunal considers appeals from regulatory enforcement decisions. Indeed, they would improve the quality of those decisions before they even reach the tribunal. There are amendments to make the internal review bodies to the regulators—the Regulatory Decisions Committee and the Enforcement Decision Making Committee—fully independent to ensure that most decisions emanating from the regulators will have been made properly, in accordance with desired common-law disciplines. Those cases would never get to the upper tribunal. When cases do get there, because a firm or senior manager believes there has been a fundamental failure of analysis by the regulators in respect of their own rules, the assessment would not be whether the rules are valid or necessary; it would merely be whether the firm or senior manager could have adjusted their conduct in advance to avoid the breach.

The basic and essential discipline intrinsic to the rule of law may require our regulators to enhance their legal teams to some degree by placing a handful of high-end lawyers at the top, who can ensure these disciplines are followed. However, the cost will be small. When that is done, adverse decisions in the upper tribunal should be few and far between. The consequence should be that firms and senior managers can go about their business of innovating, being entrepreneurial again, and driving enterprise, the UK economy and global growth by matching capital in the most efficient way with those who need it, on appropriate terms negotiated and supervised here.

The armies of compliance staff can be reduced in number and replaced by a smaller number of people applying thoughtful judgment against clear, or vaguer, rules that are nevertheless clear in their application as a result of guidance or case law precedent, using accepted common-law methods of legal reasoning. That will be in stark contrast to the regimes elsewhere in the world, which are overly bureaucratic or controlling, or unnecessarily litigious, because challenges are too easy to make and the standards are less exacting than those that our system, at its best, can deliver. In fact, the proposed changes are slight but their effects will be significant. They will introduce a discipline that will ripple through the regulators' behaviours, because the regulators will know that there is someone ready to mark their homework—someone who is managing the rulebook and supervising and enforcing against it. Obviously, regulatory judgment is essential and, in some areas, the regulators cannot be expected to set out in advance how they intend to act. However, in such areas, there can nevertheless be a level of predictability, which means people know what they are expected to do.

Firms can apply more legal judgment when seeking to apply the regulators' rules, but this method is highly effective, as is demonstrated by areas of the law that are dependent on high-level principles, such as the law of negligence. In the more judgment-based areas of financial regulation, the regulators' rules will be more open-textured, but the general mischiefs that the regulators seek to prevent

can nevertheless be made known in broad terms, and the regulators can apply their discretion to remove or dampen behaviours that they believe to be damaging.

Lord Bridges has proposed an alternative to the courts, comprising an Office for Budget Responsibility-style arrangement for the oversight of the regulators. However, that would merely introduce another bureaucracy without the discipline necessary to ensure that the regulators operate their rulebooks properly. In fact, we already have such a solution on the points that really matter. The Financial Regulators Complaints Commissioner already provides a vehicle for an examination of regulatory failings. The only shortcoming of the existing FRCC arrangements is that its recommendations are not binding. The FRCC investigated the London Capital & Finance debacle—a problem for many of our constituents—and made findings that were not criticised for their thoroughness, but were nevertheless ignored by the Financial Conduct Authority. There is no indication that the findings were incorrect or improperly reached. Lord Lilley's amendments address the lack of a binding nature to the FRCC's recommendations, and would allow the FRCC to play a more significant role in analysing regulatory failings, but direct supervision of regulatory action by our judiciary has its natural limits.

On average, only 10 such cases have been brought by firms against regulators annually over the past two decades. Almost all such cases occupy no more than a day of the upper tribunal's time. Lord Lilley's amendments would not turn that trickle into a torrent, but they would improve the quality of the resulting judgments, so that the market could follow the legal reasoning and reap the rewards of predictability sown there.

By far the greatest prize that will result from predictability for the market is a conversion of the many cases that smaller businesses and consumers bring before the Financial Ombudsman Service each year against firms. At present, the FOS is not required to apply legal reasoning in deciding its cases. That is a huge lost opportunity for firms and consumers, who would benefit from certainty in the application of regulatory rules. The Lilley amendments would harness that case flow by applying our common-law method to it, so that the beneficiary of a decision would be not just the individual claimant in a case, but the entire class of potential claimants. They would be able to follow the legal reasoning and decide whether they, too, had cause for redress.

Do not mistake me: I do not mean that the amendments would apply substantive common law to these disputes. Small businesses and consumers already benefit from statute, and from regulatory rules that require firms to treat their customers fairly, whatever the terms of a contract. It is essential that those substantive obligations of fairness remain fully in place for the protection of buyers of financial services.

The amendments would import an obligation to apply legal reasoning to what "fairness" means in the cases that come forward for decision. In that regard, the amendments take as their model our employment tribunals; since their introduction in the 1960s, they have, along with the obligation on employers to be fair at the point of dismissal, explained to employers what that means in practice. A settled body of employment practice has emerged from case law, and that is now essential to the orderly operation of labour markets. These amendments seek to emulate the success that employment tribunals

have had in delivering inexpensive and illuminating justice to customers of financial services, and to ensure the orderly operation of financial markets. The amendments would achieve those goals in many ways.

The first-tier tribunal takes as its model the employment tribunals, which are a proven means of delivering, at low cost, the considered decision of a three-person panel—a lawyer and two market participants—as to what it means to treat a person fairly. They do so in a non-technical way, guiding the unrepresented person through the important points that go to make up fair treatment. Their decisions are properly reasoned, so other firms will have a clear guide to how they should treat their customers. No longer will firms be able to complain that it is impossible to build reliable compliance programmes around regulations as no one can agree on what they mean. In that critical respect, Lord Lilley's amendments would implement to the full the Treasury Committee's recommendation of October 2018.

The amendments appear to be modelled on three tried and tested, world-beating precedents: our common-law system, our employment tribunals and our construction adjudication. They deftly remove the unconstitutional unaccountability of our financial regulators by stitching them into their proper place in our legal system, without compromising the regulators' autonomy. The regulators will be free to continue their important work, but they will do it to a higher standard. They will be more predictable and consistent in their actions. That will be a competitive advantage to us as we look to fulfil our new role in the world.

In conclusion, there is so much change coming to the financial world, including the digital tokenisation of assets, artificial intelligence and the advent of sovereign digital currencies, that it is essential that we make our regulatory structure as sure-footed and competitive as possible. These light-touch amendments present a huge opportunity, and I recommend them wholeheartedly to the Government.

4.28 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing this important debate. He has a distinguished background in finance, and clearly knows of what he speaks. I note his reference to the thoughtful amendments tabled to the Financial Services and Markets Bill by the noble Lord Lilley. I imagine that they draw on the work that Politeia has published by Barnabas Reynolds on the rules for regulators. This is an important topic, and one the Government and I take enormously seriously. We are going through the process of rewriting financial services legislation for a generation. My colleagues and I—the Chancellor and everyone in the Treasury—are very concerned that we get that right. The accountability of our financial services regulations, a sector that contributes over 10% of the entire GDP of our economy, is of the utmost importance. Unsurprisingly, a number of colleagues have raised this matter in both Houses.

The Government have a clear vision for the future: an open, sustainable and technologically advanced financial services sector that is globally competitive and acts in the interests of communities and citizens across all four nations of the United Kingdom. That was reiterated in the Edinburgh reforms late last year. Together with the Financial Services and Markets Bill, they amount to the

[*Andrew Griffith*]

most far-reaching reforms in a generation. I hope my hon. Friend would agree with me on that. The Bill contains a number of measures to address precisely the purposes and concerns my hon. Friend raises. It updates the regulators' objectives to ensure that for the very first time they consider the sector's critical role in supporting the UK economy. The Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority will be given a new secondary objective to facilitate the international competitiveness of the UK economy and its growth in the medium and long term. That is absolutely right, and the Government expect that to result in real change and in different outcomes.

My hon. Friend referred to the amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill tabled by Lord Lilley in Committee in the other place. They seek to enhance the role of the judiciary to provide additional checks and balances on the exercise of regulatory power. He is quite correct when he talks about the many benefits of common law—predictability and certainty among them—but that is not the only way. My hon. Friend is passionate about seizing the opportunities of Brexit for this country, and I reiterate to him that the Government, through the Bill as it relates to financial services, are repealing retained EU law. It will remove prescriptive provisions and hundreds of pieces of retained EU law entirely.

On judicial accountability, which we see in many domains, my hon. Friend raises a number of examples, including on employment tribunals. It will, of course, be up to the UK courts to determine how domestic legislation and rules are interpreted. All the corpus of financial services regulation will ultimately sit subject to that.

My hon. Friend raised the Financial Regulators Complaints Commissioner and a case of which I was not aware of its findings, although voluntary, being ignored. Let me say from the Dispatch Box that were that to be a pattern of behaviour, that cannot be right. That is not a reasonable expectation from our regulators. It is something we should look at, were that be the case. There is an existing mechanism for redress and it is important for all of us that that is taken with the most significant gravity.

Parliament has a unique, special role and responsibility in relation to the scrutiny and oversight of our regulators. Select Committees—the Treasury Committee in particular but not exclusively—provide scrutiny of financial services policy through, for example, Select Committee inquiries and regular hearings on the work of regulators. The Treasury Committee has a dedicated Sub-Committee on financial services regulations, and it is currently conducting an inquiry into the PRA's strong and simple framework. In addition, the Committee conducts pre-commencement hearings following the appointment of the chair and chief executive of the FCA and the chief executive of the PRA, and can subject them to ongoing scrutiny hearings. If the Committee does not wish to support the appointment of the FCA's chief executive, it can recommend that it be put to a vote on the Floor of the House.

There are a number of mechanisms in the UK's domestic framework that allow the Treasury to hold the regulators to account. For example, under section 1S of the Financial Services and Markets Act and section 7F of the Bank of England Act 1998, the Treasury

“may appoint an independent person to conduct a review of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness”

of the use of resources by the FCA and the PRA respectively. I am not aware of that mechanism having been used, but it strikes me as a particularly useful one. My hon. Friend and others may wish to make representations to the Treasury if in future they still consider that there are deficiencies in how regulation is carried out.

HM Treasury can direct the regulators to carry out an investigation into specific events if it is in the public interest. FSMA also provides the Treasury with the ability to make recommendations to the regulators in open letters on issues related to matters of economic policy. Finally, the Government use regular engagement with the regulators to hold them to account. As the Minister responsible for financial services regulation, I engage regularly with the FCA and PRA's chief executives on a wide range of issues, including their performance. I hope that my hon. Friend will take it in good faith that they are suitably challenged about how we are getting the financial services we need in this country.

I accept that there is more to do. In the Financial Services and Markets Bill, at the behest of my hon. Friend and others, we have introduced a package of measures to strengthen the accountability to Parliament of the PRA, the FCA and the Payment Systems Regulator, to strengthen their relationship with the Treasury and, importantly, to enhance their engagement with the firms that they regulate. I am grateful for the positive engagement of colleagues in both Houses who have made a number of very sensible suggestions in Committee. I hope that our incorporation of some of those suggestions in Government amendments assures colleagues that we are taking the matter, and their concerns, very seriously.

I fully understand that many people in the industry are concerned about not just the volume of rules but the speed with which decisions on those rules are made. I was grateful, although disturbed, to read the recent TheCityUK report revealing that 90% of those surveyed about the FCA felt that the efficiency of authorisations was in some way detrimental to the attractiveness of the UK as a place to do business. That pains me, but I am content that my concern is shared by the leadership of the organisations; I have been assured that improving performance in that respect will be a priority. The Bill will require the FCA and the PRA to report on their performance, not only on operational measures but in the discharge of their new growth and competitiveness objective, as part of their annual report.

I thank my hon. Friend again for raising such important points and for kindly staying until the Adjournment for recess. I know that his concerns are shared by many colleagues in this House and will continue to be taken seriously. We have a great opportunity to get this right, and it is important that we do so. I will dedicate myself over the coming weeks and months to working with colleagues to ensure that we get the best outcomes and that we listen carefully to what he and other Members, in both Houses, have said about this important matter.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.39 pm

*House adjourned.*

## Westminster Hall

*Thursday 9 February 2023*

[*YVONNE FOVARGUE in the Chair*]

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS

## Brownfield Development and Green Belt

*[Relevant documents: e-petition 575169, Prioritise brownfield development in law to protect our green belt and farmland, and e-petition 600577, Ban developments on Green belt and Greenfield sites across the country.]*

1.30 pm

**Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair):** May I remind members of the public not to interrupt the debate? If you wish to speak to Members or the Minister, please make an appointment in the usual way.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of brownfield development and protecting the green belt.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members, from both sides of the House, for being here today to support my debate. I appreciate that this is a Thursday afternoon just before a recess, and by-elections are going on across the country. I am sure that Members have many pressing commitments in their diary, so I am impressed by the number of colleagues here to support me today. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her recent appointment to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; I am pretty certain that she knows a little bit about the topic that I will be speaking to today.

It gives me great pleasure to open this debate on our green belt. The national planning policy framework states:

“The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts.”

I very much hope that that is the case. The recent new clause 21 to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill—so ably put forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who is with us today in Westminster Hall, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who is unable to be with us today, to strengthen the green belt’s protection against speculative development—would certainly help the Government with that stated objective.

However, CPRE, the countryside charity, rightly identifies that

“the Green Belt has never before faced such serious threat as large sections of land disappear under new developments.”

It is worth remembering the purpose of the green belt in our communities. It serves five purposes: to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. Despite the fact that we have those protections in place, however,

they too often count for very little with developers who seek to drive a coach and horses through planning policies to take what is the easy answer for them but the unpalatable option for so many of our constituents.

In my own constituency in the west midlands, we were previously part of a consortium with three neighbouring local authorities to produce our local plan, known as the “Black Country Plan”. It proposed, across the borough of Walsall, a staggering 7,100 homes, of which 5,500 were proposed for my constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills, primarily on green-belt sites. Nearly every one of the proposed sites broke the central link of one of the five purposes of our green belt—that is, to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another. Indeed, one of the central themes throughout the consultation process, which came up time and again from my constituents, was their objection to having our community subsumed to become a suburb of a Greater Birmingham. After the first round of consultation on the proposed plan, which more than 7,000 households from my constituency opposed, the answer, at stage 2 of the process, was not to take on board the comments of constituents such as mine in Aldridge-Brownhills; it was to come back with more proposals for yet more housing on even more green-belt sites.

However, now that the Black Country consortium has been dissolved, new clause 21 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill would help Walsall Council and the leadership, under Conservative Councillor Mike Bird, to forge a new local plan, which I believe could have a primary focus on “brownfield first”—brownfield development being prioritised over green-belt development.

I emphasise that those of us who argue for greater protection of our precious green belt are not and should not be simply labelled as nimbys. We are not. Nor is it the case that somehow I simply want to push the proposed housing into someone else’s constituency. I do not. What I want is for us to be ambitious and to be a regeneration generation.

We all recognise that we desperately need to see more homes come on stream faster and in larger numbers, but what types of homes do we as a nation need? I argue that they must include starter homes to allow younger people the same opportunity that my husband and I had in our 20s—I remember the joy of getting the keys to our first home. All too often, however, those are not the homes that developers want to build, particularly in proposals for the green belt. Indeed, speculative developer plans in a development brief for one green-belt site in Aldridge-Brownhills proposed to build four and five-bedroom houses in a location where average house prices are between 51% and 110% higher than the national average spend of a first-time buyer, which stands at just over £200,000.

The race to ensure that the next generation have the same opportunities will not be solved by concreting over Britain’s green and pleasant land. If we simply accept the argument that supply shortage is the principal reason for advocating green-belt development, we will walk into the developers’ trap. Building on inappropriate sites, with no infrastructure plan to support development in areas where there is all too often a shortage of school places and GP provision already, does not add to the existing community cohesion; in fact, it risks creating greater community tensions.

[Wendy Morton]

Given that we now have the capacity to build 1.2 million new homes on brownfield sites in England, surely they should be the first port of call for any house building programme. The Government are to be congratulated on continued initiatives such as the brownfield land release fund, which will help us to introduce a realistic house building programme on brownfield sites. The fund has allowed regions such as mine, under the stewardship of Mayor Andy Street, to ensure that we are remediating brownfield sites and operating a “brownfield first” approach across the west midlands and the Black Country. I place on record my thanks to the Minister’s predecessor in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for successfully overseeing a further round of that important funding, and I now look to the Minister to pick up the baton and lobby the Chancellor of the Exchequer, ahead of the Budget on 15 March, for further resources to advance the opportunities for more local authorities to apply for, and take advantage of, the scheme. She knows the west midlands very well, so she knows that we can and do deliver, and we want to do more.

However, in addition to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and initiatives such as the brownfield land release fund, the imminent changes to the national planning policy framework need to be used as an opportunity to strengthen protections for our green belt. I hope that we will institute the prioritisation of brownfield land over greenfield land in the changes that are due to be brought forward to the NPPF. Like CPRE, I hope that they will include a firm presumption against giving planning permission for development on additional greenfield sites, compared with those already in the plan. Greenfield sites should be allocated in local plans only where sites are primarily affordable homes for local needs, or where it can be shown that as much as possible is already being made of brownfield land, particularly by providing more housing in towns and city centres.

The NPPF also needs to change to require that all developments have diverse housing tenures and types. As I mentioned previously, a proposed development in my constituency has exclusively focused on large four and five-bedroom properties, offering no hope or opportunity to young families and young people. The infrastructure levy should be subject to change, too, to reflect the high cost of greenfield development to local communities and its impact on them, although brownfield redevelopment should still be required to make a contribution to affordable housing targets. We also need to provide local communities with stronger mechanisms to bring forward brownfield land as a source of land supply, such as increased compulsory purchase powers.

There will always be naysayers who tell us that brownfield land will not provide sufficient land to meet housing need and that the loss of brownfield sites for housing purposes will lead to the loss of land that could be used for employment purposes. However, we need to recognise that areas such as the Black Country and the west midlands—land on which heavy industry once stood—are unlikely to be returned to widespread employment use. If we are to be the regeneration generation, we need developers and our wider construction professionals to pioneer new communities that will offer a mix of employment and housing. In fact, a large part of any

revival of our town centres and high streets surely can be achieved only if we accept the need for more designated housing in them to provide new and in-built footfall.

There is no doubt that when the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill went to the other place, it did so in a far better state. However, I fear that the concessions that were won through the acceptance of new clause 21 can be easily undermined if powers under the NPPF are not strengthened. We need to see an end to the five-year land supply obligation and an end to the scandal of land banking. We need further Government support with the cost of land remediation through the brownfield fund and the brownfield land release fund, and that needs to be adequately resourced.

I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will agree that the best developments are those that work with, not against, local communities. The right type of planning regulation that unlocks the power of local communities and economic growth should not be seen as incompatible with protecting our environment and precious green belt. In the same way, our whole debate about the green belt should not be seen through the lens of “green belt good” and “house building bad”—or vice versa.

To conclude, we need to draw on our resources to solve the failure of house building. That means seeking to use our resources to build 1.2 million homes on brownfield sites first. “Brownfield first” should be our development watchwords. Get this wrong, and our green belt will be lost forever, which would be a travesty for future generations, but get this right, and we can truly be the regeneration generation.

1.43 pm

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): I think it is the second time this week that you have guided us through a Westminster Hall debate that I have attended, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing the debate and on her comments, which resonated with some of the problems we face in my area.

Obviously the country has a housing problem as our population increases and household size falls, but it seems to me that, as the right hon. Lady just said, a large amount of brownfield land in the country remains undeveloped. There are also large numbers of planning consents in land banks held by developers that are sitting on their assets and allowing them to grow while seeking further planning consents, on which they will probably sit as well.

It is time to think carefully about our green belt. I represent a rural community of 23 separate villages. It is important for Members who represent urban communities to understand the importance of the independence of a local community, its local identity and local culture. Ribbon development, which gradually takes one field, then another and then another, results in the bringing together of communities that historically were often rivals, or certainly have different identities that they want to retain.

Take the village that I live in, which is a Quaker village in a mining community. We are now two fields away from Pontefract. If we go back far enough—back to the civil war—we stood for Parliament and Pontefract stood for the Crown. That is some time in the past now, but we get the point. I can look from the top of our



village down into Pontefract; it is creeping closer and closer, and there are plans to develop more of those fields. The village I live in is a rural community, with its own identity. We do not want to be part of Pontefract, and the same applies to all the other 22 villages that I represent.

At the present time, we have three developments, all in the green belt and all for housing. I want to say two things about that: first, it is lazy for planners to simply draw lines on maps that look tidy without first having thought about the social, economic and environmental consequences. Secondly, to some extent, it is greedy of developers to want green-belt land, which is often easier to develop than brownfield land, particularly in a mining community such as mine where much of the brownfield land has been polluted and needs to be cleaned up. There are three sites in my constituency, all in the green belt; a lot of people want to speak, so I am not going to go into detail, but Springvale Rise, Highfield Road and Huntwick Grange are all under threat of development at the moment.

The first thing to say about my constituency is that these villages were mining communities. The coal was taken out by rail, so roads that would carry large amounts of traffic were never built, because people lived in the village where they worked, and they went to the local pub, club, football club or whatever social activity, and to the local school. Our roads are not built to carry the amount of traffic that is being generated by increasing numbers of vehicles, particularly now that there is no work in our communities either, but the highways engineers seem prepared to approve almost anything as long as it is going to deliver housing targets that have been imposed from above.

I was so pleased to hear our leader, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), say that he is going to bring back control for local communities, and I think some rhetoric about the same principle has been heard from the Government as well. If we are going to develop villages that need development, that should be done from the bottom up, not from the top down—that is my central point. Green-belt incursions should be a last resort, not the easy resort. I am asking for a presumption against green-belt land and in favour of brownfield land, and I think the Government have said that there will be one.

Does the Minister have time to reply, or else to write to us, about the following point? The Government, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have made statements about preferring brownfield development, and a “Dear colleague” letter has come from the Secretary of State that indicates—it uses the present tense, rather than the future tense—that he has issued orders about preferring to move away from green-belt development. Now, an inspector is looking at our local authority’s plans, and I have spoken at those hearings. That inspector started her inspection prior to the new legislation that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills has referred to, and prior to the issuing of that “Dear colleague” letter and, apparently, some changes to the way in which the planning frameworks operate. She is unclear whether she will be applying the new rules as they come into place, or whether she is now obliged to work according to rules that are no longer extant, or will no longer be very shortly. Some guidance on that question would be helpful.

The green belt is very important. I want to focus on one single aspect of it, or maybe two, because other Members will develop other arguments in favour of it. First, I represent many old miners. If a person lives in poverty and perhaps has a bad chest, as many of those old men do, they should not be deprived of access to the countryside, but the more we build up, the fewer amenities will be available. That is what is happening throughout all the villages I represent, every one of which was a mining village. The loss of amenities matters a lot: they should be not for just the middle classes, but for everybody, and yet we are seeing incursions that I think are a disgrace.

The main point that I want to finish on—it will take me one or two seconds—is that there is no obligation on planners, developers, councils or anybody else to do an analysis of the ecological impact of a development before it has been approved. In my view, that is completely wrong.

We have one development that could be 4,000 or 5,000 houses, if they get away with it. I commissioned, because nobody else did, an ecological survey by the reputable West Yorkshire Ecological Service. That survey discovered on the site to be developed 26 or 28 separate species of birds, mammals or other forms of life that are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, or birds that are on the Red List. Nobody had done that work, yet all of these species are protected, as far as I can see. There ought to be no development that destroys their habitats, yet that is what is being threatened.

It is a curious situation, because there is legal protection, but no attempt was made to identify which species were threatened by the development. It seems to me that the Minister could helpfully go away to the Department and discuss that point. Every time we build on green belt, rare species of flora and fauna are threatened. The land in our case has never been developed; it is ancient woodland that has never been touched, ever, but is now under threat from the development at Huntwick Grange in Featherstone. Will the Minister reflect on the ecological impact?

Only a couple of weeks ago, when the United Nations discussed biodiversity, the Secretary-General, in a very striking phrase, said that humanity is in danger of becoming “a weapon of mass extinction.”

What are we doing? We are building on sites where there are species that are under threat, and that may well become extinct in due course. Some species now have a very fragile hold on existence. Can we really say that our planning policies should just ignore threats to our biodiversity? I think not.

1.51 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing the debate. It is an honour to follow the powerful speech from the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett).

I am delighted to be taking part in this debate as the Member of Parliament for a constituency that contains substantial amounts of green belt land. I know how hugely my Chipping Barnet constituents value the breathing space that green belt gives them. It has kept urban sprawl at bay for more than 70 years, but excessive housebuilding targets have been making it harder and

[Theresa Villiers]

harder for councils to turn down bad development proposals. In a number of areas, that is leading to loss of greenfield and green belt land around the country, and to increasing pressure to urbanise the suburbs.

I was very struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Hemsworth on the progressive blurring of the gaps between different communities and communities being merged together, and the crucial importance of giving people access to the countryside on their doorstep. For all those reasons, green belt protections are crucial.

Even where councils refuse planning applications, there is a risk that a planning inspector will overturn the decision on the basis that the development is needed to meet the centrally set, top-down housebuilding target. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, that is why I tabled new clause 21 to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which was signed by 60 Members of the House. In response, the Secretary of State brought forward significant concessions to rebalance the planning system to give local communities greater control over what is built in their neighbourhood. That is very welcome. It is being taken forward in the consultation now under way on the new national planning policy framework, but the battle is by no means over because the extent to which the compromise delivers real change depends on how it is implemented. It depends on that consultation.

Let me give an example. I very much welcome the new NPPF footnote 30, which promises that brownfield development will be prioritised over greenfield, but even on brownfield sites, it is crucial to respect factors like local character and density. "Brownfield first" must not mean brownfield free-for-all. We need more detail on how the "brownfield first" approach will be delivered in practice, including how the new developer levy will be used to promote it.

I very much welcome the proposal that councils will no longer be required to review green belt boundaries, even where doing so would be the only way to meet the centrally determined target. I also welcome the crucial concession that if meeting a top-down target would involve building at densities significantly out of character with the area, a lower target can be set in the local plan. Wording needs to be added to the new NPPF to make it clear that a substantial proportion of councils are likely to be able to benefit from that new flexibility and to depart from the target determined by the standard method. We also need additional wording in the NPPF to give more strength and clarity to what will be considered sufficiently "significantly out of character" to justify lowering the target, and how councils will be able to satisfy the test for establishing it.

As the Better Planning Coalition says, the whole target-setting process should focus on housing need, rather than housing demand. They are not the same things, and should be properly distinguished. The consultation also proposes removing the test that local plans have to be "justified", which would be a welcome way to reduce the evidential burden councils face in establishing the exceptional circumstances that justify reducing their target. However, if that measure is to deliver the outcome promised by the Secretary of State, firm and clear instructions must be given to the Planning Inspectorate to accept local plans from councils that are based on reasonable evidence.

Scrapping the duty to co-operate was a key part of the compromise, too. The duty has created great pressure to build on green belt and greenfield areas outside our major towns and cities. Although the consultation proposes abolition, which is welcome, it envisages that the duty will be replaced by what is called an alignment policy. It would be good to hear from the Minister about this, as we need to know what that policy is if we are to be confident that the duty to co-operate is being scrapped and not simply relabelled.

Giving councils new powers to set design codes is also welcome, but design standards need to be additional to, not a substitute for, existing planning protections on matters such as green belt and greenfield density, height and character. A project that is an overdevelopment cannot be cured with high-quality design.

I would also highlight continuing concerns over national development management policies. Local development management policies provide a bulwark of defence against bad development, protecting greenfield sites and open space, constraining height or preventing loss of family homes to blocks of flats. Central control over all those policies could be deeply problematic and undermine the primacy of the local plan. Ministers say that that is not intended and that the NPPF consultation delivers on the Secretary of State's promise to consult on NDMPs and their scope, which is welcome. However, NDMPs could still be used to rewrite the entire planning system and significantly restrict local decision making. I therefore urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to look again at this issue in debates in the other place and consider amendments that restore the primacy of the local plan in the event of a conflict with an NDMP.

Finally, I want to say a brief word about London. I welcome the indication by Ministers that the new flexibilities contained in the compromise proposals in the consultation will apply in London, but there is still an urgent need to curb the power of the Mayor of London to impose targets on the boroughs. We are the party that promised to scrap regional targets, yet they are alive and kicking in our capital city. The Mayor has used the London plan to try to load additional housing delivery obligations on to the suburbs, especially boroughs such as Barnet, which have already delivered thousands of new homes in recent years.

Crucial progress has been made as a result of the discussions between Ministers and Back Benchers on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and my new clause 21, but my long-running battle to safeguard the local environment of Chipping Barnet, which it is my honour to represent, must continue. Know this: I will fight with diligence, determination and perhaps even a little obstinacy.

1.59 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this important debate.

It is vital that we protect the green belt because it brings huge benefits to people's health and wellbeing, and has a major role in supporting wildlife habitats, allowing nature to flourish and mitigating the effects of climate change. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) in pointing out that that is important for everybody, regardless of how much wealth they enjoy.

It is vital that we build the houses that people so desperately need on brownfield sites. We need to build truly affordable homes on brownfield sites that have high insulation values, and heat pumps and solar panels as standard, so that people can enjoy the benefits of moving into a high-quality home that is cheap to heat. Who would not want to do that?

The last “State of brownfield” report by CPRE, the countryside charity, published in November last year, found that the number of new homes that could be built on brownfield land has reached record levels, with more than half a million homes with planning permission waiting to be built. It revealed that

“over 1.2 million homes could be built on 23,000 sites covering more than 27,000 hectares of previously developed land.”

However, it also highlighted that despite that, “development of the highest quality farmland has soared 1,000-fold in 10 years”.

As Tom Fyans, the interim chief executive of CPRE, said:

“You know the system is broken when hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people and families are on social housing waiting lists, many in rural areas. Meanwhile, across the country, tens of thousands of hectares of prime brownfield sites are sitting there waiting to be redeveloped.”

There is work to be done to ensure that the development that can take place on brownfield sites does indeed take place there.

The Secretary of State has said that as part of a “brownfield first” approach, Homes England, the Government’s housing and delivery arm, is spending millions on acquiring sites in urban areas to regenerate new housing, but it is no good acquiring the land if it then sits unused. It has been noted that there are often barriers to developing brownfield sites, one of which is the need for remediating works. Will the Minister outline whether she thinks the Government are doing enough to help local authorities to ensure that brownfield sites in their areas are viable for homes to be built on? Have the Government made any assessment of the amount of brownfield sites in the country that could be suitable for housing, but where significant remediation is necessary before development can take place?

Another CPRE report from 2021 pointed out that 793 applications were submitted for building on green belt land between 2009-10 and 2019-20, of which 337—just over 42%—were approved. That resulted in the building of more than 50,000 housing units on the green belt in that time, so for all the Government’s talk about protecting the green belt, it is clear much stronger protections are needed. The Government know that people care passionately about this. We need action now to make it easier for development to take place on brownfield sites and we need much stronger protection for the green belt. Without that, developers will simply carry on pushing to build on green belt sites.

With the absence of such protections, it is perhaps no wonder that developers feel emboldened when it comes to submitting applications for housing on green belt land. In my constituency, Wirral West, 61.9% of the land is green belt. It is a very beautiful part of the world and is clearly attractive to developers, given that in recent months we have seen four planning applications from Leverhulme Estates for homes on land in Barnston, Irby and Pensby. All were refused by Wirral Council last autumn, following a determined campaign against the proposals by local residents. I attended and addressed

two public meetings—one at Greasby Community Centre and one outdoors in the village—in support of the many people in my constituency who oppose the destruction of the green belt. People will not forgive politicians who destroy the things that they love.

People in Wirral West value the green belt extremely highly, and they have made it very clear that they do not want to see it built on. I fully support them in this. Leverhulme Estates has appealed against Wirral Council’s decision to refuse these applications, and the appeals are now in progress. There is to be a public inquiry, which is distressing for local people, who want the local green belt to be preserved. A further application from Leverhulme Estates, for up to 240 homes in Greasby, is due to be decided by Wirral Council this evening, and the officer recommendation is to refuse that application as well. It was reported in the *Wirral Globe* last week that 6,000 people have signed petitions against the application, further demonstrating the strength of feeling in Wirral West, and wider Wirral, against development on the green belt. I have previously called on Leverhulme Estates to abandon its plans to build homes on the green belt in Wirral West, and I do so again.

Wirral’s local plan is currently going through its inspection process, but the plan, which was submitted to the Secretary of State in October last year, states:

“Sufficient brownfield land and opportunities exist within the urban areas of the Borough to ensure that objectively assessed housing and employment needs can be met over the plan period. The Council has therefore concluded that the exceptional circumstances to justify alterations to the Green Belt boundaries...do not exist in Wirral.”

Local people are extremely concerned about the actions of Leverhulme Estates and a series of other developers that are actively challenging that position.

**Jon Trickett:** Has my hon. Friend had a similar experience to ours, where the houses built on the green belt are often not accessible financially to local people? It adds insult to the injury of losing green belt land when their children or grandchildren cannot afford to live in the houses that are being built.

**Margaret Greenwood:** My hon. Friend points to a serious problem that we see in constituencies up and down the country. Developers want to build homes on Wirral West’s precious green belt, while local residents want to preserve it for the benefits its brings to health and wellbeing, as well as for environmental reasons. I stand with local residents in their fight to protect the green belt.

Brownfield land is not a static resource. Over time, some brownfield land leaves local authority registers as it is reused and new brownfield land enters the register as it becomes available. It continues to be a renewable resource, and every effort should be made to ensure that it is used to the greatest possible effect.

The Government should bring forward much stronger protection for the green belt as a matter of urgency. We need to see policy that drives the development of brownfield sites to build the truly affordable, zero-carbon homes the country so desperately needs.

2.6 pm

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills

[Greg Smith]

(Wendy Morton) on securing an incredibly important debate, as the other place continues its deliberations over the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. I worked alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on many amendments. We will start to see some big wins in protecting the countryside from development on green belt, open countryside and greenfield sites, which will push the Government much more towards their stated aim of brownfield development.

I will start by trying to define what we are talking about. It is not just the green belt. That is a technical term. The green belt is vital to many constituencies, but in mine, we have very little technical green belt. What we have is 335 square miles of open countryside. Ninety per cent of the land in the constituency that I am fortunate enough to represent in this place is agricultural.

I echo the points made by the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet when I say that it is important to remember when we debate these matters that there is a point to the countryside. It is not just there to be pretty and beautiful, although it is both of those things. It is not just there for people to enjoy for leisure: to walk, camp and do all of the things we enjoy the countryside for. It has specific purposes. First, obviously, to produce the food and drink that we all enjoy eating and drinking. It is part of the vital backbone to our national economy. It is also important to things such as water management, allowing drainage to run, rivers to flow and chalk streams to be vibrant and active. The more we build over open countryside, green belt and agricultural land, the greater the risk there is to those things.

I will give a couple of examples from my own constituency. When the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill was in Committee, I used the village of Ickford as an example when speaking to some of the amendments on flooding. The village is small and close to the Oxfordshire border with Buckinghamshire. Deanfield Homes has almost finished building nearly 90 homes on a site there—a site that has always been known to flood. It is on the flood plain of the River Thames.

Throughout the planning process, every excuse under the sun was accepted. Every clever scheme that was introduced for clever drainage solutions, or whatever it might be, was proposed and ultimately accepted by the Planning Inspectorate. Of course there are no surprises in the fact that that land continues to flood to this day, to the extent that the developers have even raised the level at which they are building the houses, with the fancy graphics used on the marketing materials even showing enormous slopes in the back gardens to allow water to run off, which of course goes into the existing and older properties in that village.

Only this week, I heard from a concerned constituent in the village of Haddenham, which has seen considerable development over recent decades, who reported a development at the back of their house on The Clays, off Churchway. The drainage pond that was put in as the developers started to dig foundations has been way above its natural level for some time. The amount of concrete that is going into those foundations is forcing the water towards their cul-de-sac, which is surrounded by walls made out of a cob unique to Buckinghamshire called wychert that, if it gets wet, quickly falls down.

We therefore have to ensure that we encourage the development of the houses and commercial properties that we need on brownfield and regeneration sites; I very much appreciate the soundbite that my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills came up with, namely “the regeneration generation”. It is important that we are cautious about the impact that development on the countryside has on flooding.

The big issue, of course, is food security. The more we build over our countryside—our farmland and prime agricultural land—the lower our self-sufficiency in food will drop. We are already down to about 60%. Of course we will never hit 100%, because there are lots of things that we like to eat and drink that cannot be grown in this country. Nevertheless, the more we build over our agricultural land, the more reliance we will have on imports, which is crazy.

I was pleased when, off the back of an amendment that I tabled to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, the Government and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities agreed to put into the consultation on the new NPPF a reference that food production can be “considered” in the planning process for the first time. That is important and I urge the Minister to ensure that that change makes it through to the final NPPF. More than that, however, I urge her to ensure that planning authorities up and down the land are given a clear instruction that that is now available to them and they can use it.

A big flaw in the current NPPF—the previous NPPF, if we can call it that—is that the best and most versatile agricultural land was often walked all over and ignored by planning authorities and indeed the Planning Inspectorate. It would therefore be much appreciated by my constituents if the Minister could give some assurances in her response about the pressure that the Government will apply to planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate on the provisions that will hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, be in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act and the new NPPF.

My last point is about consistency within the Planning Inspectorate, because if we are to achieve the ambition of the homes, commercial properties and solar panels that we need being on brownfield sites, or on rooftops in the latter case, rather than across our fields, we will need consistency in the planning process. I have a perverse case that has come to light regarding land—open countryside—that was always believed to be protected as a buffer zone next to the town of Princes Risborough in my constituency. Despite two previous decisions by the Planning Inspectorate saying that the land should be protected, a third planning inspector has now granted retrospective permission to a number of plots that have been developed on the site, so the residents of the hamlet of Ascot and the nearby hamlet of Meadle are up in arms. We need consistency from the Planning Inspectorate when it considers such matters and—if it can be achieved through the Minister’s good offices—we need that clarity to be pushed down, not only to planning authorities but to the Planning Inspectorate.

The facts speak for themselves. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and others have mentioned, the plots are out there on brownfield land. The CPRE’s data is pretty clear: there is space for 1.2 million homes. The Government’s manifesto talked of an ambition to build 300,000 houses, whereas brownfield

development can deliver 1.2 million without touching a blade of grass on the green belt—precious agricultural land, open countryside, nature reserves and so much more. I urge the Government to be bold in their ambition to move towards brownfield development.

**Margaret Greenwood:** The hon. Member has made the case very clearly. Does he agree that we need a much more positive way to talk about brownfield development? Wirral Council's plans for the Wirral, which is a peninsula, involve the development of the east side of the borough, which has brownfield sites with fantastic views of the Liverpool city skyline. Brownfield sites can be incredibly exciting urban developments that people will want to live in, but we need the political drive to make sure that they happen. The design of many brownfield sites can be very attractive for people.

**Greg Smith:** I fundamentally agree with that proposition. Lots of brownfield sites offer spectacular views—whether of a skyline or out towards the countryside. The big challenge is political ambition, but we also need recognition within the tax system through the infrastructure levy to ensure that prospective developers do not look at a brownfield site and a comparator in the green belt or open countryside and say, “It is far cheaper for us to develop the countryside.” If we had a sliding scale to make it cost-neutral to the developer, so that they paid far less in the infrastructure levy or another form of taxation to develop a brownfield site, that would be a quick political win to get us to the brownfield development that I think all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in the debate want to see.

**Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that I want to start the wind-ups at 14.38.

2.17 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank you for calling me, Ms Fovargue, and I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for setting the scene. I supported her request to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate. We are discussing English planning rules, so I cannot share any knowledge from that perspective, but I wish to sow a Northern Ireland perspective into the debate, as I always do, because what we have in Northern Ireland is mirrored in England. I will also reflect on the contributions of right hon. and hon. Members.

I congratulate the Minister on her new role. I know that she will put her energy and commitment into her position, and I look forward both to her response and to her contributions in her role in the future.

The NPPF states:

“Planning policies and decisions should promote an effective use of land...in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously-developed or ‘brownfield’ land.”

It goes on to instruct local planning authorities to

“give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land...and support appropriate opportunities to remediate despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated or unstable land”.

That is the thrust of where I am coming from, because my constituency has utilised brownfield opportunities over the years, but there is still opportunity there. It took a long process to convince the planning authorities—I understand that the planning system in Northern Ireland is different from that on the mainland.

I represent an area that has a lot of land that is not under permitted development. Although our planning system is different, the problems are the same. It is incredibly costly for a developer to develop a brownfield site, with remedial costs on top of the cost to build, which is more expensive in Northern Ireland due to the Northern Ireland protocol. My goodness, I have to mention the Northern Ireland protocol in every debate I attend, because it affects us. It affects us in planning and in everything in life—it affects the very air I breathe—so its impact cannot be ignored.

New housing developments have to do a number of things. There is a delicate balance to strike between meeting the need for houses and protecting our natural environment, and I am not sure that the balance is being struck; what hon. Members have said today indicates that it is not. As the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, new housing developments must deliver affordable housing for people to buy and they must develop infrastructure, whether that be for storm water, sewerage, roads, footpaths or street lighting. In Northern Ireland, a great deal of that development is not put in the hands of the Departments but in the hands, and indeed the moneys, of the developer.

I have lived in the Ards area and peninsula for all but four years of my life. I am pleased that the Minister—and, I think, her husband—came over to my constituency last summer. I was pleased to have her come and see what she told me was the beauty of my constituency, including Strangford lough. I know that the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for some time, also had an opportunity to go there on regular occasions, including to Mount Stewart and down the Ards peninsula where I live. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty and of special scientific interest, so there are broad controls over what can happen there. Over the years, we have been able to develop brownfield sites down the Ards peninsula. Whether it be Ballyhalbert, Portavogie or Carrowdore, where there was land available, or Ards town—the main town—Comber, Ballynahinch or Saintfield, all that brownfield land has probably been taken.

It is important to have the infrastructure. For 26 years, I was a councillor for Ards and North Down Borough Council, and I had a particular interest in planning. I recognised early on that there was an opportunity to move towards brownfield sites, and we moved that way and relaxed planning rules to ensure that brownfield sites could be used. Let us be honest: factories—in the linen sector, for example—had closed down, and they were never coming back, so that land was going to lie there for ages. It seemed logical to move in that way, so we did over time, but it took the planning laws to change.

The Library briefing succinctly sums up the issue when it says that:

“CPRE (formerly the Campaign to Protect Rural England) has argued there is sufficient brownfield land to meet England's housing needs, noting that ‘there is space for at least one million homes on suitable brownfield land’.”

It continues:

“The planning consultancy Lichfields has argued that brownfield land ‘can only be a part of the solution to the housing crisis’”, which we have to recognise. It then says that Lichfields “noted that suitable brownfield land is often not available in places where there is more need for new homes.”

[*Jim Shannon*]

For example, in Belfast, some of the land along the River Lagan lay derelict for ages, but all of a sudden, it is a lovely housing development. A lot of work was done around the River Lagan, so the properties on that land became very attractive, as they did in Belfast harbour and across other parts. Land may look derelict and as though nothing can be done with it, but we have to recognise that it can be.

I will conclude, because I understand that the timescale for speeches is about seven minutes, Ms Fovargue. We have to make sure that the community is always involved and that we bring people with us. What I want to say is: “You don’t go agin them—if you go agin them, you get nowhere.” That is important and it is what we try to do back home. I do have concerns and issues about planning in my area, so I urge the Government and the Minister to continue the process that they have started and to ascertain the best way forward to ensure that we make use of brownfield sites, yet do not leave that as the only financially possible solution.

2.24 pm

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing the debate and welcome the Minister to her place. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for all the work that has been done to progress the housing agenda in the right way—in particular through new clause 21, of which I am a huge fan. I also thank everyone for their speeches today; I agree with most of what has been said.

Ultimately, we are talking about the balance between brownfield land and the green belt; it is important that we focus redevelopment on brownfield, not the green belt. We have an acute housing crisis in the UK—we need more housing—because the population is getting older, people are separating, and immigration is on the increase. We have to ensure that we have enough houses for people to live in, so there is no question but that we must build more housing. The issue is where and how we build it.

I am a fan of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. In effect, I am speaking in support of it. It will drive local growth and empower local leaders to regenerate their areas. It will regenerate the high street in town centres and give new powers for rental auctions and permanent pavement licensing. It will introduce compulsory design codes to ensure redevelopment reflects community preferences. We are giving powers back to the community, and that is really important. It will also introduce a new infrastructure levy to fund affordable housing.

On housing targets, I was never a fan of the terrible Lichfield formula, so I give the Government full credit for listening and overturning it. We now have advisory targets, which are the right thing to do. I am dead against mandatory targets, but if anything, I want to see the end of advisory targets too, because councils are best placed to decide what housing they need locally.

I commend the Government on their brownfield development programme. Some £1.8 billion was allocated in the 2021 spending review, including £300 million of

locally led grant funding to unlock smaller brownfield sites and £1.5 billion to regenerate underused land, which is expected to unlock up to 160,000 homes. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), who spoke about permissions. We could build 1.2 million houses right now if there was the will to do so. Again, there is no need to go anywhere near the green belt.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): That 1.2 million figure keeps being thrown around, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that that represents the total existing capacity? It is not an annual figure. The Government’s target remains, I think, 300,000 new homes each and every year.

**James Sunderland:** My understanding is that 1.2 million is the overall figure. It is important to say that. That is what Government sources have told me, so I am inclined to believe it.

Bracknell is pioneering the nationwide move to use brownfield sites. Some £2.3 million has been allocated to Bracknell Forest Council to assist with three major projects: £1.6 million will go to redeveloping Market Street; £570,000 will go to redeveloping the depot site off Old Bracknell Lane West—importantly, 25% and 35% of those sites are for affordable homes—and £119,000 of public money will go to creating an access road to unlock a piece of tarmacked land that will be redeveloped into four single-person homes and two wheelchair-accessible homes. So Bracknell Forest Council is doing its bit, in line with the national agenda.

In Bracknell Forest in 2019 and 2020, a total of 1,688 homes were added, of which 1,200 were built. That is a 128% increase on the previous year, so I commend Bracknell Forest Council and Wokingham Borough Council for meeting their local plans. Those Conservative-run councils have a proud record of meeting local plans and delivering homes.

I will make a slightly negative point about residual land, however, which is important because my constituency area is deemed to be 41% built up—it is mainly an urban, built-up area. Surrey Heath, next door, is 31% built up, Wokingham is 23%, Windsor is 23% and Maidenhead is 18%, so Bracknell is already one of the most built-up areas in the south of England. That is important because we have to ensure that we are giving due consideration to the quality of life of the people who already live there. My loyalty as an MP is to those who live in the constituency, not necessarily to those who want to move into it. It is really important that we preserve constituents’ quality of life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said—this is important—that we should not be building on farming or agricultural land, golf courses, school playing fields or any other leisure areas. The people we represent have to have access to those open spaces. .

Far from encouraging building on farming land, we should be holding developers and councils to account, and issuing them punitive fines if they are doing so. We have to protect what we have; we have to feed our population. I also want to see recognition of the residual land formula in the Bill. If a constituency has only a small amount of land left, let us value that land; let us look after it and make sure that we do not build on it,

even if councils quite clearly have targets to meet—thankfully, now advisory—and as we know, section 106 money is quite attractive.

I will conclude to give my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills time at the end. My point is that building is fine in the right areas. Yes, we need more housing, but we must not build on agricultural or green-belt land. Our green and pleasant lands are very important; we must not cover them with dark satanic mills. Once they are gone, they are gone.

2.30 pm

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue, and I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate on a subject close to my heart. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) made an excellent point early on in his speech about the true definition of “green belt”, and the difference between that and agricultural land, but I reassure him that my examples today are about the green belt. Really, though, my message is more about “brownfield first”, because that is what we need to ensure.

I first became involved in politics because of a community campaign to protect huge swathes of the green belt. I set up that campaign, and although it took eight years, I protected that swathe of green belt and stopped a motorway service station from being built. A number of years on, I am back here, once again talking about protecting the green belt. My message is that I will never give up.

All colleagues have spoken passionately about the need to build on brownfield sites first. Like others, I understand that there is a need to build more houses in this country, including in Erewash, and to support those, such as our younger generations, who want to become homeowners, but that should not come at the expense of the green belt. I welcome the Government’s initial steps in pursuing the “brownfield first” policy; I am also pleased that they will end the so-called duty to co-operate, which made it easier for urban authorities to impose their housing on suburban and rural communities. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, I am wary of the watering-down of that commitment. The Government need to do more, but I emphasise that green-belt land should only ever be built on as a last resort.

I am concerned that local authorities such as Erewash Borough Council are coming under increasing pressure to include green-belt land in their core strategy, partly due to unfair housing targets being imposed on them. Despite expressing my views to Erewash Borough Council, there are still plans to build 6,000 houses in the borough, the majority of them on the green belt, including around Kirk Hallam and Cotmanhay. I campaigned tirelessly to prevent those proposals from going ahead, but sadly without success. The description that the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) gave of the impact on his community mirrors the impact that such building would have on my communities.

We do have brownfield sites available across Erewash, as well as a considerable number of empty properties, mainly above retail sites in the town centres of Long Eaton and Ilkeston. Erewash has a proud industrial heritage, and there should be a planned approach to

access those empty and derelict properties, with the option of converting them to residential properties. There are already some examples of that happening in Erewash, but not enough: the Poplar pub on Bath Street, which is the high street in Ilkeston, has now been replaced by housing and retail units. While it is always sad to see the demise of our pubs, that development will play its part in the redevelopment of Bath Street—so important for a thriving community—as well as taking pressure off our green belt. Maximising those kinds of opportunities first surely must be the strategy moving forward.

On 21 March last year, I wrote to the Secretary of State requesting a meeting, along with the leader and chief executive of Erewash Borough Council, to discuss the specific situation in Erewash. That request was passed to the then Housing Minister—that was a few Ministers ago—but I am still waiting for that meeting. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) to her place today; hopefully, she will be in post for a sufficient length of time for that meeting to take place.

Today’s debate has provided a welcome opportunity to raise awareness of why the “brownfield first” policy is the right path to choose. It is clear that building on brownfield land plays an important role in regenerating our communities across the country. I welcome the Government’s initial steps to pursue the “brownfield first” policy. Nevertheless, they need to fully commit to it and do more.

2.35 pm

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I also welcome the new Minister to her place and express a genuine hope that she improves on the 87-day average tenure of her four predecessors, not least because I have to meet the new Ministers once they are in post to decide how we might work together, which I certainly hope we can.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this important debate and thank all other Members who have participated. In her thoughtful opening remarks, the right hon. Lady made an impassioned case for protecting the green belt and for prioritising brownfield development, and that point has been echoed by many other Members this afternoon. I doubt any right hon. or hon. Member would disagree with the notion that the Government should be doing everything possible to incentivise and encourage good development on brownfield sites, and to prioritise such development over that on urban green space and greenfield, wherever possible. Of course, “brownfield first” is far from a new policy concept.

As far back as 1995, the Major Government outlined proposals in their “Our Future Homes” White Paper to use the planning system and public investment to encourage more development in existing urban areas and less on greenfield sites, with an aspirational target of 60% of new homes on brownfield land. The 1998 planning for the communities of the future policy statement, published by the Blair Government, set out a general preference for building on previously developed sites first; the 2000 planning policy guidance note 3 specified a brownfield target of 60%, with the aim of promoting regeneration and minimising the amount of greenfield land being taken for development. That 60% brownfield target

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

remained in place throughout the life of the Blair and Brown Governments and was carried forward by the Conservative-led coalition Government into the 2012 national planning policy framework.

In short, while the precise weight accorded to brownfield over greenfield has certainly fluctuated, every Government over recent decades, of whatever political persuasion, has ostensibly sought in one way or another to maximise the development potential of brownfield land. The succession of Conservative Administrations since 2015 are no exception in that regard.

All manner of initiatives have been announced over recent years to promote brownfield development, including the use of brownfield registers, the allocation of funding to unlock and accelerate development on suitable and available brownfield sites, and minor changes to the planning system to fast-track brownfield regeneration. The problem is that these recent initiatives have been and continue to be undermined by other decisions the Conservative Administrations have taken—or, in many cases, have failed to take. Let me give three examples.

First, there is the Government's reluctance to reform biased spending rules. Leaving aside the issue of whether this Government are actually going to be able to spend the £1.5 billion brownfield fund, or whether the Treasury might claw some of that funding back, one need only examine the distribution of allocations from the Government's brownfield land release fund over recent years to see that a disproportionate share of brownfield land remediation funding flows to local authorities in the south of England for no other reason than the fact that they are already relatively prosperous and have higher house prices.

If the Government were serious about delivering a more overt brownfield-focused policy, they could choose to direct more already allocated funding towards brownfield regeneration in those parts of England where urban brownfield land is relatively low value and the cost of remediating sites often prohibitively high, rather than channelling those funds into high-value housing markets where that further stokes land-price inflation.

Secondly, there is the Government's general unwillingness to intervene to enable brownfield development. In those parts of the country where land values are relatively high, the existing incentives for brownfield land, including subsidy, are often sufficient. Instead, barriers to development in those locations more often than not relate to delivery, whether that be problems relating to fragmented land ownership or difficulties associated with site assembly.

Again, if the Government were serious about delivering a more overt "brownfield first" policy, they could act to ensure that brownfield development takes place in areas where local planning authorities either cannot or will not build out deliverable brownfield sites themselves, whether that be, as one hon. Member mentioned, by legislating for further reform of compulsory purchase powers or by overhauling Homes England to give it a greater role in driving brownfield regeneration and supporting local authorities with land assembly, master planning, infrastructure delivery and the brokering of local delivery partnerships.

The third example is the Government's refusal to confront many of the underlying reasons why greenfield development is so much more attractive for private

developers than is brownfield land. That applies in both high and low-value land areas. In many ways, the proliferation of low-quality, car-dependent development on greenfield sites that more often than not fails to meet local housing need is a direct consequence of the Government's over-reliance on private house builders building homes for market sale to meet housing need. Again, if they were serious about delivering a more overt brownfield-focused policy and reducing greenfield market sale sprawl, the Government could take steps to ramp up social housing-led development on those brownfield sites with genuine viability challenges and limited prospects for market development, not least by more effective use of grant funding.

However—here we come to what is the nub of the issue in many ways—even if the Government did act in those and other ways to increase the overall quantum of brownfield development, the fact remains that brownfield development alone will almost certainly never be enough to meet the country's housing need. The evidence on that fact is perfectly clear. There are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable, in the right location and able to provide the type of homes required to meet local housing needs and aspirations.

The CPRE figure is correct, but it is existing total permissions over a very long period. Analysis published by Lichfields last year makes it clear that even if every brownfield site that has been identified to date were indeed deliverable and were built out to full capacity, including by means of intensified density, the resulting development would equate to 1.4 million net dwellings over 15 years. That is just under a third of the 4.5 million homes that estimates suggest are needed in that period.

Put simply, even if the Government manage to boost rates of development on identified brownfield sites significantly, that will only ever be, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) argued in his contribution, part of the solution to the housing crisis, which is why previous "brownfield first" approaches ultimately had to incorporate requirements to ensure that local planning authorities maintained a sufficient supply of housing on deliverable sites, irrespective of whether that supply could be met in full by development on identified brownfield sites alone.

**Wendy Morton:** I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's comments, which I welcome. On that specific point about brownfield, does he agree that unless sufficient protections are in place around the green belt and really push the "brownfield first" approach, all that happens is that brownfield sites remain undeveloped, developers continue developing on the green belt and we achieve absolutely nothing?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I agree with the right hon. Member. As I hope I have conveyed to the House, I think the Government could be doing much more to ensure that brownfield sites are built out and that we do not get speculative fringe development of the type that she refers to. They could do so by, for example, putting in place effective regional frameworks, and sub-regional frameworks, for managing housing growth. There is nothing there at the moment, and a series of Members just applauded the removal of the duty to co-operate,



which, as flawed as it is, is the only mechanism in place to provide for that sub-regional housing growth. We will end up in a situation where we have no strategic planning mechanisms to go for growth, and I fear that, even with the changes in place, we will still get speculative development of the kind that the right hon. Member refers to.

I would like to make some progress, because I am conscious of the time. It is the requirement to maintain a deliverable supply of land for housing in order that objectively assessed housing need can be met that the Government, in their weakness, have fatally weakened through the proposed revisions to the NPPF. As I have argued on previous occasions, the Government clearly hope that England's largest cities and urban centres will do the heavy lifting, when it comes to housing supply, as a result of the entirely arbitrary 35% uplift to urban centres being made policy, but we already know that most of the cities that that uplift applies to almost certainly will be unable to accommodate the output that it entails.

Therefore we are left with a situation where, despite a rhetorical commitment to "brownfield first", the Government are seemingly not prepared to do what is necessary to maximise the supply of new homes on brownfield sites. Neither are the Government prepared to explore other ways in which brownfield-constrained local areas might meet local housing need, while avoiding development on urban green space and greenfield, for example by throwing the full weight of Government behind serious efforts to boost infill development in suburbs. And the Government are certainly not prepared—despite, as a series of hon. Members have mentioned, presiding over the progressive loss of large amounts of high-quality greenfield land over the past decade, often to haphazard and speculative fringe development—to consider how we might instead ensure that more of the right bits of the greenbelt are released by local authorities for development, that land value capture is maximised on those sites so that the communities in question can benefit from first-class infrastructure and more affordable housing, or that greenbelt land with the highest environmental and amenity value is properly protected, enhanced and made more accessible.

Instead, Ministers have taken the easy option, namely to amend national planning policy in a way that will ensure that fewer houses are built in England over the coming years. In the midst of a housing crisis, the fact that meeting objectively assessed housing need is seemingly no longer a Government priority is, I would argue, a woeful abdication of responsibility. As we will continue to argue, it is high time that we had a general election, so that the present Government can make way for one that not only is committed to fully exploiting the potential of brownfield sites, but serious about building the homes the British people need.

2.46 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean):** It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this debate, and for the interest it has generated from colleagues from across the House and across our United Kingdom—it would not be the same without our friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I also thank colleagues for their kind words about my role, and the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) for his words of welcome. I very much look forward to having many exchanges with him, and I stress the word "many". I am sure they will all be polite and constructive, yet probing and robust when they need to be. He has definitely eased me in very well today, and in a very kind way, although no doubt that will not continue. However, we have enjoyed today.

Let me start by saying that there is so much that we all agree on in this debate. We all agree that brownfield regeneration is absolutely vital. I again pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for her tireless championing of this cause and her constructive engagement with the Government ahead of the Report stage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. In her customary way, which we all know well, she raises so many practical points that her communities and residents have raised with her. That is a reflection of how she champions her constituents and the Black Country values that she represents so well in this House, and we all benefit from that.

We all know that redeveloping brownfield sites is not just better for the environment, but also holds the key to regenerating communities. The Government share my right hon. Friend's view that, as I think every colleague has highlighted, we should do everything we can to protect our precious green-belt, greenfield, open-space and countryside land, while also making the best possible use of land that has already been developed—land that usually already benefits from mains drainage, power and road access.

That is exactly why the Government have pursued an unambiguous "brownfield first" approach to development. Indeed, I am sure my right hon. Friend will have seen that we have announced £60 million to help councils to free up their brownfield sites for regeneration and new homes. That is part of a much bigger pot of money—catchily entitled the brownfield land release fund 2—that is worth £180 million overall. This £180 million-worth of grant funding will help to accelerate the release of land for roughly 17,600 new homes by March 2028. The brownfield housing fund has already had a transformative effect on communities. Let me answer the challenge that the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich posed about how the funding is allocated across our country. In November '22, we announced that 57% of brownfield land release funding was allocated outside London and the south-east, which is of course consistent with the Government's levelling-up aspirations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills will know about the incredible work done by our friend Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority. She also highlighted the work of Councillor Mike Bird, with whom she has worked closely. The West Midlands Combined Authority has been a trailblazer for brownfield redevelopment, using £153 million from the fund to unlock over 10,000 new homes on brownfield sites.

She will know about projects such as the Lockside scheme, which will see 252 well-designed, high-quality homes built at the old Caparo Engineering site, and the transformation of the Harvestime bread factory, which has already delivered 88 much-needed new homes and a thriving community. An added benefit of that development is that it has tackled some of the crime and antisocial behaviour that used to be seen at the site.

[Rachel Maclean]

Colleagues raised a huge number of points; I will try to respond to them in turn, using the time I have available. The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) gave us a fascinating insight into the civil war history of his constituency, and highlighted the similarity of the challenges facing us all, no matter which parts of our nation we represent. He asked about biodiversity and rare species on sites where development is proposed. He will know that we are putting the protection of habitats at the heart of the planning system, through the introduction of biodiversity net gain from November 2023; developers will need to assess the condition of the land they propose to develop and ensure there is better biodiversity value after development.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for all the work she has done throughout the passage of the Bill, under my predecessor, particularly with reference to new clause 21. She is working to rebalance the planning system and I listened carefully to all her comments. We should have a meeting to discuss the issues in a huge amount of detail, with the kind assistance of my officials, who have been working on this for a lot longer than the 48 hours I have had to do a massive reading sprint of all the comments and debates; we will do better justice to the issue by having a meeting. Although she said she would be obstinate, she was also incredibly polite, so I look forward to many future discussions with her.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) talked a lot about the brownfield remediation that is needed. The Government are reviewing the brownfield land planning system, and I am happy to write to her with more detail in response to some of her questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) referred to the importance of food production—the food and drink that is produced in his constituency, and across the country—which is considered in the national planning policy framework. Again, I listened to his comments. He will know that the consultation is under way, and I invite him to join the meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, or on another occasion when we can discuss the issues in more detail. I understand the frustration of some of his constituents.

The hon. Member for Strangford reminded me of a very happy trip I made to the Mourne mountains and the beautiful scenery of Northern Ireland—[*Interruption.*] I do not want to interrupt his conversation, but he reminded me of the wonderful time I had. I went through his constituency to another part of beautiful Northern Ireland, so I have seen it for myself. Although the system in Northern Ireland is devolved, we have many similar challenges and we can all learn from working with each other.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) talked in favour of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill; I was grateful to hear his support. He talked about how it will regenerate high streets and communities, which we can all welcome. He highlights the importance of local plans to the quality of life of the people who already live there.

Last but not least, I come to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup). I well remember her long record of campaigning and how she started her journey to this House. I have no doubt that she will never give up, as she set out in her motto. I hope I can assist her campaign by promising to set up a meeting with her as soon as I can; I am looking to my very helpful officials, who no doubt are scrutinising the debate closely.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for securing this useful and constructive debate. Having been in the job for two days, it is an honour to be here discussing these issues that touch all our constituents, in every single community, no matter where we live. The Government have a mission to level up the United Kingdom and build beautiful homes in the places where people want to live. We all want homes to be available for our children—or in my case, my granddaughter. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend; she talked about the excitement of first getting the keys to her new home, and that is the balance we seek to achieve in our work. We are thoroughly committed to working with all hon. Members across the House in that endeavour, and we will continue to build the right homes in the right places for the people who need them most.

2.55 pm

**Wendy Morton:** I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her speech, and Members from across the House who joined the debate. We have had a really good debate, representing many constituencies up and down the country, and showing that “brownfield first” and protecting the green belt is not just a southern or northern issue, but an issue right across the country that can play a really important part in the Government’s levelling-up agenda.

I gently say to the Minister that she should take a clear but strong message back to her Department, after 48 hours in the job. I am sure she is under no illusion that the clear message, as right hon. and hon. Members will agree, is that we are looking for a meaningful, stronger commitment from the Government when it comes to protecting the green belt, demonstrating the commitment to deliver on brownfield regeneration, and clarity on some details of the policy. There is real interest, passion and energy for this on the Back Benches.

We won some concessions in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, but the battle is not over. I will not be giving up; neither, I am sure, will many others. We know that we need housing, but it needs to be the right housing and in the right place, and regeneration generation is a key part of that. Let us get on and deliver it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of brownfield development and protecting the green belt.

2.57 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Sunscreen Products: VAT

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of VAT on sunscreen products.

We should be united across this House in our efforts to beat cancer, and that means all cancers—not just the ones it is politically expedient to target. Melanoma is the fifth most common cancer in the UK, killing 2,300 people each year. It receives only a fraction of the political attention it deserves, especially when we consider that 90% of cases are preventable with adequate skin protection—that is more than 2,000 lives we could save each year.

In recent years, both melanoma and non-melanoma cancers have been on the rise across the UK, with around 16,000 new cases of melanoma diagnosed each year—90% of which, as I said, could be prevented by staying safe in the sun. With Cancer Research UK finding that getting sunburnt just once every two years can triple a person's risk of melanoma, which sunscreen plays a vital role in preventing, it is just common sense that we should work together to make sunscreen products that bit more affordable for our constituents.

With the support of several organisations and Members across the House, my VAT Burn campaign seeks to reform the value added tax charged on sunscreen products of SPF 30 and above—products deemed by the NHS to provide significant enough coverage to our skin if applied correctly. Removing VAT from sunscreen is not a radical idea; in fact, when asked, most people are surprised, if not shocked, that VAT is charged on sunscreen. It is not a novel idea; both the US and Australia have made sunscreen exempt from VAT-style taxes. But removing VAT is a necessary idea—one that should, can and must be done to promote sun safety measures and reduce cases of skin cancer. It would be an important step to demonstrate the UK Parliament's commitment to sun safety and send a clear message to the public about the importance of sunscreen.

We should not stop there. As in Australia, removing VAT from sunscreen should go hand in hand with an awareness campaign. The Australian Slip, Slop, Slap campaign was a huge success, and there is no reason why something similar could not be replicated in the UK. This is not hard. As Australia and the US have shown, any barriers to implementing this policy change are surmountable. That is why there are two folds to my VAT Burn campaign: first, to reform the value added tax charged on sunscreen products; secondly, education and awareness around skin protection from the sun. I encourage colleagues present today and others to sign early-day motion 839, in my name, which calls on the Government to launch an Australia-style awareness campaign around skin protection in the sun and the risks of prolonged sun exposure.

Sunscreen products are currently treated and defined as cosmetics or luxury goods for VAT purposes, which, given their clear health benefit, is unacceptable and unjust, particularly with temperatures rising—although,

I must say that sunscreen should not be worn only when we perceive it to be hot outside. It should be worn all year round, which is why I launched this campaign in February, on World Cancer Day, and not at a sunnier time.

I am incredibly passionate about this issue, and I will put front and centre the reasons why. People like me, whether because of background, class or opportunities, do not tend to end up in this place. For those who do, we end up in politics, I hope, to create positive change for us and for our communities, but most importantly, for our constituents. Not many 30-year-olds—nor Members of Parliament, for that matter—can speak from a position of experience of having survived melanoma twice. It would be a dereliction of duty to my fellow cancer survivors, my surgeon and my family if I did not use that experience to speak up for those who cannot.

I will clarify that VAT Burn seeks a VAT exemption for sunscreen products of factor 30 and above, with a four-star UVA rating and marketed exclusively as sun protection. I will be crystal clear that this exemption will not encompass products from the cosmetics industry, such as foundations including SPF, as those products provide little or—I argue—no protection from the sun.

The anomaly of sunscreen products being exempt from VAT is longstanding, and seems perfectly reason to question, given we are in a cost of living crisis and a climate crisis. Also, given the VAT relief provided to drugs, medicines, medicinal products and aids for the disabled, it seems logical that preventive healthcare measures should be exempt too. Many of my constituents will find it hard to believe that the like of Calpol and paracetamol are exempt from VAT, but not sunscreen products.

The Government line that sunscreen products are exempt from VAT when dispensed by a pharmacist simply does not hold up to scrutiny. First, only a tiny amount of the population receive sunscreen on prescription. Secondly, prescriptions are already free in Scotland, meaning that our constituents do not receive any benefit from that. The Government, I assume, will also argue that this policy will cost the Treasury too much money. But given that it is estimated to cost somewhere in the region of £40 million, which is only 0.03% of the total amount of VAT the Government receive, it is a tiny amount of money in the context. This is clearly not about the money; it is about the Government's unwillingness to act.

We should not be talking about money, especially the money it will cost the Government. Instead, let us think of the lives that can be saved—those 2,030 lives per year that I mentioned earlier. Let us think of the effort saved by our NHS diagnosing and treating less skin cancers. The money saved within this vital public health service cannot be ignored. At the risk of pre-empting the Minister's response, why does she recognise the merits of zero-rating some products, but not sunscreen? Do the Government value the protection of our skin from the sun? Do they see merit in an Australian-style awareness campaign? Will the Minister take the proposal to the Prime Minister, and share his views on whether sunscreen products should be more affordable to our constituents?

I understand that there are some reservations about VAT exemptions, because previous zero ratings have not produced savings for consumers. That is exactly why, as part of VAT Burn, I have a pledge for retailers and producers to sign up to. I can confirm today that

[Amy Callaghan]

Morrisons has agreed to sign up to it, and, given that Tesco already absorbs the VAT on sunscreen products, I feel confident that our constituents will see a saving when it comes to sunscreen, should the Government choose to back VAT Burn.

VAT Burn is the product of months of work. To be honest, I never wanted to get to this stage. When I submitted a written question pointing out the anomaly of VAT charged on sunscreen, I had hoped that the Minister would respond positively, and the UK Government would intervene to remove the VAT and quickly bring sunscreen into line with all other healthcare products. But that was not the case. I was told people should wear hats, cover up and sit in the shade, while the Minister curiously ignored sunscreen. Those are important measures to keep safe in the sun, but only alongside wearing sunscreen.

I organised a cross-party letter to the Chancellor, and 40 MPs from every major political party signed the letter. The Chancellor, at the time the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), reiterated the UK Government's opposition to removing the VAT, citing the same arguments as before: sunscreen alone does not mean someone is safe in the sun. But no one ever said that it does; it is clearly just one part of the solution. When the Chancellor changed, and we had a former Health Secretary in post, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), I re-sent the letter. I hoped that someone with experience in health policy would see the sense in this simple change, but I received another stock rejection.

Whether it was parliamentary questions or meetings with Ministers, none of it has got us anywhere. That is why we are here today, and why the campaign is being covered in the media. It is why six charities are backing the campaign, and why I will keep pushing until we see movement on the issue—specifically, with a ten-minute rule Bill on VAT Burn on 23 February.

I touched very briefly on the organisations supporting VAT Burn. I place on record my thanks to each and every one of them for the great work they do to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of cancer and its impact. I thank the Teenage Cancer Trust, Skcin, Melanoma UK, Young Lives vs Cancer, Melanoma Focus, and, last but not least, Melanoma Action and Support Scotland—Scotland's only skin cancer specific charity, based in my constituency of East Dunbartonshire.

It is also a workers' issue. Too many workers spend prolonged periods of time exposed to the sun without adequate, or any, protection. I note that Police Scotland provide their officers with sunscreen if they spend prolonged periods of their shift exposed to the sun. If sunscreen were more affordable, more employers would step up and provide sunscreen products for their staff. This Government proposed to provide free sunscreen to all emergency workers. It would be useful to get an update on that from the Minister. No worker should be put at unnecessary risk of skin cancer due to a lack of sunscreen being provided by their employer.

This common-sense approach to zero rating sunscreen can help everyone. It almost feels daft that I have to stand here today and make a case for it. Let us agree to work together to make this simple change for the benefit of all our skin.

3.10 pm

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): “It won't happen to me”—that is what we all think. But then it does. It happened to me. Back in 2019, I noticed a blemish on my left arm. Knowing that both my parents had benign skin cancer, I decided to get it checked out. After a biopsy, my blemish was diagnosed as melanoma and I underwent surgery to remove the cancer. I was one of the lucky ones. The melanoma had not spread. I was not ill. I was discharged from the cancer specialist in 2020, free from melanoma. While I am left with an impressive scar on my left arm, the outcome could have been so different had I not been aware of the signs to look for and caught the cancer early.

One in 36 men and one in 47 women in the UK will be diagnosed with melanoma in their lifetime. Tragically, 2,300 people die from the disease each year. That number has included a business acquaintance of mine, who very sadly passed away in his early 40s, and BBC Radio Derby presenter Colin Bloomfield, who passed away at the age of just 33 in April 2015 after his melanoma metastasised to his lungs.

These deaths do not need to happen—86% of melanomas are preventable by adopting simple sun protection. That is why I back the call for sun protection of SPF 30 and above to be available VAT-free. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) on securing today's debate and on all the work she has done on this issue.

The Government can do a lot, but they cannot stop people going out in the sun; they can do a lot, but they cannot change the weather. But they can remove VAT from sunscreen. We need to remove every possible barrier that could stand in the way of people buying a life-saving product. At the same time, such a measure sends out the message that the Government are serious about tackling all types of cancer. From an economic perspective, a healthy workforce is a productive workforce. The cost to the NHS of not taking action against a preventable cancer must be huge. We need to break down the silos in the NHS, between the NHS and the Treasury, and between all Government Departments, and look at the cost of not removing VAT on such a product.

As is often the case, each and every one of us needs to take some personal responsibility. They say that only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. We should be taking the same preventive measures during the hot summer months here that we would if we were on holiday abroad. That includes seeking shade, wearing a hat and loose clothing, and keeping out of the sun when it is most prevalent. Through a combination of these actions, we will see a noticeable decline in cases of melanoma, which at the moment takes far too many lives, far too early, but the Government have a part to play as well.

3.13 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is pleasure to be called to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for bringing the issue forward. She and I have been friends for a long time in this House, and I am really pleased to see her in her role here. We share APPG roles and I deputise for her—not very well; she does it much better than I do. What a pleasure it is to be here.

I want to add a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, as I always do. I fully support the hon. Lady's request to reduce VAT on sunscreen products. Melanoma is a growing health problem in Northern Ireland. My office has six staff members, and three of them—50%—told me that they have immediate family members who had melanoma. One of the younger girls, who is in her early 20s, admitted that she used sunbeds until her father had third-stage melanoma. This is not a disease of the tropics. Perhaps because of our skin and where we are from, we take the sun a wee bit more aggressively than they do in the Mediterranean, for instance. We usually go boiled red to start with, and then when the pain is too much we move to the sunscreen, which we should have done at the very beginning.

It has been found that 86% of cases of melanoma can be prevented by adopting simple sun protection measures, including wearing factor 30-plus sunscreen. That is a very small thing to do, but the hon. Members for East Dunbartonshire and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and I are asking the Government to do something to incentivise that. We are not asking for a lot; we are just asking for a wee nudge in the right direction. The United States of America and Australia have already done that.

The incidence is increasing, and there are now more than 16,000 new cases of melanoma skin cancer each year in the UK. The problem is growing, and therefore the need is greater than it ever was. Of course, that does not take into account repeat diagnoses of melanoma—the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said that she got it twice.

In the 15-to-44 age group, melanoma skin cancer is the second most common cancer in males and the third most common in females. I find it difficult to comprehend why that is the case when all those people were taught the dangers of the sun in school. We were told to be careful when we go out—mum and dad told us that as well, but more often than not we ignored it.

**Amy Callaghan:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, despite people believing they do not need to wear sunscreen in Scotland, Northern Ireland and other places across the UK, it is essential that they do? They are more likely to contract melanoma if they are pale and fair haired, or have red hair, which is common in our isles.

**Jim Shannon:** In my case, with no hair.

**Amy Callaghan:** You've got a wee bit.

**Jim Shannon:** I've got a wee bit round the sides. I used to have a whole lot of hair. The hon. Lady makes a fantastic point, and it is true: we are of a fair skin, and that right away puts us in the target area.

We have the information, but for some reason the message just is not getting across. One in 36 males and one in 47 females will be diagnosed with the deadliest form of skin cancer in their lives, so we need to stop seeing sunscreen as a luxury, like a nice moisturiser. We should instead see it as an essential, like good nutrition or drinking water. If it is put in that category, the seriousness of what we are trying to achieve will be clear.

One way of getting the message across is to make it cheaper to purchase sunscreen. My speechwriter—a very busy girl—loves her holidays abroad. I think it is because it means she does not have to answer my calls

for two weeks. She has no speeches to prepare, and of course she has no internet access due to overseas roaming charges. She never buys sunscreen before she goes because it is half the price in Florida—that is where they go for their holiday every year. She waits until she gets to Florida and buys enough to bring home and do the whole year back here, because the savings are significant. Hon. Members might say that is an Ulsterman or Ulsterwoman thing, but we do look for a bargain. If it is a bargain that helps our skin and protects us, that is why we do it.

In the US, sunscreen products have been exempt from VAT-style taxes since 2012. In Australia, they are exempt provided they are principally marketed for use as a sunscreen and have an SPF rating of 15 or more. The reason for that is that in Australia and America, sunscreen is seen as an essential daily living product. That is how they categorise it. Some of us have been conditioned to see it as a holiday item, but they see it as something they need to have all the time. Many people who have never gone abroad have melanoma. It is not a holiday problem; it is a lifetime problem.

Public polling indicates that many people find the cost of sunscreen too high, and with the current cost of living crisis deepening, that cost is likely to deter increasing numbers of people from buying sunscreen. The major retailers Tesco and Asda have recognised cost as a prohibitive barrier for people buying sunscreen, and Tesco reduced the price of its own-brand sunscreen by 20% in 2021 to offset VAT. In a consumer poll—such polls are good barometers of what people are thinking—some 57% of respondents said that the product was too expensive, and 29% claimed that they would wear it daily if it were a little bit cheaper. Incentivise it, make it happen and address the issue.

The call for VAT to be removed from sunscreen was part of a sun safety campaign in 2013. That is why I support removing VAT from sunscreens that are factor 30 or more: as Melanoma Focus has said, doing so will make sunscreen more affordable and send a powerful message from the Government about the importance of skin protection. We only have one chance for our skin: it will last us our lifetime, but if we have constant cases of melanoma, then unfortunately it might not last us for the right time. I further support the recommendation that that measure be coupled with a Government-backed cross-media awareness campaign akin to the Australian Government's successful Slip, Slop, Slap campaign, which the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire referred to. It reminds me of one of those catchy 1960s tunes from when I was a wee boy—I am aging myself by saying that—but a campaign is significant.

With increasing temperatures in the United Kingdom from climate change, such a measure is becoming increasingly urgent. The hon. Member deserves great gratitude for bringing this debate forward, because—as others have said, and as those who follow my speech will say as well—this is an urgent subject. Removing VAT from sunscreen would not have been possible under EU rules, but it is now; there is nothing to restrict us, except those of us who live in Northern Ireland. I hate to say it, but in every debate I have, I have to temper everything with the Northern Ireland protocol. In Northern Ireland, we would not be able to take advantage of leaving the EU in this way, due to the protocol. However, that is a different issue for another day.

[Jim Shannon]

Melanoma Focus believes that if this policy were implemented, the reduction in VAT revenue would be offset by reduced melanoma skin cancer cases and therefore reduced costs to the NHS. That is a crucial factor: if we take action to ensure that people can protect themselves more by being able to buy sunscreen that we bit cheaper, we can ensure that those people do not need ongoing healthcare, with its associated costs. That seems logical to me.

**Amy Callaghan:** The hon. Gentleman is making a great speech, and I welcome his support for VAT Burn. On his point about the EU, there are little to no advantages of Scotland being outwith the EU, but while we are tied to this place and also outwith the EU, we can reform the VAT on products such as sunscreen. We will take that tiny little benefit that we can, and we appreciate it.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. We certainly encourage the Government to take advantage of opportunities to promote better health as a result of leaving the EU.

The “Getting It Right First Time” NHS review of dermatology highlights high and increasing demand for skin cancer treatment, with 200,000 surgical operations for suspected skin cancer carried out every year, and skin cancer rates doubling every 14 to 15 years. That is the main factor driving the request being made today. When it comes to health, those are the stark figures, and I believe they highlight the need for additional workforce to meet current and future pressures, and also suggest that we need to raise sun and skin awareness to reduce pressures on dermatology services.

In conclusion, I support the call to remove VAT from sunscreen. I say to the Minister, who knows that I respect her greatly, that we make that call today because we believe it is worth supporting. The Government have taken other steps when it comes to VAT—the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire referred to sanitary products. Removing VAT from those products was something that the Government should have done; they did so, and I welcome that. Today, we make another request.

It is not just a matter of listening; it is also about taking action to protect our people and our NHS, and the future of its services. Here is a figure for everyone—85% of cancer is preventable. This is preventable, if we take some steps in the right direction. Let us take the steps in this place to prevent it right across all of this great nation, this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.24 pm

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) on her excellent work in securing this debate and on her powerful speech. I also commend colleagues from all parties in the House for their speeches.

I want to make three brief points, first about the obvious importance of sun protection, secondly about the context of the cost of living crisis, and thirdly about the importance of investment in public health.

First, on sun protection, we have heard a persuasive argument today about the importance of protecting ourselves from skin cancer. Quite clearly, it is a threat that can be managed and that we can protect ourselves from, and the hon. Member is absolutely right to point that out. However, those 2,000 preventable deaths surely prompts a question for the Government: what is the state of their current public health work on this important matter? I hope that the Minister will be able to answer that in detail when she responds.

I also urge colleagues from all parties in the House to consider the context for families—who will perhaps have started thinking at this time about booking a summer holiday, or going away for a weekend or to the seaside at Easter—because we are living through the most serious and sustained cost of living crisis for 40 years. When families go to purchase everyday goods, they will see cost increases of around 20% for those goods in the supermarket, and there is a real issue with additional items possibly not being bought as a result. We need to understand that that is a huge risk. There have been many reports in the media of families paring back other products and services because they are under such severe pressure. I hope the Minister will consider that context and see the obvious additional importance of wise public health advice and any measures that are deemed necessary.

When we consider the cost of the summer as a whole for families, particularly those with two or even three children, which involves buying hats, sunglasses, loose-fitting clothing—as we heard earlier—and sunscreen, there are quite obviously considerable extra costs for the many families who are thinking about a summer holiday, either in the UK or abroad. Obviously, sunscreen is part of that cost, so the point that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire made about the cost of sunscreen is an important one.

Finally, I turn to the need for more investment in public health. It is noticeable that in this country we have a very strong tradition of public information campaigns, which have actually been very successful over the years. Some of us will remember campaigns such as Clunk Click, or other campaigns to try to prevent smoking or many other health risks. What are the Government prepared to do to try to prevent the risk of melanoma, perhaps through better advice, through the media and by directing Government information in a more effective way?

There is also a wider point about working with the health service and other public health professionals. It is a tragedy that since 2010, and certainly for the period immediately before the pandemic, there was a cut in Government spending on public health. In my opinion that is a tragedy, and sadly many important health priorities were allowed to drift in that time, including action to tackle smoking, and there may well be other important measures that were not supported, possibly including the battle against melanoma.

I am conscious of time, so to conclude, this is an important health issue, and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire has made an interesting point. This debate is also timely, given that this is the time of year when many families are booking holidays and considering what to do in the summer, and at Easter and in other holiday periods approaching in the spring. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response, and I hope she will address a number of the points made today.

3.28 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am delighted to participate in the debate and I pay tribute to my esteemed colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), for her pursuit of this important matter and for her excellent, comprehensive and very powerful opening speech.

My hon. Friend, along with the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), came to Westminster Hall today to speak as a survivor. That gives what they say power and authenticity. When survivors speak, it is incumbent on us all to listen to the lessons they are trying to teach us. Whether we are in government or not, what they say matters and must be listened to in that way.

It seems odd to most people that suncream is not already classified as an essential healthcare item in the UK and, as such, is not exempt from VAT. After all, we know and have heard today in some detail that suncream plays a vital role in preventing serious health conditions such as skin cancer. In all honesty, I am not aware of anybody who wears suncream for cosmetic purposes; they wear it because the consequences of exposing themselves to the sun without sunscreen are extremely serious and potentially fatal. That is because it provides protection against harmful ultraviolet radiation. Importantly, it is strictly regulated to ensure that it provides sufficient ultraviolet protection for consumers, so there is no sense or logic in classifying it as a cosmetic product.

As we have heard, that is recognised in the US, where sunscreen is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, and in Canada, where it is classified as a non-prescription drug, so there is international precedent for reclassifying the product as a healthcare item. The hon. Member for Strangford reminded us of those international examples and precedents for the change that everybody in the Chamber seeks.

The debate matters, and it is even more important when we consider that skin cancer is now much more common across the UK, where around 16,000 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed each year. Of the 16,000 people who are diagnosed, about 2,300 will die. Cancer Research UK concludes that being sunburnt just once every two years can triple the risk of melanoma, and statistics show that more than one in four skin cancer cases are diagnosed in people under 50. When we consider the cost of treating the growing numbers of people diagnosed with skin cancer, removing VAT from suncream should be considered as important preventive spend. I suspect that the Minister will tell us about the pressure on the public finances and the significant contribution that VAT makes to the public finances, but, like others in the debate, I find it unbelievable that simply removing VAT from sunscreen—that one act on its own—would create insurmountable fiscal challenges for the Treasury. It would make sunscreen more affordable, and that can only be positive when we think about the quest to reduce skin cancer cases and pressure on our NHS.

Some retailers, such as Tesco, have decided to absorb the cost of VAT on sunscreen, so that at the point of sale the consumer is spared that cost. It is worth noting that when Tesco made that announcement, in May 2021, consumers were outraged to discover that sunscreen

was subject to VAT. There is a lesson in that outrage for all of us and for the Government: we are working in a situation in which the public believe one thing when the reality is entirely different. Of course, the public are using logic, which we all want the Government to use. The work that Tesco and other retailers have done is to be applauded, but it is a pity that the Government will not and have not taken the lead on the issue and shown that they understand the importance of making that important health product VAT-free.

Tesco made the decision to absorb the cost of VAT on its sunscreen products because, after it did some research, it discovered that 57% of adults think sunscreen is too expensive, 29% say that they would wear it daily if it was a little bit cheaper and 31% of parents—this is important in terms of the stats for melanoma—state that they cannot always afford to apply sunscreen to the whole family. That means that this is not really a debate about sunscreen; it is a debate about public health. It is hugely disappointing that the Government are content to leave this important public health concern to the discretion of retailers, who have taken a lead on the issue. It is important that retailers have done so when the Government have not acted, because we know how financially challenged households are at this time.

I do not want to second-guess what the Minister will say, but I suspect that she will say that high factor sunscreen is available on the NHS on prescription for certain conditions, and therefore is provided VAT-free when dispensed by a pharmacist. That point has been made to me in the past. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire said, that does not really help someone in Scotland; to be honest, it does not really help all the people who do not get it on prescription but who would benefit enormously from using it.

Removing VAT from sunscreen for everybody will help make the product just a little cheaper during these difficult times. More people would be able to stretch to affording it and would get the protection they need, and it would thereby help to prevent some of the 16,000 diagnoses a year of melanoma. We all urge the Minister to rethink. This is not a debate about the wider principle of VAT—we understand that VAT is levied on certain products. It is about VAT on sunscreen. When I have asked about the issue in the past, I have been told, in great detail, why VAT matters. VAT does matter, but the Treasury is well able to forgo VAT on this particular product, for the sake of public health.

The levy on this particular product has to end. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire said, that would logically go alongside a public health campaign on the importance of wearing sunscreen. Such measures would ultimately take pressure off our NHS. I urge the Minister to ensure that sunscreen is no longer categorised as a cosmetic item—that is just daft; it is ludicrous. We need to call it what it is. Sunscreen is an important weapon in our armoury for tackling melanoma.

3.37 pm

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a particular pleasure to serve in this debate with you, Mr Sharma, my parliamentary neighbour, as Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) on securing the debate and raising this important health issue. I am pleased to be here on behalf of the Opposition and I thank all hon. Members

[James Murray]

for their contributions. People have spoken powerfully about the impact that skin cancer can have on people's lives, and on friends and family.

There is consensus among hon. Members present about the importance of sunscreen products and their growing importance in our lives. While these products have perhaps historically been associated more with travel to warmer climates, the past year has demonstrated how susceptible we are to heatwaves and the intense periods of direct sunlight they can bring to the UK.

I echo what other hon. Members have said today. Organisations including Cancer Research UK have long made clear that the amount of UV exposure over someone's entire lifetime is one factor that contributes significantly to the risk of skin cancer. According to the research, melanoma is the fifth most common cancer in the UK, with 16,000 cases a year, of which almost nine in 10 cases are preventable. It is vital that people can access sunscreen products when they need them.

As we heard earlier, high factor sunscreen products are already available on the NHS prescription list for a few specific conditions, and are exempt from VAT when dispensed through pharmacies. However, we are only too aware of the crisis facing our NHS and the difficulties people can encounter trying to secure an appointment with an NHS GP. That may restrict access to prescriptions, especially in cases where a repeat prescription is not available.

In her response, it would be very helpful if the Minister could share with us any information she has on the number of people receiving sunscreen products as a prescription on the NHS, and how many receive their prescription free of charge. It would also be helpful if she could update us on the average waiting time to obtain an NHS GP appointment. I am sure that the Minister will also set out the Government's position in response to the call from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire. The Opposition appreciate that expanding the scope of VAT release is a complex consideration that can add pressures to public finances.

There is a wider point about the affordability of sunscreen and other products that consumers may need to buy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said. As the cost of living crisis has deepened, costs for ordinary households have risen to record highs. The Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted that living standards will be worse at the end of this Parliament than they were at its start. It has also outlined that real post-tax household income is expected to fall by 4.3% in 2022-23—the biggest fall since comparable records began nearly 70 years ago.

Finally, I would be interested to hear from the Minister what discussions the Government have had with sunscreen product manufacturers and retailers to determine what steps can be taken to ensure that such products are affordable for consumers. I would be grateful if she could also set out what support those manufacturers have said they may want or need from the Government to help make sure this can be achieved.

3.41 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and I congratulate the hon. Member for

East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) on securing the debate. We had a very interesting, helpful and detailed conversation in November, which was quite amicable, so I hope she will forgive me for saying that my recollection of our conversation is not that I said that people should wear a hat. I was merely pointing out to her that the NHS advice is that we should all wear appropriate clothing, particularly when we are in strong sunshine and in hot places. I think we all accept that sunscreen is but one part of our protection against the damage that the sun can do to us. If I remember correctly, she acknowledged that sunglasses, hats, appropriate clothing and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) said, staying inside during the hottest times of the year are all part of that jigsaw.

**Amy Callaghan:** I agree that we had a very amicable meeting, but I do not think it was necessarily helpful to my VAT Burn campaign. What the Minister said is correct, but there are some questions from our meeting that are still to be answered.

**Victoria Atkins:** I very much accept that, and I genuinely welcome the debate. I particularly thank her and my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash for bringing their personal examples into the debate. It is very important as part of our national conversation—not just on this topic, but on all sorts of topics that the House rightly debates. When we do so, it does not always get the attention it deserves, but it is important that people can bring their experiences to the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought the experiences of his staff and their families into the debate, underlining the point that has been made fairly and effectively about how common melanoma is in the UK and the particular impact it can have on people under the age of 50.

As one would expect, the NHS advises people to wear suitable clothing, to spend time in the shade during the hottest times of the day, and to wear high factor sunscreen with at least a four-star UVA rating. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) made an interesting point when he said that this is the time of year when a lot of people start to book summer holidays, whether here in the UK—I would always recommend the coastline of Lincolnshire for a holiday, unsurprisingly—or overseas. There is some interesting research that I looked into as part of my preparation not just for today's debate but for the meeting I had with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire in November. Increased exposure to intense sunlight is thought to have increased because more people can travel internationally and to go abroad, and there is some thinking that that may explain the increase in the rate of melanomas since the early 1990s. It is important to note that, as although sunscreen is an important part of our defence, where we go and what we do when we go abroad on holiday also has an impact.

I am sorry to fulfil hon. Members' predictions about what I would say, but the truth is that any Treasury Minister worth their salt would make the point that VAT is a broad-based tax on consumption. The 20% standard rate applies to most goods and services, including sunscreen products purchased over the counter. A couple of misconceptions about that seem to have arisen, which I will correct.



We do not have categorisations of cosmetic products for the purposes of VAT, or the Canadian categorisations that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) described. Either products are bought over the counter, and will therefore have VAT charged on them, or they are prescribed by a doctor or other prescribing professional. Those are the categorisations. VAT applies to all products bought over the counter, including paracetamol and Calpol. In their examinations of patients, GPs carefully analyse whether families are able to buy products over the counter or need them to be prescribed.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran is right that the NHS can provide sunscreen on prescription in certain restricted circumstances. Doctors can prescribe sunscreen, which will therefore be provided without incurring VAT, to people who suffer from certain skin conditions characterised by extreme sun sensitivity, including porphyria. In addition, it can be prescribed to patients who have an increased risk from UV radiation because of chronic disease, therapies or procedures. The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) asked for numbers; I do not have the numbers from either the Department of Health and Social Care or the NHS to hand, but I will happily provide them to the House of Commons Library.

There are no plans to change the VAT rating on sunscreen.

**Amy Callaghan:** On that point, will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I will develop my argument, and then I will give way to the hon. Lady.

I know that hon. Members have said they suspect they know what I am going to say, but I cannot change the fact that VAT is one of the main forms of revenue for the UK Government. In the year 2022-23, VAT is predicted to raise some £157 billion. To put that into context, that is almost the entire cost of our NHS. That is how important it is as a revenue raiser for the Government so that we can fund the services we care so much about.

Against that VAT backdrop, we look at items that we want to zero-rate or exempt. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned period products; I am really proud that a Conservative Government removed VAT from period products. That is a definite benefit of our having left the EU. Starkly, evidence is emerging that such VAT cuts are not being passed on to customers by those who sell those products. I have asked for more details about that, because when Government change tax policy in order to try to help with the cost of living—

**Patricia Gibson:** On that point, will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** In a moment. It is important that those changes are passed on to the consumer, as that is the purpose of the policy. Our raw concern is that if relief is provided, not just with VAT but on other taxable items, it may not be passed on to the customer.

Colleagues across the House have rightly commended Tesco for choosing to absorb the VAT on sunscreen products within its profit margins. I stand with those Members and encourage other retailers to do the same, if this is a matter they care deeply about. While I am

delighted to hear that Morrisons will promise to pass on the cut to customers if this VAT policy is changed, I gently point out that we would expect it to do that anyway; perhaps Morrisons should be encouraged to follow the lead of its market competitor Tesco. I know not, and I had better not get involved in competition between supermarkets. However, I would very much hope that retailers—I am sure they take a close interest in their customers' ability to pay—will follow Tesco's lead.

**Amy Callaghan:** The Minister has made a number of points that I want to pick up on. While it is great that these larger businesses pick up and absorb the VAT, we cannot expect that of the small retailers, such as independent pharmacies, in our constituencies. I am thoroughly disappointed that the Minister's response is living up to expectations, to be honest. Does she recognise that the Government previously committed to reviewing VAT on sunscreen products on the Floor of the House, when the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) committed to it?

**Victoria Atkins:** There were a number of points there. First, the hon. Lady asked about independent retailers, and I fully accept what she said. I do not pretend that this is an easy decision or an easy policy area. My duty as a Minister is to weigh up the trade-offs implicit in deciding tax policy. We have to ensure that when we make changes to the VAT system, we do so fully understanding the potential consequences for other aspects of that system.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said that this change would represent a very small sum. The truth is, since the 2016 referendum, the Treasury has been encouraged to make changes to the VAT system totalling some £50 billion. Many of those changes will be commendable, and we will have a great deal of sympathy with why a Member feels compelled to make that case on behalf of their constituents. However, we have to make these difficult decisions as to which items are VAT-exempted or VAT-free and which are not, and that is why those products are so small in number.

**Patricia Gibson:** The Minister is making a powerful case as to why VAT is an important source of revenue for the UK Government, and I do not think anybody would dispute that. But if she was to do as Members in the Chamber ask and remove VAT on sunscreen, can she tell us how much that one single measure would cost the Treasury?

**Victoria Atkins:** It is very difficult to calculate. Because of the way multinational companies such as Tesco conduct their VAT returns, it is difficult to break it down. Our concern is, as I say, a practical one about the impact. Each and every time I get asked to exempt a product from VAT—this is a regular occurrence, I promise, and I completely understand why Members of Parliament would wish for such matters to be exempted—I have to conduct this trade-off. It is incredibly difficult. I very much understand the intentions behind the campaign, but this is the thinking behind why we have thus far had to say no. Of course, we keep it under review.

**Maggie Throup:** I completely understand the point the Minister is making about trade-off and balance, but will she commit to looking at the cost to the NHS of

[Maggie Throup]

melanoma as a condition? That, surely, should be balanced out against the loss of VAT. Obviously, she will have to go to the Department of Health and Social Care for that, but let us look at that trade-off and that balance in more detail.

**Victoria Atkins:** That is a very fair challenge. I keep talking about difficulties, but that is the reality of the decisions we have to make; while a lot of melanoma is caused by of exposure to the sun, even in this day and age, some melanoma will be due to sunbed use, which I know colleagues across the House will have great concerns about. Some melanoma will be from damage caused decades ago, when we were less aware of the risks of the sun, and some will have no link at all to sun damage. It will never be a straight swap.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response, and I want to follow on from what the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) said. In my contribution I referred to 200,000 surgical operations and 16,000 new melanoma cases every year, and the scale of that results in a significant cost for the NHS. We are not criticising the Minister; she is doing what a Treasury Minister has to do. We are saying, very respectfully, that there is a cost to the NHS every year. That has to be part of the mathematics of the process.

This is a very long intervention, and I apologise for that. Given that Australia and the United States of America have cut VAT on sunscreen, has there been any discussion with the relevant bodies about what those countries achieved by doing so?

**Victoria Atkins:** I do not know if there have been any discussions. I will ask, because it may be that my predecessors had them. In terms of comparisons with Australia and the United States, we have to tread a little bit carefully. With the horrendous damage that has been done to the ozone, Australia has a very particular problem with exposure to the sun, and we have to remember the strength of the sun there. I note what the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said about UVA and UVB being present in Scotland, but I do not think that anyone would suggest that Scotland has the same strength of sun exposure all year round as the sunnier parts of Australia.

**Amy Callaghan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I have been quite generous with the hon. Lady, so I will carry on. We have to tread carefully with international comparisons. On the broader point, I understand the argument, but we have a great deal of other extremely good causes that I have to look at carefully. It is the responsibility I have to bear. That is the thinking behind our approach to the VAT system.

**Amy Callaghan:** I thank the Minister very much for giving way. The point that she was getting to prior to the previous intervention hinted at the desperate need for an awareness campaign. If she will not commit to reforming the VAT on sunscreen products, will she consider an awareness campaign around exposure of our skin to the sun?

**Victoria Atkins:** I fear I may be treading on Health Ministers' toes if I commit the Department to an awareness campaign. I have already written to the relevant Health Minister to ask what plans there are to help the public on this. Again, it should not just be the Government working on this. Any parent who has a baby nowadays will be told by medical professionals—I remember that I was with my little boy—how vital it is to protect infants, babies and young children with sunscreen, and, critically, to keep them indoors at the hottest times of the day.

There is work that schools can do to help with this, and, in fairness, an awful lot of them do. I do not know if the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire is aware of this, but when there are hot days, such as during the heatwave we had last summer, schools encourage mums and dads to put sunscreen on their children before they go to school and to top it up. I think there is a greater awareness of the risks than there was 20 years ago—even than there was 10 years ago, dare I say.

On the point about the cost of sunscreen, one of the best things that the Government can do is, of course, to cut inflation. Inflation lies at the heart of many of the issues that we as a country are facing. It is precisely why in his new year speech, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made, as his very first pledge to the British public, the promise to halve inflation. We want to cut inflation, because if we cut inflation, prices across the board begin to fall. The poorest, who are the ones hurt most by inflation, will then begin to see their money going a little further, helping them with the cost of living. As well as cutting inflation, we have to get the economy growing and we need to continue on our path of fiscal prudence. That is why I have set out the Government's responsibilities when it comes to the administration of VAT and its importance as a single revenue raiser towards the cost of the public services that we care so very much about.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire asked about emergency workers. I will try to chase that one down. If I am completely honest, I was not at the urgent question, but I will get back to her on that issue. We take the point, of course, that people working in our emergency services are outside day in, day out. We absolutely accept that and we thank them for the services that they provide on behalf of us all. Whatever our disagreements in this Chamber, we can certainly agree on that.

In the fight against cancer, we are taking action to improve early diagnosis for all cancers. That is why the NHS long-term plan sets out the ambition for 75% of cancers to be diagnosed at stage 1 or 2 by 2028. A recent NHS campaign called Help Us Help You focuses on the barriers to earlier presentation across all cancer types and aims to address some of the underlying challenges to earlier diagnosis. That campaign ran during March and June of last year and in both months saw a 1,600% increase in the number of visits to the NHS website's cancer symptoms landing page. In addition, the cancer programme has worked with the British Association of Dermatologists and NHS England's out-patient recovery and transformation programme on a timed pathway for suspected skin cancers, as well as guidance on implementing teledermatology and community spot clinics. Both documents promote the use of technology and efficient pathways to prioritise and quickly diagnose suspected melanomas so that treatment can start as quickly as possible.

I conclude by thanking again the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire for highlighting this important issue and by thanking hon. Members from across the House for their contributions and, in particular, for sharing their personal experiences. I know that we all continue to advise the public to buy sunscreen but also to follow the other guidelines presented by our NHS to help to tackle skin damage. There is a need to protect people's health against the very real risks that have been presented in this Chamber today.

4.3 pm

**Amy Callaghan:** I thank colleagues from across the House for their support for VAT Burn. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), who is not in his place today, and the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for sharing their personal experiences of melanoma. I also place on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate in the first place.

I appreciate that the Minister has been generous with her time, both today and previously, but I must record my disappointment that VAT Burn is not a priority for

this Government. A lot of effort goes into campaigns like this, and I thank my team, some of whom are here today, for the huge effort that they have put into this campaign so far. VAT Burn is not over; this is literally just the beginning. I will keep pursuing this issue, including with the ten-minute rule Bill that is coming up, as I said previously. I thank everyone for their contributions thus far and I hope that Members from across the House will continue to show their support at a drop-in event that I am hosting in the first week back after the recess. They can come and hold a pledge board and get a photo, and show their support for VAT Burn; and we can show the Government and the Minister just how important the strength of feeling on this issue is across the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of VAT on sunscreen products.

4.5 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 9 February 2023

## TREASURY

### Customs Fraud and the European Union

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** In March 2018, the European Commission took the first steps towards infracting the UK, alleging that between November 2011 and October 2017, the UK had failed to prevent undervaluation fraud involving importations of Chinese textiles and footwear. On 8 March 2022, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) published its judgment, finding against the UK on most liability points.

The UK has argued throughout the case that it took appropriate steps to counter the fraud in question. However, since these infringement proceedings were raised, the UK has taken proportionate and increased steps to combat this fraud without impacting legitimate trade, including by liquidating suspect traders through enforcement action. The UK takes a comprehensive and dynamic approach to tackling customs fraud risk and evolves its responses as any new potential threats emerge.

Whilst the UK has now left the European Union and this is a legacy matter from before our departure, the Government are keen to resolve this long-running case once and for all and are committed to fulfilling their international obligations.

Throughout this process, the Government have also been conscious of the risk of further protracted legal proceedings, which could open UK taxpayers to not only a larger principal bill, but also continued substantial interest accrual. Considering this, in June 2022 the UK took the proactive step of making a payment of €678,372,885.63, which the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out in a statement to the House on 30 June (HCWS167). This represented the minimum, indisputable amount the UK considered due at that time in light of the CJEU judgment and, vitally, stopped interest accruing on this portion of the bill.

Following further discussions with the European Commission, on 13 January 2023, the UK made a final principal payment to the EU of €700,351,738.31. This constitutes the entire remaining principal due and the figure paid reflects the 12.43% share back that the UK is entitled to from its time as a member state.

On 6 February 2023, the UK made a final payment to the EU of €1,227,884,519.53, representing the interest due on the principal amounts paid. These are substantial sums but represent the final payments and draw a line under this long running case, with the UK fulfilling its international obligations.

Now that the UK is no longer part of the EU customs union, we do not have to remit any duties to the European Union, a tax that in 2021-22 represented a £4.9 billion contribution to the Exchequer. Outside the EU, we can set our own law, including tax and trade policies, that work for the UK. Furthermore, taking into account the

financial settlement with the EU, the Government have determined how an additional £14.6 billion of spending by 2024-25 can be allocated to its domestic priorities, rather than be sent in contributions to the EU. This additional spending was already included in the overall spending plans that the Government set out at previous spending reviews.

[HCWS561]

## DEFENCE

### Chemical Weapons Convention: UK Protective Programmes for 2020 and 2021

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey):** My noble Friend the Minister in the House of Lords (the right hon. Baroness Goldie DL) has made the following written ministerial statement.

The UK's chemical protection programme is designed to protect against the use of chemical weapons. Such a programme is permitted by the chemical weapons convention, with which the United Kingdom is fully compliant. Under the terms of the convention, we are required to provide information annually to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. In accordance with the Government's commitment to openness, I am placing in the Library of the House copies of the summaries that have been provided to the organisation outlining the UK's chemical protection programme for 2020 and 2021.

The attachment can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-02-09/HCWS553/>.

[HCWS553]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Air Pollution: Funding for Local Authorities

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** Today we announced our award of £10.7 million in funding to local authorities in England to help them tackle air pollution in their areas.

Across 44 different projects, we are helping local authorities to improve air quality in their local communities to benefit schools, businesses and residential areas and reduce the impact of air pollution on public health.

The air quality grants have been running since 1997 and since 2010, we have awarded nearly £53 million in funding.

This year's grant has prioritised three areas:

Projects which reduce air pollutant exceedances especially in those areas that are projected to remain in exceedance of the UK's legal targets;

Projects to improve knowledge and information about air quality and steps individuals can take to reduce their exposure to air pollution and minimise health risk;

Measures that reduce levels of fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>), including support for low-emission transport.

Schemes across England being funded include air quality education programmes for healthcare workers; traffic management schemes to reduce congestion and

emissions; the funding of an e-cargo bike scheme for businesses to reduce their reliance on more polluting vehicles; and the implementation of a river freight scheme in London.

The air quality grant scheme will reopen for new applications in summer 2023.

<i>Authority</i>	<i>Value funded (£)</i>
Bedford Borough Council	36,332
Bedford Borough Council	113,071
Blaby District Council	573,701
Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council	120,309
Buckinghamshire Council	120,000
City of York	101,375
Colchester Borough Council	310,770
Cornwall Council	62,160
Derbyshire County Council	278,347
East Herts Council	126,408
Exeter City Council	367,428
Lancaster City Council Air Quality	454,576
Lincolnshire County Council (In partnership with councils for City of Lincoln, South Kesteven District, North Kesteven District, Boston Borough, East Lindsey District, West Lindsey District, and South Holland District).	58,180
London Borough of Brent	470,546
London Borough of Camden	170,645
London Borough of Enfield	223,500
London Borough of Havering	65,127
London Borough of Havering	35,139
London Borough of Islington	282,680
London Borough of Lewisham	248,021
London Borough of Redbridge	323,774
London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham	277,950
Maldon District Council	129,000
Medway Council— Environmental Protection Team	279,533
Norfolk County Council	171,545
Oxford City Council	192,993
Reading Borough Council	327,000
South Ribble Borough Council	53,244
South Tyneside Council	201,005
Southampton City Council	248,198
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council	256,285
St Helens Borough Council (in partnership with Warrington Borough Council)	405,227
Surrey Heath Borough Council	12,280
Swindon Borough Council	148,902
Telford and Wrekin Council	147,615

<i>Authority</i>	<i>Value funded (£)</i>
Tunbridge Wells Council (in partnership with councils for Ashford Borough, Canterbury City, Dartford Borough, Dover District, Folkestone & Hythe District, Gravesham Borough, Kent County, Maidstone Borough, Medway, Sevenoaks District, Swale Borough Council, Thanet District, Tonbridge and Mailing Borough)	175,675
West Midlands Combined Authority (in partnership with councils for Birmingham City, Coventry City, Dudley Metropolitan Borough, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough, Solihull Metropolitan Borough, Walsall Metropolitan Borough and the City of Wolverhampton)	918,531
West Northamptonshire Council	292,378
West Yorkshire Combined Authority (in partnership with councils for Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds City, and Wakefield)	220,457
Westminster City Council	72,521
Westminster City Council (delivered through Cross River Partnership, in partnership with City of London Corporation, London Boroughs of Ealing, Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Islington, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Richmond, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth and Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea)	1,000,000
Wirral Borough Council	171,200
Wokingham Borough Council	213,332
Worcestershire Regulatory Services (on behalf of councils for Worcester City, Wyre Forest District, Wychavon District, Malvern Hills District, Bromsgrove District, and Redditch Borough)	248,400

[HCWS555]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### The UK and the Arctic

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** The Minister of State (Overseas Territories, Commonwealth, Energy, Climate and Environment), my noble Friend Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, has made the following written ministerial statement:

Today, the Government are publishing a new UK-Arctic policy framework, “Looking North: The UK and the Arctic”. This updates the UK’s current Arctic policy framework, “Beyond the ice”, published in 2018.

“Looking North” brings together all the UK’s policies and strategies relevant to the Arctic under a single, integrated framework, in line with the integrated review. It builds on the Ministry of Defence’s “The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North” paper, published in March 2022. It outlines the full range of UK interests in the region, and sets out the long-term priorities and objectives which shape our engagement and actions on the Arctic.

This new framework is designed to represent evolution, rather than revolution, in the UK’s approach to the Arctic, underlining our long-standing interests in the region, particularly at a time of heightened tension in the region, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and amid growing competition from China. Our approach will remain dynamic, responsive to changes in the Arctic region and across the globe.

Our long-term strategic objective remains for the Arctic to be a peaceful and stable region, characterised by co-operation. The new framework reiterates that the UK will remain an active, influential and reliable partner in the Arctic.

In doing so, the UK will focus activity across four priority areas:

Partnering and collaborating—the UK is open to the world, with a global network of friends and partners, and with the opportunity to forge new and deeper relationships.

Protecting the climate, people and environment—the Arctic is, first and foremost, home to the people who live there. But climate change poses an existential threat to the Arctic as we know it, and to all who rely on its ecosystems and biodiversity.

Preserving security and stability—the Arctic has, for many years, enjoyed constructive international co-operation and has, historically, been characterised by low tension. The UK remains committed to the long-term stability and security of the Arctic region.

Promoting our shared prosperity—the UK aims for a prosperous Arctic, where economic and commercial development is achieved in a way that is safe, responsible and sustainable. The people who live in the Arctic should benefit from increasing prosperity in the region.

Through this new framework, the UK will take a whole-of-Government approach to the Arctic. Drawing on the diplomatic excellence of our diplomatic missions across the region, the defence capabilities of the UK’s armed forces, and the world-class scientific expertise of the UK Arctic research community, we will work with our partners and allies to help maintain the Arctic as a place that is safe, secure, peaceful, and well-governed, protecting its environment and the communities who call the Arctic their home. A copy of the framework has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS556]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Ambulance Services: Consultation on Minimum Service Levels

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill requires the Secretary of State to consult with such persons as they consider appropriate prior to making regulations to establish minimum service levels for relevant health services in the event of strike action. The regulations must be approved by both Houses of Parliament before they are made. The consultation requirements may be

fulfilled before and after the Bill receives Royal Assent. Minimum service levels will enable employers to issue work notices, ensuring adequate staffing for a minimum level of safety to be achieved in the event of strike action.

Minimum service levels aim to limit the impacts of strike action on the lives and livelihoods of the public and to strike a balance between the right of unions and their members to strike with the need for the wider public to be able to access key services during strikes.

This consultation focuses on minimum service levels for ambulance services, which the Prime Minister has identified as a priority, alongside fire and rescue services and rail services. Our proposal is that ambulance services should be covered in regulations as a priority recognising that disruption to blue light services puts lives at immediate risk. This consultation will help to inform a decision as to whether ambulance services should be covered by the regulations and if so the detail regarding the minimum service levels required in the ambulance service.

The consultation will open today, Thursday 9 February 2023, and will be open for a period of 12 weeks, closing on Thursday 4 May 2023.

Copies of the consultation will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS563]

### Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch: Transition Update

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** I am making this statement to update Members on the Government’s timetable to establish the Health Services Safety Investigations Body (HSSIB) and the Maternity and Newborn Safety Investigations special health authority (MNSI). The programmes of national investigations and maternity investigations currently sit in the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (HSIB).

The Health and Care Act 2022 contains provisions that will, once commenced, establish the HSSIB as a non-departmental public body. On 26 January 2022, by way of a written ministerial statement, the Department of Health and Social Care announced that a separate special health authority would also be established to continue the independent maternity investigation programme, and that both bodies were expected to be operational in April 2023.

I am today announcing a delay of six months until October 2023 to the expected establishment of both bodies. I believe this further period will enable all the necessary work to be completed to ensure a smooth transition of these investigation programmes.

In the meantime, I remain committed to ensuring that the important work of the HSIB continues, both investigations and the maternity investigations programme.

[HCWS554]

### Indemnity for the Liverpool Community Health Independent Investigation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament

giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute proposing the provision by NHS England of an indemnity that is necessary in respect of an NHSE non-statutory independent investigation into patient safety incidents and deaths at the former Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust.

This investigation follows an independent review chaired by Dr Bill Kirkup CBE into widespread failings by Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust. The review report, published on 8 February 2018, found that there were significant failings in the trust from November 2010 to December 2014.

It is important that these failings are investigated and that lessons are learnt to improve services. In response to the serious patient safety incidents described in the report, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care commissioned Dr Kirkup to conduct an independent investigation into patient safety incidents at the trust. The investigation's terms of reference cover patient safety incidents that occurred in the same period as the initial independent review addressed—namely, November 2010 to December 2014. The investigation was originally intended to submit its report at the end of 2021, but a number of factors have come together to delay its work, including challenges related to information governance and electronic document management. We now expect the investigation to have reported by spring 2024 at the latest.

NHSE is able to obtain indemnity cover from NHS Resolution through the liabilities to third parties scheme—LTPS. The scheme applies to any liability that a member of the scheme owes to any third party in respect of loss, damage or injury arising out of an act or omission in the course of the carrying out of any relevant function of that member which is a qualifying liability.

The NHS resolution indemnity will cover any sums—including any legal or other associated costs—that members of the investigation team are liable to pay in relation to legal action brought against them by a third party in respect of liabilities arising from any act done, or omission made, honestly and in good faith, when carrying out activities for the purposes of the investigation. The indemnity will apply to any work carried out in accordance with the investigation's terms of reference from the commencement of the investigation to its completion in 2024. The indemnity will cover the contingent liability of any legal action up to and following the publication of the investigation report.

The liability of the scheme for any proceedings brought against the member by virtue of section 13 of the Data Protection Act 1998, or any subsequent updating or replacement legislation (the “data protection legislation”), for all compensation payable to any claimant or any number of claimants in respect of or arising out of any one event or series of events consequent on or attributable to one source or original cause shall not exceed £50,000. Further, the maximum sum payable for such cases in any one membership year shall not exceed £500,000.

However, in view of the substantial fines that it is possible for the Information Commissioner's Office to impose in the unlikely event of a data breach, NHSE considers it prudent for the £50,000 cover available

under the NHS Resolution LTPS scheme to be “topped up” with a specific NHSE indemnity to £500,000. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days, beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before Parliament, a member signifies an objection, by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS557]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### **Biometrics Commissioner and Surveillance Camera Commissioner: Annual Report and Reappointment**

#### **The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):**

I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the Annual Report of the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner, together with the Government's response.

The Biometrics Commissioner and the Surveillance Camera Commissioner are independent statutory roles, who are appointed by the Home Secretary under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. This is the first time the commissioner, Fraser Sampson, has submitted a combined report covering both roles.

The Report covers the exercise of the Biometrics and the Surveillance Camera Commissioner's statutory functions over the reporting year. The Home Secretary has also reappointed Mr Sampson from March 2023 to continue in these roles.

I am grateful to Mr Sampson for this report, which we have published in full.

Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office. The Government's response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS560]

### **Fire and Rescue Services: Consultation on Minimum Service Levels**

#### **The Secretary of State for the Home Department**

**(Suella Braverman):** On 10 January, the Government introduced the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill in Parliament. This is part of the Government plan to ensure the ability of the unions and their members to strike whilst giving confidence to the wider public that they can retain access to key services during periods of strike action.

The Bill gives Secretaries of State the power to use regulations to set a minimum service level in six specified sectors and also specify the “relevant services” to which they apply. Fire and rescue services are defined as one of the six sectors.

The Bill sets out that where a trade union gives notice of strike action the employer may decide to issue a work notice, in accordance with the minimum service level set, ahead of the strike day(s). The work notice will specify the individuals required to work in order to meet the minimum service level and the nature of the work that they must carry out.



### Consultation

Prior to using regulations to set minimum service levels for any of the sectors in scope of the Bill, the relevant Secretary of State is required to consult such people as they consider appropriate. The Secretary of State must also consult—before specifying in regulations—the particular services to which MSLs will apply.

Today a public consultation has been published on gov.uk to fulfil these requirements in relation to the fire and rescue services. In addition, Home Office officials will continue to engage with key fire and rescue service stakeholders. The consultation will run for 12 weeks from 9 February to 3 May 2023.

The consultation sets out that the essential services in scope of a minimum service level should be those required to deal with emergency incidents that pose an immediate risk to the public. This should include but not be limited to:

- Firefighting.
- Rescues (including, but not limited to, on the road network, water rescue or rescues at height). This includes actions to avoid further harm such as rectifying potentially hazardous situations to avoid future risk of fire and rescue, for example clearance of debris on motorways and major roads.
- Dangerous substance clean-up.
- Services necessary to carry out the above, including for example control room activities. Other activities undertaken by fire and rescue services, such as fire safety audits and domestic fire safety visits, remain vital but it is less arguable that there could be an immediate risk to life as a result of strike action by staff providing these services. We therefore do not consider that these services should be subject to a minimum service level at this time. However, the consultation asks respondents to consider any further services that should be brought into scope of the minimum service level, for example, in the event of prolonged strikes by fire and rescue service staff.

The consultation invites comment on five potential approaches for setting a minimum service level for fire and rescue services. These are:

- Requiring staffing levels or fire engine availability to remain above a specified percentage relative to business as usual.
- Requiring staffing levels to be shaped by the minimum resources needed to respond to specific risks, such as a major incident.
- Requiring business as usual staffing levels to be maintained during periods of peak demand on fire and rescue services. This could include days where we would expect greater demand on the service (such as Bonfire Night and its nearest weekends), periods of severe weather such as extreme flooding or wildfires, and/or periods when other emergency services are taking strike action.
- Asking local leaders and organisational input to provide evidence to allow the Home Office to decide what the minimum service level in each of the 44 fire and rescue service areas should look like.
- Setting a national minimum level of service to be provided by fire and rescue services during periods of strike action, and then providing flexibility for local leader and organisational input to decide whether to build on that minimum level in light of their local area's needs and risk profile.

The consultation sets out that there is flexibility to use elements from different options in combination, to cover essential services.

This Government recognise the principle of workers and unions being able to negotiate over fair pay. However, the UK Government also have a duty to the public to ensure their safety, protect their access to vital public

services and to help them go about their daily lives. The fire and rescue services provide a vital role in protecting the public and it is right that we seek to ensure the public can rely on these vital services during strike periods.

I will place a copy of the consultation document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS562]

### Report on the Operation of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman):** In accordance with my obligations under section 260 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, I am today laying a report on the operation of that Act, which was prepared between May and November 2022. Copies will be available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

I have additionally commissioned Lord Anderson to undertake an independent review into the operation of aspects of the Act, drawing on the areas identified in this statutory report. He will publish his findings later this year. Further information on his appointment is available on gov.uk.

[HCWS559]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### Northern Ireland Executive Formation

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Today, the Government is introducing the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, to extend the period within which the Northern Ireland parties can form an Executive to 18 January 2024.

Over a year has passed since the then First Minister of Northern Ireland resigned. Twelve months and one Assembly election later, it is disappointing that people in Northern Ireland still do not have the strong devolved institutions that they deserve.

The restoration of the Executive, in line with the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement, remains my top priority. I will continue to do all I can to help the Northern Ireland parties work together to make that happen. It was on that basis that we legislated in the autumn to extend the Executive formation period through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022. Since that period ended on 20 January 2023, I have once again been under a statutory duty to hold an Assembly election within 12 weeks (that is on or before 13 April 2023).

Having spoken to political representatives, businesses and communities in Northern Ireland, I have concluded that another election at this time is not the best course of action to facilitate the restoration of the Executive.

On that basis, this Bill will provide for a single retrospective extension of the Executive formation period of one year from 19 January 2023. That would mean that, if the parties are unable to form an Executive before 19 January 2024, I would again fall under a duty to hold an Assembly election within 12 weeks. The legislation will also enable the Government to bring this new period to an early end and move to elections sooner, if necessary.

Yesterday, in a meeting with vice-president of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič in Brussels, I reiterated that the UK Government are working hard to resolve the problems caused by the Northern Ireland protocol, and the desire to see an agreed solution with the EU. I was clear that this extension does not influence protocol discussions.

I remain focused on restoring devolved institutions as soon as possible and this Bill creates the best opportunity to do that. I will continue to do all I can to support the

people of Northern Ireland in the meantime. I will also host Northern Ireland party leaders at a roundtable in Belfast today to urge them to restore the Executive as soon as possible.

I very much hope that the parties will recognise the importance of getting back to work, so that a functioning Executive can take the actions needed, to address the challenges facing public services in Northern Ireland.

[HCWS558]

# Ministerial Corrections

*Thursday 9 February 2023*

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Local Government Finance

*The following is an extract from the debate on local government finance on 8 February 2023:*

**The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove):** Within that context, in this year's local government report we have been able to increase core spending power overall by £5.1 billion, secure an additional £1.7 billion of additional grant funding, ensure additional support for adult and children's social care, ensure a minimum 3% increase in core spending power for every local authority without the need for council tax increases, and ensure that the most deprived local authorities receive a 17% increase. [*Official Report, 8 February 2023, Vol. 727, c. 986.*]

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).*

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on local government finance.

The correct response should have been:

**The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove):** Within that context, in this year's local government report we have been able to increase core spending power overall by £5.1 billion, secure an additional £1.7 billion of additional grant

funding, ensure additional support for adult and children's social care, ensure a minimum 3% increase in core spending power for every local authority without the need for council tax increases, and ensure that **the most deprived areas of England will receive 17% more per dwelling in available resource than the least deprived areas.**

## DEFENCE

### Ukraine: Update

*The following is an extract from the Ukraine: Update statement on 16 January 2023.*

**Mr Wallace:** The right hon. Gentleman referenced the Army cuts. I have come to this Dispatch Box on numerous occasions and admitted how woeful our Army's equipment programmes have been in the past and how behind and out of date they have been. That is why we have committed investment of more than £24 billion in Army equipment alone over the next 10 years.

[*Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 40.*]

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace):*

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey).

The correct information should have been:

**Mr Wallace:** The right hon. Gentleman referenced the Army cuts. I have come to this Dispatch Box on numerous occasions and admitted how woeful our Army's equipment programmes have been in the past and how behind and out of date they have been. That is why we have committed to **investing £41 billion in Army equipment and support** over the next 10 years.



# ORAL ANSWERS

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Thursday 16 February 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE  
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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