

**Wednesday
19 July 2023**

**Volume 736
No. 193**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 19 July 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Artificial Intelligence

1. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Whether she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to regulate the use of artificial intelligence. [906120]

4. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Whether she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to regulate the use of artificial intelligence. [906123]

5. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Whether she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to regulate the use of artificial intelligence. [906124]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Chloe Smith): Our White Paper set out how we will regulate AI through a flexible framework underpinned by five principles. This proportionate and adaptable approach has been welcomed by British business. It includes new monitoring functions allowing us to update our approach in response to a rapidly evolving technology. The Government will come back with proposals in the autumn following the White Paper consultation.

Owen Thompson: AI has been used by public authorities in a wide range of contexts that affect individual rights, from facial recognition technology used by police to the system used by the Department for Work and Pensions to investigate benefits claimants. Does the Secretary of State agree that public trust in the state of AI is essential and that any changes to the law will require public support and, therefore, greater consultation to ensure that that trust is not undermined?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes a thoughtful point. He is right that we need a comprehensive public debate on many of these points. He named some risks that concern him. I would marry those with consideration about opportunities. For example, my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are also looking at how the technology can help with job matching and ensuring that people have information about the job market. I look forward to further conversations, as he said, as we go forward with this critical technology.

Drew Hendry: Following calls from the SNP, the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), agreed that human rights must be at the forefront of AI diplomacy. Will the new UK laws on AI protect people by outlawing any collaboration or research with nations that seek to abuse human rights through, for example, facial recognition or social credit systems?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman also makes a thoughtful point, which is an important consideration in all our diplomacy and the work that my colleagues in the Foreign Office take forward. Specifically on AI technology, domestically we have set out our proposals in our White Paper, which as we have said will evolve over time, and internationally we are clear that we see a leadership opportunity for the United Kingdom, because we are already a global leader in this technology and care passionately about ensuring its safe and responsible deployment.

Marion Fellows: Researchers at Robust Intelligence recently discovered that AI could be trained to bypass its in-built restrictions and privacy protections within hours of use. Despite growing concerns about the impact of AI, the Government are expanding the scope of automated decision making as part of their Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill. Can the public have confidence that sensitive personal data will be protected as the Government's use of AI grows?

Chloe Smith: The short answer is yes. That is because, first, the legislation that the hon. Lady mentioned focuses on doing that. In addition, in our White Paper we set out the principles on which we intend to take advantage of AI, which ensure that we have safety, transparency, explainability, fairness, accountability and governance, and contestability and redress. Those are all vital, as I know she will agree, and there is much work ahead of us.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her sure-footed discharge of her responsibilities over the past few weeks, which I think end today.

In the White Paper, there is a commitment that

“when parliamentary time allows...we will...strengthen and clarify regulators' mandates by introducing a new duty requiring them to have due regard to the principles”

of the White Paper. Given the blistering pace of AI deployment and the fact that the forthcoming King's Speech will be the last opportunity until 2025, will the Government confirm that they will bring forward that legislation in the next Session?

Chloe Smith: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his kind words about me. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) will return later this week. It has been a privilege to help her by conducting her maternity cover at the highest levels.

My right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee is correct that we set out that plan in our White Paper. We said that we anticipate introducing a statutory duty on regulators

“requiring them to have due regard to the principles”,

which I mentioned in my previous answer. He will also know that I cannot commit to the contents of the King’s Speech, but what I have already said this morning is that the Government will be returning to the House with a full update on the conclusion of the consultation on the White Paper.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s leadership in this policy area. The conference in the autumn will give the Government an opportunity to lay out their plans for working with international partners. Does she agree that AI cannot be blocked or stopped, and therefore an open, pragmatic approach needs to be shown to harness the benefits of AI for the economy and society in general?

Chloe Smith: My right hon. Friend is correct. That is what we have laid out in our approach so far. As the Prime Minister said, we intend to lead overseas and domestically, lead the charge of that opportunity in our public services and ensure that our pro-innovation approach enables the benefits of this technology to be captured sooner across the economy.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Was my right hon. Friend reassured by the comments made by Nick Clegg this morning, while representing Meta, that AI at present is not capable of individual thought as such, but goes through a massive trawl very quickly of existing data?

Chloe Smith: We are drawing on the benefit of a range of experts in our work. In particular, I thank Ian Hogarth and those who have stepped up to form our Foundation Models Taskforce, which is helping us by looking extremely closely at the safety requirements for those models at the very frontier. There will be more updates on that work as time goes on.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State will surely have read the many reports of bad actors using AI technology to create voice clones and, ultimately, scam victims out of money over the phone. For as little as 76p a month, a subscription to one of those websites can be yours, Mr Speaker. Computer security company McAfee recently found that one in four people had experienced a voice scam or knew someone who had. What exactly is the Secretary of State doing right now to prevent and, ultimately, protect people from those voice scams and deepfakes?

Chloe Smith: The shadow Minister raises a good point, which we should all examine. We have the correct answers, through the approach we have set out in our White Paper using our world-class regulators, the approach we are working on in this House and the other place on the Online Safety Bill, and existing crimes and offences. Right now, my officials are working with Ofcom to ensure it is ready for the duties that will come to it

through the Online Safety Bill, and that it has the tools to ensure that scams, fraud and other offences are properly addressed.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State said that my colleagues had made thoughtful points about human rights concerns, control of personal data and public trust, but we need actual action and commitment from the Government. In contrast, the EU is moving to become the first regulator in the world to legislate for a specific AI Act, to ensure that AI works for people as well as business and Government. Will she finally commit to the UK following suit and legislating for AI, to ensure that the UK does not become a haven for the worst possible applications of what should be beneficial technology?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman is telling the wrong story. The UK Government are acting comprehensively. The framework we set out in our White Paper applies across the UK. The work we are setting out with our global summit leads the way internationally. That approach is proportionate and flexible, and has been welcomed by business across the UK. In addition, the principles I have already named and the work of my colleagues across Government on human rights and other aspects ensure that our citizens can enjoy the safe and responsible use of this technology. I look forward to working with anyone in this House who has a thoughtful approach to take to that.

Decarbonisation Technologies

2. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of UK Research and Innovation funding for decarbonisation technologies. [906121]

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (George Freeman): We can all be proud that this country is leading the global charge on net zero. As part of our historic uplift in R&D expenditure to £20 billion a year—£52 billion over the consolidated spending review period—UK Research and Innovation is investing in £800 million annually on research and innovation in net zero, and £210 million through the industrial decarbonisation fund. I am delighted that Scotland is in the vanguard, with more than 1,400 projects funded, in receipt of £1.3 billion. The Faraday battery challenge investment of £540 million appears to be working, with the good news today of Tata’s multibillion investment in a £4 billion gigafactory.

Joanna Cherry: I am delighted to hear the Minister acknowledge that Scotland is in the vanguard of research in this area. The Industrial Decarbonisation Research and Innovation Centre at Heriot-Watt University in my constituency has become a focal point of collaboration and innovation for UK industrial clusters, but the excellent progress that it is making is at risk owing to a funding gap. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the vital work being done at Heriot-Watt University, and how the Government can support it better in its efforts to help them to reach their industrial decarbonisation targets?

George Freeman: Brevity, Mr Speaker: yes, with pleasure.

Broadband: Rural Wales

3. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): If she will take steps to improve rural connectivity in (a) Delyn constituency, (b) north Wales and (c) Wales. [906122]

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): Under Project Gigabit, we are launching procurements across Wales and the rest of the UK to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to rural and remote premises not included in suppliers' commercial plans. We are planning to launch a regional procurement for north Wales by the end of the year, which will include premises in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr Roberts: The towns of Flint and Holywell in my constituency have 90% and 83% full-fibre connectivity respectively, but the exchange in Mold has only 10%, and Northop only 2.6%. The Mold exchange in particular serves many of the smaller villages and also the farming community, which is vital to my constituency. What more can the Minister do to improve connectivity in these rural areas so that the vital farming sector does not grind to a halt in places such as Delyn?

Sir John Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of digital connectivity to rural communities and businesses. We are pressing ahead apace with Project gigabit, and have appointed our hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) as rural connectivity champion. At present, more than 98% of premises in Delyn have access to superfast broadband, while 62% have a gigabit-capable network, and our Project Gigabit procurements are intended to ensure that communities such as Northop and Mold do not miss out on gigabit-capable connection.

Horizon Europe

6. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on securing the UK's association with Horizon Europe. [906125]

10. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on securing the UK's association with Horizon Europe. [906129]

12. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What her planned timescale is for negotiating the UK's association to Horizon Europe. [906131]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Chloe Smith): We are moving forward with discussions on the UK's involvement in Horizon Europe, and we hope they will be successful. Association is our preference. The talks are continuing constructively, but we have not yet agreed a deal. We want to reach a resolution as quickly as possible to give the industry certainty. We have also set out our bold alternative, Pioneer, which we are ready to implement if necessary.

Janet Daby: Owing to the Government's delay in associating with Horizon Europe, the UK has lost out on "hosting" nearly 400 high-end European Research Council grants. Furthermore, nearly 50 grant winners have left the country altogether. Scientists including Brian Cox and Sir Paul Nurse are warning that the Government's failure to act is damaging Britain's science base. Is the Secretary of State concerned about these failings?

Chloe Smith: Unfortunately it is the European Union that has delayed for more than two years, and that has caused serious and lasting damage to the UK's participation. What we need to do is ensure that we can get the right deal for UK researchers, UK businesses and UK taxpayers. That that is what we are working to do, and we are confident that the talks are proceeding constructively. It is much more important to get the right deal than to get a fast deal.

Gerald Jones: The Government made a manifesto promise to associate with Horizon Europe, but it is now 132 weeks since they took our country out of the world's biggest science fund. It is shocking but not surprising that they have broken yet another promise. Government inaction has seriously damaged our international science pedigree. How much longer will our world-leading scientists, researchers and universities—who have suffered so much already—be forced to wait because this Government cannot keep their promises?

Chloe Smith: We have continued to support the sector with more than £1.5 billion of the Horizon guarantee. We have done that to ensure that there is no loss of funding for the UK science sector. I think it far more important to speak directly to researchers, businesses and taxpayers about our commitment to getting the right deal than to engage in party politics here.

Wera Hobhouse: We in Bath have two fantastic universities, the University of Bath and Bath Spa University. Their leaders continue to worry about losing talent from Europe, and the Government have worsened the position by proposing a 66% increase in visa fees. Will the Secretary of State explain what that increase will mean for UK science, and how it accords with the Government's stated ambition to bring the best and brightest to this country?

Chloe Smith: We continue to run a range of successful talent programmes that bring the best and the brightest to universities and indeed to those in the hon. Lady's constituency. I welcome her representing them here today. The point is that we have to get the right deal on Horizon, as I have laid out, and we also have to strike a balance with the needs of policy across Government. That is what she has heard from me and other Ministers at this Dispatch Box, and that is how we will ensure that we get the right deal for Britain, both in terms of talent and of science programmes.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is very much in Europe's interests for us to be part of the Horizon programme, because we have some of the strongest academic institutions in Europe, and in a way it undermines the science base of Europe if we are not in there? Does she also recognise that, although there was great enthusiasm at the recent meeting of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly for us to join again, there was also a feeling that it could surely be done a little more quickly?

Chloe Smith: I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's insight into this issue. As I have already said, we are working consistently and steadily to get the right deal for UK science, by which we mean British researchers as well as taxpayers and businesses. That is what we are doing; the talks are proceeding and I look forward to the House being able to have an update very soon.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I would like to put on record my respect for the Secretary of State and her excellent stewardship of her portfolio.

I would like us to join Horizon Europe, but is it not right that we should get the right deal for our UK scientists, our UK businesses and our UK taxpayers, and that any commentary before a deal is done will only undermine our science industry and not be helpful in the slightest?

Chloe Smith: That is exactly right, and it is right for two reasons. The first is that billions of pounds of taxpayers' money are at stake and we need to be responsible stewards of that money. That is why we are focused on getting the right deal. The second point is that my Department exists to forward and further the frontier of science in this country and to make sure that we stay a science and technology superpower. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We are in the middle of answers to a question. I call Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Teledyne e2v is the world leader in space imaging. It provides the eyes to NASA, the European space programme and Copernicus. Can my great and right hon. Friend make sure that our conversations about Horizon also include Copernicus? Otherwise, the EU is going to be building Earth observation satellites that cannot see the Earth.

Chloe Smith: I welcome my right hon. Friend's interest in this area, and she is absolutely right to say that we have enormous opportunity in our space sector, across a range of aspects. I know that the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), would like to discuss her constituency interest further with her. I can also assure the House that there will be further updates coming soon on the UK Government's space strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In Vilnius, the Prime Minister had the chance to conclude a deal allowing our scientists to participate in the world's biggest international science programme, driving innovation and sustainable growth. He did not take it, again, so the Horizon saga drags on, month after month, year after year. Are we in or are we out? The Science Minister is not in the negotiations, and the chief scientist is not in the negotiations. It is all about the Prime Minister. Does the Secretary of State understand that while the Prime Minister is dithering, our science base is withering?

Chloe Smith: Today is quite possibly my last opportunity at the Dispatch Box. I first served from these Government Benches in May 2010, and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) first shadowed me 10 years ago. I know that she has a very fine mind and is a dedicated public servant. However, on this she is wrong. Labour Front Benchers may not know from one day to the next what their policy is, but we have been consistent on this point and we are working hard to get the correct deal for UK taxpayers and UK science.

Topical Questions

T1. [906135] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Chloe Smith): Since I last updated the House, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure has announced £380 million of funding to bring the fastest internet speeds to some of our most rural communities. The Government's Office for Life Sciences has agreed a landmark deal with BioNTech that will see up to 10,000 cancer patients benefit from potentially life-saving treatment. Today, my Department has launched a call for evidence on engineering biology.

Theresa Villiers: What action are the Government taking to deliver regulatory reform and business investment in the biosciences sector, so that it can play its part in boosting economic growth and delivering great job opportunities for people across the country?

Chloe Smith: I welcome my right hon. Friend's expertise in this area, and I thank the team that works with me on this subject, including my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, who has been central in leading how we will reform our regulatory landscape on life sciences. I point my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) to the Chancellor's announcements, both at the Budget and still to come, on how we will continue to support our life sciences and biosciences sectors, which are essential to the UK economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her time covering this role, notwithstanding her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who asked a very important question.

Today's inflation figures confirm that prices continue to rise. Broadband customers are dealing with inflation-busting price hikes, as a direct result of the Government's choices. They lifted the cap on wholesale costs, which has caused retail prices to rise. Will the Secretary of State apologise to hard-pressed families and tackle the cost of living crisis for broadband customers?

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): We recognise that households are having a very difficult time due to the cost of living, which is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has met the regulators to press them to do more to help. We have agreement that social tariffs are now available to all those in receipt of universal credit and other benefits. At the same time, Ofcom has agreed with providers that anybody who wishes to switch to a cheaper tariff can do so without charge.

T2. [906136] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): There can be few more exciting and innovative projects for any constituency than a spaceport to launch satellites into space. We had a done deal to build one on the runway at RAF Scampton, before the Home Office marched in and stymied the whole project. Will the Minister please lobby the Home Office to try to get the spaceport back? Why would the Home Office want a runway, or is there a darker purpose behind this?

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (George Freeman): My right hon. Friend has raised this before, and I will happily speak to him about it and support that space cluster. The UK is poised to lead Europe in the launch of low Earth orbit satellites over the coming decade, and we are building launchpads around the country for that very purpose.

T4. [906138] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Royal Society's 2021 visa costs analysis shows that researchers entering the UK via the global talent scheme had to pay six times more than they would have paid under similar international science schemes. Does the Minister acknowledge the cost of Brexit in our failure to attract world-leading researchers and skilled workers?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman is on his own mission. He fails to see the strength of the UK science and technology sector, and he fails to see that it will be better for Scotland's businesses, scientists and citizens to continue to be part of that thriving sector. That is what we are doing in making sure the United Kingdom is a science and technology superpower.

T3. [906137] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Indeed, we have world-class universities in the west midlands. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to support regional innovation clusters?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are investing heavily in regional innovation clusters all around this country. We have three: one in Manchester, one in Glasgow and one in the west midlands, where the excellent Mayor, Andy Street, is driving a genuine innovation economy.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Almost one in two properties in my constituency, and less than one in five in rural areas, do not have access to gigabit broadband. They do not even have superfast connections. The Department must help properties get connected where profit incentives are low. Will the Minister provide an update on the gigabit voucher scheme and the total value of vouchers claimed this year?

Sir John Whittingdale: Currently, more than 76% of premises have access to gigabit-capable broadband and we are on track to meet our target of 85% coverage by 2025. However, the hon. Lady raises a good point about the take-up of social tariffs under the scheme and we want to see that happen much more. We are determined to press ahead with Project Gigabit to achieve our target of universal coverage by 2030.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [906105] **Sajid Javid** (Bromsgrove) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 July.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): The ban on LGBT people serving in our military until the year 2000 was an appalling failure of the British state—it was decades

behind the law of this land. As today's report makes clear, in that period many endured the most horrific sexual abuse and violence, homophobic bullying and harassment, all while bravely serving this country. Today, on behalf of the British state, I apologise, and I hope that all those affected will be able to feel proud parts of the veteran community, which has done so much to keep our country safe.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Sajid Javid: May I associate myself with the remarks the Prime Minister just made? In the UK, sadly, every 90 minutes someone takes their own life. Indeed, for men under the age of 50 and for women under the age of 35, this is now the biggest killer. When I was the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I met many brave families and campaigners, and I committed to them that the Government would publish a comprehensive, cross-departmental suicide prevention strategy. That was more than a year ago and still there is no strategy. I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister cares as deeply about this issue as I do; we have discussed it many times. Will he please commit his Government to publishing the strategy within days of Parliament's return from the summer recess?

The Prime Minister: When someone takes their own life, the effect on their family and friends is devastating. I know that the loss of my right hon. Friend's own brother was an enormous source of pain for him. I want to reassure him that we are actively addressing suicide rates, through our national suicide prevention strategy, backed by funding, and, in particular, by rolling out 100 suicide prevention voluntary community and social enterprises. I can tell him that we will publish the new updated national suicide prevention strategy later this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Labour in government was proud to repeal the ban on LGBT+ people serving in our armed forces, and today we strongly welcome this apology from the Prime Minister as a recognition of their historic mistreatment. My constituent Ken Wright was a proud RAF serviceman who was forced to leave the job he loved simply because he was gay. I am delighted that he is here today to witness this apology. Although we cannot right the wrongs of the past, the Government should now act on the recommendations of the Etherton review to fix the lives broken by the ban—it is what LGBT+ veterans deserve.

I also know that the whole House will want to send our very best wishes to the Lionesses as they start their World cup campaign this Saturday. Let us hope they continue the brilliant success they had in the Euros.

When the Prime Minister took office nine months ago, the NHS waiting list had 7.2 million people on it. What is the number today?

The Prime Minister: The reason that NHS waiting lists are higher today than they were then, after actually being stable for the first few months as we put in place new initiatives, is very simple: because the NHS has been disrupted by industrial action. We have put very clear plans in place to bring down waiting lists in urgent

and emergency care, primary care, ambulances, out-patient and elective. Those plans were working and will continue to work, but we do need to end the industrial action. So I would ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman, if he does care about bringing the waiting lists down, does he agree with me that consultants and junior doctors should accept the pay deal that the Government offered?

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister likes to get away early, but the longer Members stop me getting on with the questions, the longer I am going to keep him here, so it is up to them.

Keir Starmer: I am sure the whole House is pleased that the Prime Minister has graced us with his presence today, but we do not get any more answers when he is here than when he is not. He knows the answer: 7-point million people are currently on the waiting lists. That is the highest it has ever been. It means that since he set foot into Downing Street, 260,000 people have been waiting in daily agony for things like hip and knee replacements, while he boasts. Has he figured out why, after nine months, dozens of gimmicks and umpteen broken promises, his Government are failing more patients than ever before?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, again, I do not think we heard an answer to the question, so—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I also do not want Opposition Members holding up proceedings.

The Prime Minister: It is very simple. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman actually looked at what was happening, he would see that earlier this year our plans were beginning to work: ambulance waiting times down, from an hour and a half over Christmas to around half an hour; virtually eliminating the number of people waiting one and half years for treatment; making huge progress on GP access. All those things—all those plans we put in place, all the funding, all the extra ambulances, the extra discharges—are starting to make a difference, but all are held up by one very simple fact: industrial action in the NHS. Again, I will give him a second chance: if he really wants to get people the healthcare they want, will he agree with me that those doctors should accept the recommendations of the independent pay review body? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This would be a bad time to get thrown out—it is six weeks, so think long and hard. I just say to the Prime Minister: this is Prime Minister's questions, not Opposition questions.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, I think that, given his time away, the Prime Minister has slightly forgotten how this works. He talks about his NHS staffing plan, but he doesn't need to lecture me—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This might be the last Prime Minister's questions before recess, but let me just say to somebody that if they really want to go early, it will be very tempting to ensure that happens, so they should think long and hard beforehand.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister talks about his plans, but he does not need to lecture me on that. On the NHS staffing plan, he nicked it from Labour. It is the same old story: they mess up the NHS and look to Labour to fix it. Come the election, the country will be doing the same. The difference is that, unlike us, he has not said how he would pay for his workforce plan. Now is his chance. Where is the money coming from?

The Prime Minister: Not only is the NHS long-term workforce plan fully funded, but it was welcomed by not one, not two, but 43 different NHS stakeholders. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about our plans and whether they are making a difference, so let us just look at urgent and emergency care. Our plans mean that we will put 800 more ambulances on the road, and there will be 5,000 more beds, faster discharges and more community care. That is why the Royal College of Emergency Medicine described it as “significant” and said that it “would undoubtedly improve conditions”. That is why we have seen A&E waiting times in England the best in two years, while—the Opposition will not like this—the NHS has the worst waiting times in the country in Wales.

Keir Starmer: When the Prime Minister said that the workforce plan was fully costed, I have never seen the Chancellor look more bewildered. It is less than a year since his party crashed the economy with its unfunded spending commitments, and he has not learned a thing. Let me ask this another way: is his uncoded spending coming from more tax rises, more cuts, or is it just the latest promise to fall from the Tories' magic money tree?

The Prime Minister: As I and the Chancellor set out, the plan is fully funded—the right hon. and learned Gentleman will see that at the autumn statement. I am pleased that he is now interested in fiscal responsibility, because that is very welcome. There is an opportunity for us to make sure that this is true conviction. We have just had, in the past week, the recommendations of independent pay review bodies, including for the NHS. I believed that the right thing to do was to accept those independent recommendations, but that involves taking difficult and responsible decisions to deliver those pay rises without fuelling borrowing, inflation, taxes and debt. But, yet again, on this crucial issue, while his MPs are back on the picket lines, he simply refuses to take a position. It is the same old story. He should stop taking inspiration from his friends outside and unglue himself from the fence. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]

Mr Speaker: You want some more? Who wants to lead the exit?

Keir Starmer: In that burst of nonsense, what we did not hear was a single word about how the Prime Minister will pay for it. Labour's NHS workforce plan is fully funded by scrapping the non-dom status that he so adores. You know the one, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that one or two of you have asked to catch my eye. You are not going about it in the right way.

Keir Starmer: Labour's workforce plan is fully funded by scrapping the non-dom status that the Prime Minister so adores. You know the one, Mr Speaker: the “non-dom tax thing”, as he calls it, that allows some of the

wealthiest people in the country to avoid paying tax here. Is that loophole so important to him that he would rather have billions in unfunded promises than simply make billionaires pay what they owe?

The Prime Minister: That is the same policy that has paid, I think, for five different things at this point. Everybody knows that I am a fan of doing maths to 18, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a very strong case for doing maths all the way to 61. When it comes to the substance of the plan, it is important that we address this. I am aware—I will say this—that he did set out some proposals to train more staff. The problem is that that is all he did. Our plan is much more comprehensive and much more impactful. Not only will we train more staff—*[Interruption.]* This is important substance. I acknowledge that the Labour party did set out some plans to train more, but that is not enough. You also have to set out plans to retain more NHS staff, as we did, and, crucially, you also have to set out plans for how you reform the NHS, so that you can have a more productive NHS. That is the difference between us: he is only ever focused on the superficial headline, while we are getting on with the actual reform.

Keir Starmer: If the Prime Minister is so good at maths, he will know that I am 60, not 61. I do not know whether he has found time during the recent by-elections to visit Hillingdon Hospital, where the wards have had to close, staff are working in appalling conditions and patient safety is at risk, and that is simply a snapshot of the wider problem. This week, the National Audit Office set out in detail what everyone already knows: the Government's hospital programme has, shall we say, some gaps in it. So can the Prime Minister confirm that, apart from the fact that there are not 40 of them, that most of them are not new, and that many of them are not even hospitals, everything is going fine with the 40 new hospitals?

The Prime Minister: Not only are we going to deliver on our manifesto commitment to build 40 new hospitals across the country by 2030, we are not stopping there; we are also delivering 100 hospital upgrades across the country, and crucially more than 100 new community diagnostic centres to speed up treatment for people, including in the constituency of the deputy Leader of the Opposition, and the constituencies of the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, the shadow Energy Secretary, the shadow Justice Secretary and the shadow Attorney General. That is how committed we are.

Let me end on this. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned Hillingdon Hospital in Uxbridge. I want to help the people of this country. I want to make sure that not only can they get to work but they get the care that they need. Why on earth does he want to charge them £12.50 every time they visit their GP and hospital?

Q3. [906107] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): There was welcome news this morning of inflation falling by more than expected. Businesses in my constituency are trying to plan their pricing for next January and are struggling because of the proposals to introduce the extended producer responsibility. They do not yet have the information on how much it will cost or how it will work. Will the Prime Minister look at pausing and resetting that programme, so that in January we do not

see price rises in our supermarkets without the consequent reduction in packaging and increase in recycling that we all want to see?

The Prime Minister: This is something that has been raised with me by those in the industry. We are committed to protecting the environment and delivering on our net zero targets, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is continuing to engage closely with manufacturers, retailers and packaging companies on the precise design of the scheme. I know that Ministers will continue to keep this House and my hon. Friend updated.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the SNP.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The two-child benefit cap introduced by the Conservative party has left 250,000 children living in poverty. Does the Prime Minister take comfort in knowing that the heinous legacy of that policy will no longer be protected just by Conservative Members but by Labour Members too?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the Labour leader's new-found support for our policy, even though he previously committed to a different approach. What I would say to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), and indeed the Labour Front Bench, is that they do not have to worry too much given the Labour leader's track record: he has never actually kept a promise that he has made.

Stephen Flynn: Voters in Scotland are used to child poverty under the Tories—they almost expect it—but they do not expect child poverty support from the Labour party. If we look very closely right now, there is a shiver running along the Labour Front Bench looking for a spine. *[Interruption.]* Does this not tell us something much bigger: that for children living in poverty in Scotland, Westminster offers them no real change and no real hope?

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty is through work, and the best way to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty is to ensure that they do not grow up in a workless household. That is why we are focused on creating more jobs, with 200,000 more in Scotland since 2010 and hundreds of thousands fewer children across the United Kingdom growing up in a workless household. We will always continue to reduce child poverty. I do not want to see a single child grow up in poverty, and we will deliver that in every part of the UK, including in Scotland.

Q9. [906113] **Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if Opposition Members are in favour of illegal economic migration, they should have the courage to say so, rather than claiming that young men in their 20s and 30s, arriving here from safe countries, are actually asylum seekers?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that the Opposition do not have a plan to tackle illegal migration. We saw that just this last week, when I think they voted over 70 different times against our stop the boats Bill. That Bill will make it crystal clear that if you come here illegally, you will be detained and swiftly removed to a safe third country. That is the fair, compassionate and right way to deal with this problem, and that is what we believe in.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is exactly a year to the day since UK temperatures hit a deadly 40°C for the first time, with 3,000 excess deaths last summer. Yet businesses and the Prime Minister's own climate advisers have said that his climate progress is worryingly slow. He likes to claim that the UK is decarbonising more quickly than the rest of the G7, but since the Paris agreement that is simply not true. He also likes to claim that it is not a top concern for the public, while recent polling shows that that is not true either. Experts, businesses and the public all want bolder climate action, but it is not even one of his top five priorities. Can he tell us why not?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady just makes a completely bizarre point. Because we moved quicker and faster than everyone else, she thinks that somehow that is something we should now not be proud of. It is right that other countries are catching up; it is inevitable that they will have to decarbonise faster now to make up for the fact that over the past two decades they have not followed our example. I am not going to take any lectures from her on this topic, because our track record is a good one. We have decarbonised faster than everyone else and right now we are making the right long-term decisions to make sure that we not only transition to net zero, but do so in a way that brings people along with us and creates jobs in the process.

Q14. [906118] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Bedfordshire businesses now have apprentices on the factory floor, earning £48,000 a year on qualification, easily beating cost of living pressures. What more can we do to get schools to promote apprenticeships to pupils and parents, as our colleges and institutes of technology are great poverty-busting institutions?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the practical steps we are taking is to put all apprenticeships on to the UCAS system this autumn, which will make sure that they have parity of esteem in the classroom and increased information for parents and teachers. At the same time, as I announced earlier this week, we are clamping down on university courses that fail to deliver good outcomes. What we should be doing is providing young people with the best opportunities for them to get on in life, and he is absolutely right that that should include apprenticeships.

Q2. [906106] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why does the Prime Minister think that Sir Brian Langstaff, who chairs the public inquiry into infected blood, has reopened the hearings and summoned before him the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Leader of the House and the Paymaster General to answer questions next week?

The Prime Minister: My thoughts remain with all those affected by this appalling tragedy. The infected blood scandal should never have happened, and that is why the public inquiry was set up by one of my predecessors. I have submitted written evidence to the inquiry and am due to give oral evidence shortly, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Some 800,000 people work indirectly or directly in our car industry, which accounts for 10% of our country's

exports. I strongly welcome the £4 billion investment by Tata Motors in a battery factory, and the jobs associated with it. Will my right hon. Friend build on that success and pursue a clear plan to get more gigafactories, including in the west midlands, so that we can capitalise on our lead in battery innovation and technology?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of today's announcement. It is one of the largest-ever investments in the UK auto industry in this country's history, with billions of pounds and thousands of jobs, and it is a massive vote of confidence in the UK economy.

Q4. [906108] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The NHS in England has just had its longest-ever junior doctors' strike and consultants go on strike tomorrow for the first time in 50 years, yet so far Scotland has had no NHS strikes. That is not by chance; it is because our Health Secretary and First Minister have kept working with the British Medical Association to try to address the pay erosion faced by doctors since 2008. Workforce shortages are the biggest challenge facing healthcare, and the Prime Minister just mentioned the importance of staff retention. Does he really think that refusing even to talk to health unions will stop doctors leaving the NHS?

The Prime Minister: We did talk to health unions, but we also respected the independent pay review body process, which is the right way to resolve these issues and means that a typical junior doctor will see a 9% pay rise as a result of this deal. Since the hon. Lady mentioned retention, earlier this year the Government delivered the BMA's No. 1 ask, which was to remove the cap on pensions tax. That was specifically designed to retain senior doctors in the NHS. The Government have now done our bit, and I urge the unions, "Please get back to the hospitals and treat your patients."

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my unease that a bank that has the Government as its largest shareholder should close the account of a senior opposition politician? Will he use the Government's shareholding to ensure that there is an inquiry into those circumstances, because the subject data access request makes it clear, or certainly indicates, that it is the political views of the person concerned that led to his cancellation? Does my right hon. Friend agree that, however much we may find them tiresome, members of the opposition deserve bank accounts?

The Prime Minister: It would not be right if financial services were being denied to anyone exercising their right to lawful free speech. Our new Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 puts in place new measures to ensure that politically exposed persons are being treated in an appropriate and proportionate manner, and having consulted on the payments services regulations, we are in the process of cracking down on that practice by tightening the rules around account closures. But in the meantime, any individual can complain to the Financial Ombudsman Service, which has the power to direct a bank to reopen their account.

Q5. [906109] **Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I know how it feels to be homeless, squatting from one place to another with your entire belongings in one single black bin liner. Hard-working families, including in Bradford West, are at risk of homelessness because of the Tory mortgage bombshell and the failure to legislate to protect renters. Apart from totally losing grip of the whole situation, what is the Prime Minister doing to stop half a million people becoming homeless?

The Prime Minister: Actually, rough sleeping levels were about a third lower in 2022 compared with the peak in 2017. Since our landmark Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into force, more than 600,00 households have successfully had their homelessness prevented or relieved, and we are investing £2 billion over the next three years to continue to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Prime Minister mentioned our armed forces. May I mention them again? We lost 457 personnel killed in Afghanistan, and several thousand suffered life-changing injuries. So I and some of my colleagues on the Defence Committee were absolutely stunned to see a video posted by our own Chairman lauding the Taliban's governance of Afghanistan but not mentioning that they are still trying to identify and kill Afghan civilians who sided with NATO forces, nor the fact that they do not like girls to go to school. Can I make it plain that that was not in our name, and can I have the Prime Minister's assurance that that silly and naive act was not in his name either?

The Prime Minister: I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to our brave serving personnel and veterans, and I thank them for their service, as we touched on earlier. We have repeatedly called out, and will continue to repeatedly call out, the human rights abuses that we see around the world. He mentions rightly the prohibition on women being educated in Afghanistan, which is something that we have spoken about in the past. We will also continue to have dialogue with regimes. That does not mean that we consider those regimes to be legitimate or that we approve of their actions, but that is all part, as he will understand, of establishing normal diplomatic presence in countries where the situation allows. I will very happily look into the specific case that he raises.

Q6. [906110] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is not just the adoption of the disgusting two-child benefit cap; it is the endorsement of a hard Brexit, the tuition fees, the immigration. Does the Prime Minister not agree that there is now no real difference between the two main UK parties? Is it not time that we perhaps rearranged the furniture in this House, had them all on one big Bench and re-titled them the "This is what you get from the UK party"?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I will leave him and the Labour party to debate the finer points of policy between them. On the substance, because it is important, the track record demonstrates that we are making a difference and reducing child poverty. There are now 400,000 fewer children in poverty than there were in 2010, as a result of the

actions of this Government—notably, by moving their parents into work, because that has the single best benefit for those children. That is the right policy and it is one that we will continue to deliver.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Conversion therapy is quackery packaged up by bigots seeking to promote their hate and to profit from it. On 19 January, a Minister promised at the Dispatch Box to bring forward a ban against conversion therapy and ensure that pre-legislative scrutiny was completed before the end of this parliamentary term. How does my right hon. Friend plan to continue that? May I also welcome his statement today and thank those LGBT veterans who are with us? We are so grateful for their service and we seek this ban also in their name.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I agree with her that conversion therapy is an abhorrent practice, and we need to do everything we can to stamp it out wherever we see it. The Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), will continue to keep my hon. Friend and the House updated on her progress.

Q7. [906111] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister remember seven years ago, when he was a passionate supporter of leaving the European Union, along with his then best friend, Boris Johnson? Is he aware that Sir John Major now says, in every speech he makes, that that decision was catastrophic for the people of this country and living standards, as well as deeply damaging to our role, status and influence in the world?

The Prime Minister: I would say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he made the central point at the beginning of his question: it was seven years ago, and we need to move forward. He talked about what has happened since then. Since we left the single market, this economy has grown faster than Germany, France and Italy. He also talked about our standing on the world stage. He obviously was not here for the statement on the NATO summit last week, but nobody can be in any doubt that the United Kingdom is highly respected on the world stage.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Just last week the Leader of the Opposition announced his new flagship policy—the two-child benefit cap. It is very popular on this side of the House, but it is not so popular on the other side. Can the Prime Minister tell the House when the Leader of the Opposition will jump off the bandwagon, be honest with the British public and tell them what he stands for?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. I welcome the Leader of the Opposition now supporting the Government's policy, but I do not think anyone actually believes that he believes in what he says. That is the—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister need not worry, because he has no responsibility for the Opposition.

Q8. [906112] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Every single Member of the House is required by law to confirm the true source of a donation before it is accepted or declared. Can the Prime Minister tell us

whether he followed all the rules all the time before he took £38,500 of free air travel on 28 April? If so, why does his story keep changing about who paid?

The Prime Minister: All donations are declared in the normal way. As the hon. Gentleman knows, if there are administrative changes to that they are quickly corrected.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): To bring the Prime Minister back to the question asked, rightly, by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), the opposition politician referred to is Nigel Farage, whose bank account was closed not because he was a PEP—a politically exposed person—or for commercial reasons, but because his views did not align with the values of Coutts bank: thinly veiled political discrimination and a vindictive, irresponsible and undemocratic action. In addition, Nat West also disclosed confidential details about Farage's account to the BBC and lied about the commercial viability of his account, actions that should jeopardise its banking licence and should certainly worry Nat West's 19 million other customers. The Prime Minister has told us what he will do in the future, but there are many other people in this circumstance. Will he require every bank with a British banking licence to inform the Treasury of all the accounts that they have shut down for non-commercial reasons in the last decade?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend has spoken to the Chancellor about this issue, and that he will continue to have those conversations. In the short term, having consulted on the payment service

regulations, we intend to crack down on that practice by toughening the rules around account closures. In the meantime, the Financial Ombudsman Service is available for people to make complaints to, but I look forward to continuing the dialogue with my right hon. Friend, as does the Chancellor.

Q10. [906114] **Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): As a father, the Prime Minister will know how precious children are. Adam Watson, aged nine, and Poppy Ogle, aged 10, from my constituency sadly lost their battle with childhood cancer just last year. Their homes are forever broken. Both families want to see a change in financial support for the 1,600 children diagnosed with cancer across the UK each year. Will the Prime Minister commit to meeting these families to listen to their stories, and to reviewing child disability living allowance payments so that they commence immediately on diagnosis of childhood cancer, whether or not the diagnosis is terminal? The three-month wait for support is just too long. Surely this Government can see fit to wrap their arms around these children and their families in their hour of need.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. I cannot imagine how difficult it is for families whose children are being treated for cancer, with everything that comes along with that. I will happily look into the specific issue that she has mentioned and get back to her in all haste. She should know that she has my total support for helping and supporting families who are going through what will be an unbelievably difficult time.

Contest: UK Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023

12.37 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on Contest, the United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Yesterday, the Government published an update to our counter-terrorism strategy, Contest. A written ministerial statement was laid alongside the Command Paper in Parliament.

Contest has a clear mission: to reduce the risk from terrorism to the United Kingdom, our citizens and our interests overseas, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence. The terrorism threat level, set independently by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, has not changed, but the threat from terrorism is enduring and evolving. Despite a prevalence of lower-sophistication attacks in the UK, the threat we see today and in the coming years is more diverse, dynamic and complex: a domestic terrorist threat that is less predictable, harder to detect and harder to investigate; a persistent and evolving threat from Islamist terrorist groups overseas; and an operating environment in which accelerating advances in technology provide both opportunity for, and risk to, our counter-terrorism efforts.

It is within that context that we judge that the risk from terrorism is once again rising. By far the biggest terrorist threat comes from Islamist terrorism. It accounts for 67% of attacks since 2018, and about three quarters of MI5's caseload. The remainder of the UK terrorist threat is largely driven by extreme right-wing terrorism, which accounts for approximately 22% of attacks since 2018 and about a quarter of the MI5 caseload. Our counter-terrorism response will be even more agile in the face of an evolving threat—more integrated, so that we can bring the right interventions to bear at the right time to reduce risk, and more aligned with our international allies, to ensure that we continue to deliver together against that common threat.

Through this updated strategy, we will place greater focus on using all the levers of the state to identify and intervene against terrorists. We will build critical partnerships with the private sector and international allies to keep the public safe, and we will harness the opportunities presented by new technology. There is no greater duty for this Government than to keep the British people safe, and I will not rest in delivering that mission.

Holly Lynch: The Contest update has very much been a sobering reminder of the threats we face. Our agencies, to which we are so grateful, have prevented 39 late-stage terror attacks in the past six years. The majority of them, as we have heard, were Islamist-motivated, with extreme right-wing terrorism making up the remainder. However, we are concerned by certain omissions from the update, and the disparity between the threats outlined and the responses proposed.

On artificial intelligence, the update recognises the challenge, saying that

“terrorists are likely to exploit the technology”.

We have called for new offences criminalising the training of chatbots to radicalise individuals, but concrete measures are woefully lacking in the update, so how are the Government going to tackle that? The update says that the threat from Daesh and al-Qaeda is on an “upward trajectory”, so can the Home Secretary tell us how we are working urgently with international partners to mitigate that risk?

The desperate situation in prisons is laid bare. With four of the nine terrorist attacks in the UK since 2018 perpetrated by serving or recently released prisoners, we are told individuals may develop

“a terrorist mindset...during their time in prison.”

Not only are we failing to de-radicalise people in prison, but people are being radicalised in prison, and failures to manage those prisoners on release are putting the public at risk. Can the Home Secretary tell the House how many terrorist prisoners are due to be released in the next 12 months, and whether every one of them has been engaged in intensive de-radicalisation programmes and assessed for terrorism prevention and investigation measures?

Finally, perhaps the most glaring omission is on state threats, despite the fact that the director general of MI5 made it clear in his annual threat update in November that Iran is

“the state actor which most frequently crosses into terrorism.”

In February, our agencies said that they had to disrupt 15 attempted kidnap and assassination attempts here in the UK. Remarkably, the report makes no reference to the resources, the approach or the powers necessary to respond to that form of terrorism. The Home Secretary knows that we have advocated for proscription powers on multiple occasions, so why do the Government continue to reject those proposals and why have they not finally proscribed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

Suella Braverman: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I know that she recognises the gravity and the sensitivity of this subject, and she will share my view that we must face the threat of terrorism united as one unified country.

Since March 2017, our agencies and law enforcement have disrupted 39 late-stage terrorist plots in the UK, as the hon. Lady said. These have included the targeting of public figures such as Members of Parliament, specific communities and events such as Pride, and public locations such as iconic sites in London. I want to put on record my profound thanks and admiration of all the professionals who work day in, day out under pressure for all they do to keep the British people safe every day. Many of us will never know the lengths to which they go in applying their expertise, dedication and public service attitude to put our safety above their own.

I am very proud of this Government's track record when it comes to keeping the country safe. As Marty's law makes its way through Parliament, I expect the Opposition to be responsible and to support us in our efforts to provide this extra layer of protection for venues. We have seen significant reforms in our National Security Bill, now enacted. The hon. Lady mentioned terrorism in prisons. We take a very tough approach to managing terrorist prisoners, limiting their interactions with each other and restricting their communications. We have developed a new counter-terrorism assessment

[*Suella Braverman*]

and rehabilitation centre for expert psychologists and specialist staff to research and implement specialist programmes to draw offenders away from terrorism. Indeed, the independent review of Prevent made extensive recommendations related to those in custody.

The hon. Lady referred to the use of artificial intelligence and technology. Foundation-model AIs undoubtedly hold vast potential, and they are crucial to the UK's mission to become a science and tech superpower, but there are still many unknowns with this class of technology and many other forms of emerging technology that pose significant, but not yet fully understood, public safety and national security risks. I am particularly concerned about the rapid development and public deployment of generative large-language models like ChatGPT, and we are alert to the exponential pace of their development, the emergent capabilities which make the exact risks difficult to anticipate or control, and the relative ease with which safeguards can be overwritten. Those at the forefront of these technologies are explicit about the seriousness of the risks if proper safeguards are not developed quickly.

We look forward to promoting and enabling an open and constructive dialogue and deepened collaboration with tech company leaders, industry experts and like-minded nations as we seek to ensure that the gifts of this technology are delivered and that society is protected. Indeed, at the recent Five Eyes security meeting in New Zealand, where I represented the UK, we discussed the emerging hostile use of technology and collaborative ways in which we may work at the international level to mitigate those risks.

To conclude, I am very clear that we need to face the threats united as one country. I hope that the Opposition understand the heavy weight of that responsibility and that we will work together constructively to keep the British people safe.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): One of the most effective ways to disrupt, identify and reduce the terrorist threat is to bring together the disparate and disjointed data sources that exist to link organised crime group activity to terrorists. Will my right hon. and learned Friend detail how the Contest strategy will help make that happen?

Suella Braverman: As I mentioned in my statement yesterday, there is huge interaction—a blurring of the lines, if you like—between terrorist organisations and groups, hostile state actors and serious organised crime groups, acting on a transnational basis with sophisticated and well-resourced networks and a heightened level of elusiveness. That is exactly why our Contest strategy has been refreshed to realign our priorities, resources, technological capabilities and co-ordination across agencies to properly respond in a swift and robust way to these emerging threats.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): May I start by expressing my party's deep gratitude to all those who are working to

protect us from despicable terrorist attacks? Of course, our thoughts remain with all those who have suffered as a result of such evil crimes.

On that note, while I welcome the strategy's focus on victims, may I raise the recent reports of survivors of terrorism who have been deeply upset by poor treatment by the criminal injuries compensation scheme? What discussions has the Home Secretary had with colleagues about fixing those problems?

The strategy's commitment to engage across the tech sector is welcome but, like the shadow Minister, I was surprised by its very limited reference to the use of artificial intelligence for radicalisation and instruction. The Windsor castle crossbow attacker is a perfect example of someone being radicalised in that way. Does the Home Secretary believe that legislation is required, and what concrete steps are being taken to address the use of AI in that way?

What extra funding will support the refreshed strategy, especially given the reports that later this year a significant number of convicted terrorists will complete their sentences, which will require the most careful management? The strategy recognises the critical importance of the closest partnership working with the devolved Governments and agencies that have responsibility for delivering various aspect of Contest. Can we have the Home Secretary's assurances that that close working will continue?

Suella Braverman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his observations. He talked about support and compensation for victims of terrorism. More can and must be done, which is why the Government are reviewing the support available to better address victims' needs. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that victims of terrorism get the full compensation to which they are entitled, in line with schemes administered by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. Those schemes deliver for victims of terrorism. The truth is that no amount of compensation can ever make up for the ordeal suffered by victims of terror. That is why it is right that survivors get all the support they need, in whatever form it may be required, through the publicly funded CICA, which paid out more than £158 million to victims of violent crime last year alone.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the update of the strategy. It would be helpful if the Home Secretary told us whether it will get the big tech companies to do more to prevent terrorists from exploiting their platforms—an issue highlighted in the Intelligence and Security Committee report, "Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism".

Suella Braverman: The technological aspect of terrorism is very real. Our enemies are using more and more sophisticated tools against us for hostile purposes. That is plain from an intelligence point of view. That is why Contest makes a deliberate point of addressing the technological features of this kind of work. A huge amount of investment and operational capability has been put into mitigating and dealing with that threat, most notably in the form of the counter-terrorism operations centre—a new collaboration centre that I had the honour of visiting recently.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A few weeks ago I met Travis Frain, a founder member of Survivors Against Terror, who explained how his life had been changed forever by the Westminster bridge terrorist attack and how he did not get the support he needed in the aftermath. This week, a survey of 130 survivors of 11 major terrorist incidents found that more than two thirds felt that the compensation scheme overseen by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority was unfair and unreasonable. The Home Secretary talked about a review. It is unacceptable that these people are in that position at the moment. When will the review actually be published?

Suella Braverman: As I mentioned, there are no words and there is no amount of money that can adequately reflect the pain and suffering experienced by victims of terrorism. That is why it is absolutely right that we provide victims of terrorism with full compensation and the fullest support possible and available to enable them to move forward from these tragic events. As I said, we know that more must be done. That is why we are reviewing the support available. We need to better address victims' needs through the current schemes and ensure that they are properly meeting the needs of victims.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): There are people in Ukraine who found their territory illegally occupied and annexed by Russia, their children disappeared into Russian custody and their land settled by ethnic Russians. Under international law, we recognise the right of victims of the criminal actions of the Russian state to resist. How can we ensure that we do not end up characterising the legal actions by the victims in that conflict, and in other analogous conflicts around the world, as terrorism?

Suella Braverman: I am very proud of the UK's track record of supporting Ukraine and the Ukrainians both in Ukraine and abroad through the devastating illegal conflict that Russia and Putin have waged upon them. It is right that we provide military support, it is right that we rolled out an extensive set of sanctions against Russia, and it is right that we continue our international and diplomatic support for Ukrainians.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I add my comments to those of the Home Secretary on our security services and thank them for the work that they do. The Intelligence and Security Committee report last year on right-wing terrorism found that 30% of disrupted plots were from right-wing terrorism, and that they mainly involved young people who aimed to join either the armed forces or the police. We made recommendations on tightening up the vetting of police officers and proscribing membership of right-wing organisations for members of the armed forces. Will the Home Secretary update the House on what progress has been made on those two issues?

Suella Braverman: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to refer to the emerging threat posed by extreme right-wing terrorism. The director general of MI5, in his annual update, referred to the ideologies that are emerging and increasing in activity, and the independent review of Prevent focused on work that can be better done. It is absolutely right that we take robust action.

That is why I am acting on the recommendations set out by Sir William Shawcross on upgrading and updating Prevent, so that it better responds to the risk of extreme right-wing terrorism, as well as to the risk posed by Islamist terrorism.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In updating the UK's counter-terror strategy, what work are the security services doing with UK Border Force to identify those entering the United Kingdom, particularly by irregular means?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Terrorists and those who have malign intent for our nation will exploit all sorts of vulnerabilities, including at the border—that is obvious. That is why the Contest upgrade deals specifically with this issue. We need to further strengthen the UK border as a critical line of defence against terrorism, taking advantage of new immigration tools—detection, targeting and biometric capabilities—to identify and block threats from entering the UK illegally in the first place.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): This is a policy area that throws up some of the most difficult cases ever to be found, so I welcome the Home Secretary's determination to build political consensus and ensure that we work with our strategic allies. Some of the most difficult cases around counter-terrorism involve UK citizens, especially children who were trafficked by ISIS and are currently in north-east Syria. That is an area where we risk becoming an outlier, because all our allies have repatriated their citizens. It risks causing friction between ourselves and our allies. Indeed, we have our own responsibility, given the fact that these are UK citizens who were trafficked. Is there anything in the strategy that will help to tackle those very difficult cases?

Suella Braverman: The right hon. Gentleman is right to refer to this very regrettable feature of modern day counter-terrorism. Paragraph 26 of the Contest strategy states:

"In recent years there has been a small increase in the number of minors investigated and arrested by Counter Terrorism Police. Most adverse activity conducted by minors has occurred online; over half of under-18s convicted of terrorism offences over the past five years were charged with non-violent offences (the collection or dissemination of terrorist publications)."

It is vital that we are cognisant of this emerging threat, and that we have the right resources, services and professionalism in place to mitigate and intercept the threat at source as soon as possible, but it is clear that wherever criminality has occurred there will be a robust response from the appropriate agencies.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Technology brings huge benefits, but it is also exploited by terrorists. Is my right hon. and learned Friend confident that the updated strategy will ensure that technology companies do far more to prevent their services being used by those who wish us harm and to co-operate with our security and law enforcement services, particularly given the approach that some have taken on encryption and child abuse imagery?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend has spoken about an issue that is close to my heart: tackling online child sexual exploitation, which is rising at an exponential and horrifying pace. About 32 million instances of

[Suella Braverman]

online child sexual abuse were recorded by the global recording centre last year alone. In this country, we arrest 800 individuals a month involved in this heinous crime, and we safeguard about 1,200 children a month. It is horrifying, and that is why we are taking steps to work constructively with the tech companies. In terms of Contest, I refer him to the extensive sections on page 21 onwards and in other parts of the strategy that talk about the technological aspects, how it is emerging and our actions and response. Notably, our world-leading counter-terrorism operations centre, newly established, will bring together the right data, technology and expertise to investigate and disrupt these types of threats.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I welcome this statement. Although it was much delayed, it was much awaited. One of the key things missing from the strategy is the use of covert human intelligence sources—the people who used to be known as informants to the police. Increasing numbers of people caught under this network are people with mental health issues. Will the Home Secretary provide a detailed account of how many CHISs are used, what the results are and how many of those reported are people suffering with their mental health?

Suella Braverman: I cannot get into details that relate to operational independence and decisions made by the agencies in live investigations, but what I would say is that I expect all agencies and law enforcement organisations to use the full breadth of powers that we have afforded them.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): The current situation, whereby tens of thousands of young men are arriving in small boats on our shores—primarily young men from unstable parts of the world—is frankly an accident waiting to happen. Does the Home Secretary agree that the British people expect our borders to be robustly enforced, and that is just as important when it comes to defending our nation from terrorism as it is for anything else?

Suella Braverman: A strong border is critical to counter-terrorism. The Contest 2023 strategy clearly sets that out. In the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Government revised schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000, expanding powers to prevent illegal entry, including via small boats. Our migration and border system provides a critical opportunity to identify and manage individuals and goods that pose a terrorist concern. That is why rigour and robustness in our borders is essential for national security.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): In the Government's response to the Intelligence and Security Committee's "Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism" report—I thank the Home Secretary for referring to the scale of that threat earlier in her remarks—they said that

"our counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, remains threat agnostic so that rather than targeting specific ideologies, our tools, powers and overall CT approach can adapt to changing threats while also ensuring our approach is still able to identify and assess what are inherently ideological threats."

Can I simply ask her to confirm that nothing she has said today and nothing that has been published changes the underlying philosophical basis of how the Contest strategy operates?

Suella Braverman: As the Contest strategy refresh makes clear, a broad range of ideologies and narratives draw people into supporting terrorism. That includes, as I have said, Islamist terrorism, which is by far the largest proportion of MI5's case load, but there is also an increasing threat from extreme right-wing terrorism that we must confront, eliminate and do everything in our power to stop. Wherever it comes from, and however people are radicalised into extremist and violent behaviour, it is unacceptable, and we take a robust approach, ultimately, to keeping the British people safe.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In June this year, the borders inspectorate said that not every arrival into the UK at Manston was having security checks done as part of their interview or having their property checked. Can the Home Secretary guarantee now that every arrival is being fully checked, and if not, why not?

Suella Braverman: Having visited the reception centres at Western Jet Foil and Manston, and having been working closely on ensuring that the right facilities, resources and mechanisms are in place to ensure that those who arrive illegally are appropriately accommodated, I can say that we ensure that those who arrive are checked. They go through biometric checks and any other appropriate checks, and then they are put through our processing centres, generally at Manston. They are then put on a track, effectively, to other onward accommodation if they have an asylum claim. That is the general scheme that we have been carrying out for some time.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The UK police and security services used to conduct more than 600 million real-time security checks on a shared EU platform before we lost access after Brexit. At the time, the Government informed us that we would have access to a shared platform within two or three years. Now, the permanent secretary has advised that we will not have access to a shared dataset until 2027 or 2028. Can the Home Secretary confirm just how much of a damaging effect the loss of this vital intelligence and security mechanism is having on our ability to tackle terrorism and cross-border crime?

Suella Braverman: I know the hon. Gentleman is on his Brexit bandwagon, or whatever it is, but the reality is that from a security point of view, we have never had stronger collaboration with international partners than today. We have continued to develop our global reach and insight through sustained working with allies. That is particularly with the Five Eyes, where we share an enormous amount of common approach and strategic development, but also with European partners. I have met many of my European counterparts, and we share the common goal of national security. In many instances, the UK is seen among European allies as a leader and a nation valued for its contribution to pan-European national security.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), rightly stated, the Government's update acknowledges that when it comes to AI,

"terrorists are likely to exploit the technology to create and amplify radicalising content, propaganda and instructional materials, and to plan and commit attacks."

However, there are no concrete plans in the update to address those growing risks. Beyond pointing to the Government's own Online Safety Bill, which has been delayed yet again and watered down, and other than the rhetoric we have heard today from the Secretary of State, what are the Government actually doing? What concrete plans are in place to tackle this growing problem, because we have seen little to no action thus far?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Lady obviously has not read the document. If she had, she would see our actions, our achievements and what our plans are. First—I will save her the trouble of reading the document—we are realising the full potential of our newly established, world-leading counter-terrorism operations centre. I do not think she has visited, but I recommend she tries to, because it is an incredibly impressive, world-leading operational centre established recently that brings together the right teams, data and technology to more effectively identify, interrupt and disrupt terrorists. We are also ensuring a broader range of expertise from non-law enforcement interventions to mitigate the evolving terrorist threat. We are maintaining our investment in the critical threat assessment capabilities through the world-class joint terrorism analysis centre. I could go on, but in the interests of time, she would probably do better to read the document first.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The new Contest counter-terrorism strategy mentions that incel threats

"could meet the threshold of terrorist intent or action".

The person behind the shooting in Plymouth in 2021, where we lost five people, could have had their actions informed by incel culture and violent misogyny. Incel violence currently largely falls out of the scope of all the Prevent strategy tactics. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is now time to develop a cross-Government incel strategy, so that we can not only prevent people from going down that path towards violent misogyny, but help rescue those who are doing so? That would provide a greater level of community safety for women and our entire community, and we would never again see the violence we saw in Plymouth repeated on our streets.

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is an incredibly powerful advocate for his constituents. Let me put on record my thoughts and prayers for the loved ones of all of those who were tragically lost or affected. Incel culture is not strictly within the Contest apparatus, but it does need work. I readily accept that it is a violent trend and a radicalising influence that is promoting a culture that is totally at odds with the free, safe and democratic society that we all love and want to cherish. I am happy to speak to him about what further steps we can take as a Government.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): In March, the security threat level in Northern Ireland was increased from substantial to severe in the aftermath of the attempted

murder of DCI John Caldwell. Since 2016, the additional security funding that the Government provide to the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been flatlining in cash terms at £32 million a year. Will the Home Secretary undertake to review that level of funding to ensure that the PSNI and the Security Service have the tools to continue their good work in combating both dissident republican and loyalist terrorism?

Suella Braverman: Northern Ireland-related terrorism remains a serious threat, particularly in Northern Ireland. The Contest strategy does not address the threat from Northern Ireland in Northern Ireland; that is managed by a separate strategic approach led by the Northern Ireland Office. At the Home Office, our Contest approach covers the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism in mainland Great Britain. It is important that we do not decouple those two threats, which are very interlinked. We know that some dissident republican groups continue to carry out terrorist attacks, as the hon. Member referred to, so we need to ensure that all the resources are available, and we want to ensure that we support partners in Northern Ireland so they are readily equipped to mitigate and respond to the threat.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In June, the national security adviser to the Canadian Government—a key Five Eyes member—listed Russia, China and Iran as key state actors that pose a threat to Canadian life. They then added India to that list due to the rise of Hindu nationalist activity specifically targeting Canadian Sikhs. Is that anywhere in the Home Secretary's thinking on extremism? If not, why not?

Suella Braverman: As I said, general ideologies are set out in our Prevent approach and our Contest approach. We are actor-agnostic, but we note where these threats are emerging based on a casework analysis, as confirmed by MI5 and other agencies. The predominant threats relate to Islamist terrorism, but of course it is right that there are robust law-enforcement responses for any kind of violence or extremism that meets the criminal threshold.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome very much the Secretary of State's answers to the questions posed. Further to the question from the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), will she outline what steps have been taken to allocate additional funding to local police forces in areas with higher threat levels such as Northern Ireland, where republican terrorism is a real threat to the democratic process? Bearing in mind that the police budget in Northern Ireland has been cut in real terms in a time of crisis, will she confirm what discussions have taken place with the Chief Constable and the Policing Board to ensure that the commitment to ringfencing funding for the battle against terrorism in all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is maintained?

Suella Braverman: I made some reference to the specific nature of the threat posed by Northern Ireland-related terrorism. It is clear that it is primarily concentrated and directed against targets in Northern Ireland. I regularly discuss with UK Government colleagues how we can ensure robust defences across the whole piece, but I am happy to see what more can be done through a conversation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The rapid proliferation of end-to-end encryption and anonymous messaging services allows terrorist groups

[Margaret Ferrier]

to communicate freely without the risk of detection or identification. Of course, personal privacy must be upheld for ordinary citizens, so how are the Government looking to work with tech experts to find alternative ways of accessing the communications of members of such groups?

Suella Braverman: This is something that really does concern me. The proposed roll-out of end-to-end encryption without enabling lawful access or without safeguards will pose a danger not just to national security, but to children and to all our people. It is vital that the technology companies work with us to roll out the available technology—I am confident that it exists—to enable and protect privacy rights, but at the same time to enable law enforcement access and interventions to take place so that we can safeguard children online, prevent radicalisation online and prevent criminality online.

Veterans Update

1.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like expand on the apology delivered by the Prime Minister this afternoon for the unacceptable hurt caused to LGBT members of our nation's armed forces by the 1967 to 2000 ban on homosexuality. It was not acceptable and it was not what the brave men and women it affected deserved. For that, on behalf of the Government and the armed forces, I am deeply sorry.

For hundreds of years, joining the British armed forces has been a career choice full of opportunity, adventure and self-improvement; one of the most fulfilling and stimulating occupations a young person can choose. But it is also one of self-sacrifice and bravery. This morning, we published the independent review into the service and experience of LGBT veterans who served prior to 2000. It makes for miserable and distressing reading. It is only right that the House takes the time to acknowledge and reflect on those veterans who have shared their experiences with the review.

I, along with a number of colleagues in the House, served in our armed forces when the ban was in place. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for someone to join the armed forces, buoyed up by that great spirit of service, only to discover, to their horror, that many believed they did not fit. I cannot imagine what it must have felt like to be hounded out of a job they loved simply on account of their sexuality. Nor can I imagine what it must have been like to lose their livelihood, their family and their home simply because of the person they chose to love, yet that was the experience of many sailors, soldiers and aviators over decades, and it happened here—in this country—little over 20 years ago. The report published today brings the experience to life for us and spotlights the hurt felt by those affected. For that, I am truly grateful.

The ban was introduced in 1967—unbelievably, after the Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised same-sex sexual acts in private between consenting adults. To add to the injustice, when the ban ended at the beginning of the millennium, the stories of those who suffered were forgotten and their records were buried. Additionally, in 2010 and 2011, in line with Government policy agreed by the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Ministry of Defence enacted a policy to destroy legacy police investigation records concerning decriminalised sexual offences, so that historical decriminalised convictions could not show up on criminal record checks of service personnel. I assure veterans that this was not a cover-up and does not mean that their wider service records have been destroyed.

I want to place on the record my thanks and gratitude to Lord Etherton and his team for compiling this comprehensive report. It was commissioned in January 2022 and, since, 1,128 people have responded with their experiences, many in substantial detail. I pay particular tribute to all those who came forward. They have shown tremendous courage in chronicling traumatic experiences, which for many had been causing grief and groundless shame for decades. I also place on record my admiration and thanks to Fighting With Pride, and especially Craig and Caroline, who have held the baton for so long.

The testimonies make truly harrowing reading. They paint a shocking and shameful picture of a Defence that is hard to comprehend. The enforcement of the ban became something of a witch hunt. The testimonies detail investigations, invasive searches and examinations, degrading tests, brutal bullying and, in some cases, sexual abuse. One doctor who joined in 1984 describes how he had to perform a test for which there was no medical or clinical basis. Some who thought they could confide in their chaplains were stunned to find their details were passed to their superiors.

For those affected, the hardships impacted every aspect of their lives. Reputations were demeaned and defamed. Commissions were surrendered and officers demoted by multiple ranks. Veterans who served with distinction, awarded medals in famous campaigns from the Falklands to the Gulf, were stripped of their medals.

We cannot turn back the clock, but we can make amends and take action. This report makes 49 recommendations. My Department, alongside the Office for Veterans' Affairs, the Department for Health and Social Care and others across Government, in partnership with the devolved Administrations and the charity sector, all have a role in delivering the report's recommendations. Many in the LGBT veteran community have been eagerly awaiting the publication of this report, and rightly so—they have been waiting for decades to be heard. I am pleased to say that, since we received this report at the end of May, multiple Government Departments have been busy working through the recommendations to ensure that we come to the House today accepting, in principle, the vast majority of the report's recommendations. While we agree with the intent behind them, we may deliver a number in different ways from that described in the report.

We will set out those differences when we publish the Government's full response to the review after the summer recess, but I assure the House: that will be the time when we can not only deliver restitution and redress to the LGBT veteran community, but make sure that the House properly debates the report and the Government's response to it and its recommendations. This of course is a statement today. While I welcome all colleagues' challenges and requests on it, I have decided specifically that a debate in the House should take place to give a chance to debate the Government's recommendations. That is the right thing to do. Although that may take the summer, it is important that both Opposition and our colleagues can hold me or my successor to account. In fact, we have already delivered six of the recommendations today; the Prime Minister delivered the first this morning at the Dispatch Box.

Importantly, we have set up a digital front door, which went live today at midday, to offer information on veterans' services, support and restorative measures to those affected by the ban. I encourage LGBT veterans to visit it to see what support is available to them now, and to stay informed as our delivery of the recommendations is rolled out. I am happy to be drawn on further details on the recommendations during today's questions but, as I said, the House should have proper time to debate and scrutinise them.

I am glad that today's MOD is a very different place today from the Defence of the late '60s to '90s. Our LGBT colleagues are an integral and undifferentiated

part of the Defence family, making a fantastic difference all over the world. At the start of this month, the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), met LGBT members of our armed forces and veterans before they marched at London Pride. The occasion has become a celebrated part of our military calendar. Today's MOD policies are geared towards LGBT issues. There is training for LGBT allies and thriving LGBT staff networks.

There is no place for prejudice in the modern armed forces. However, things are by no means perfect, which is why we continue to improve on our zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination. We should not forget that we could not have reached this point were it not for some incredibly brave people. I pay tribute to those who have campaigned for justice over the decades, including Fighting With Pride, Rank Outsiders and the Armed Forces Legal Action Group.

Cultural change takes time, particularly in such large organisations as our armed forces. But it can only really begin when individuals are prepared to stand up and be counted. This Government have shown they care about righting historic wrongs. That is why we brought forward this review. Once we have taken the time needed to fully work out how to deliver recompense for this community, we look forward to being back at the Dispatch Box to outline those details.

In his preface to the report, Lord Etherton notes:

"The survivors have waited for at least 23 years for acknowledgment of what they have suffered, and for justice and restitution."

Today is about that acknowledgment. It is about recognising the saddening personal accounts and the deep traumatic hurt that the historic ban has caused. It is about acknowledging the adversity they overcame. It is about celebrating the spirit of service they displayed. And it is about taking the time to acknowledge their importance within our Defence family, serving or veteran.

I was struck by one particular quote in the report from a veteran:

"I don't feel I am a veteran. I have never asked for help. I don't feel like my service was recognised."

Today, we want to say to all those ex-soldiers, sailors and aviators, many of whom are in retirement: you are one of us, you belong to our community and, in choosing to put yourself in harm's way for the good of your colleagues, your community and your country, you have proven yourselves the best of us.

I say again to the veteran community—I am deeply sorry for what happened to you. The very tolerance and values of a western democracy that we expected you to fight for we denied to you. It was profoundly wrong. I am determined as Defence Secretary, and as a veteran, to do all I can today to right those historic wrongs, so that you can once again take pride in your service and inspire future generations to follow in your footsteps.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

1.25 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Today might be his last appearance at the Dispatch Box, so I pay tribute to him for focusing his last appearance on such an important issue for the LGBT+ community.

[Rachel Hopkins]

I thank Lord Etherton and his team for their diligent work in completing the review into the pre-2000 ban on LGBT+ serving personnel in the UK armed forces. As the Leader of the Opposition said at Prime Minister's questions, we strongly welcome the apology from the Prime Minister as a recognition of this historic injustice.

The review represents important progress in recognising the injustice that LGBT+ veterans have suffered, and recommends a framework to enable LGBT+ veterans to rebuild their lives and get the resolution they need. On behalf of the Labour party, I pay tribute to LGBT+ veterans and groups such as Fighting With Pride which have campaigned for justice over this appalling treatment. It was right for the Government to launch the review, reflecting proposals put forward by the Labour party during the passage of the Armed Forces Act.

The loss of livelihoods and long-term suffering endured by LGBT+ veterans due to the cruel and unjust ban have been enormous. LGBT+ veterans put their lives at risk to protect our country. They were our nation's heroes, yet suffered a serious injustice. We now know that, as a consequence of the ban, around 20,000 LGBT+ military personnel were jailed, dismissed, outed to their families or subjected to abuse, simply because of their sexuality or gender identity. That should have never happened. Many lost a job they loved, and their income, pension and honours. Those dishonourably discharged were banned from wearing their military uniform at remembrance events. Many more were forced to conceal their true identity. The review references the shocking and appalling treatment of serving LGBT+ personnel, including the disgraceful use of electric shock therapy. No one across the whole of society should be subjected to that awful practice.

I have spoken to brave LGBT+ veterans impacted by the ban, who told me how they lost careers they loved, suffered disgraceful abuse and still suffer the impact of the ban—all for simply being themselves. Many LGBT+ veterans showed exceptional courage to reach back into traumatic memories to contribute to the review. The review received 1,128 responses from people sharing their lived experiences. It is important that their testimonies are heard to ensure that the LGBT+ community has a sense of ownership of the report.

Today's commitments represent the beginning of the process. We must now see immediate action from the Government to implement the review's recommendations, as that will begin the process of helping LGBT+ veterans to get the resolution they need and, in some cases, rebuild their lives. The Secretary of State said that the Government agree with the intent behind the recommendations, but may deliver a number of them in a different way from that described in the report. Will he outline to the House which recommendations will be delivered in a different way from that set out in the report? How has that been decided? Will the Government work with LGBT+ veterans and third sector groups to ensure that they are delivered appropriately?

We fully support giving back medals to LGBT+ veterans and ending the ban on those dishonourably discharged due to their sexuality or gender identity from wearing uniform at remembrance ceremonies. I hope the Minister will outline how veterans can seek the return of their medals. Recommendation 28 states that an

“appropriate financial award should be made to affected veterans”.

How are the Defence Secretary and the Chancellor planning to take that forward?

Any proposed compensation scheme must be accessible to all veterans affected, whether they were dishonourably discharged, medically discharged, at the time, because of their sexuality, or dismissed while under investigation. The recommendations relating to mental health and physical welfare must be delivered in an inclusive manner that recognises all LGBT+ veterans and the different ways in which they were affected by the ban and dismissed. Can the Secretary of State assure the House and the LGBT+ community that this is an issue his Department is actively considering?

The Government must do whatever it takes to successfully implement the recommendations. We look forward to their full response and to a future debate. We cannot right the wrongs of the past, but we can help LGBT+ veterans now fix their lives, damaged for too long by this ban.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she has said. I think that all of us—the Opposition and those of us on this side of the House—share not only a desire to honour those veterans and make our apology, but a recognition that we must work to deliver recommendations that will make that difference. There is no delay and we are not avoiding the question: when I said that “we may” apply some recommendations in a different way from that described in the report, I was alluding to simple issues relating to the general data protection regulation and to differences of opinion in the same community.

Let me give an example: the veterans badge. Some members of the LGBT community would say that they are veterans, full stop. They do not want to be differentiated; they want the same badge as all other veterans. There are others, however, who want a separate badge. There is no easy answer to that, which is why we will be working on the issue with organisations such as Fighting With Pride. The same goes for financial provision or recognition of the harm done. We must arrive at an elegant solution that matches the needs and requirements of those individuals, rather than coming to the House in haste and making a statement. As we have seen with the infected blood scheme, for instance, when schemes are not thought through, more problems are caused and lawyers seem to take more money than the victims who deserve to be compensated or supported.

We will be very happy to work with the Opposition in advance of any debate to discuss our thinking on the recommendations. We have no qualms about that: the whole House has a role to play in valuing these veterans. People in my age group served in the old Army, and I say “old Army” because what the report says about institutional homophobia is true, and Members should read it. I was part of that Army, and I was determined to make this statement today—rather than its being made by my excellent colleague the Minister—because I wanted to acknowledge that I had been part of that Army and that thinking, which I deeply regret.

We should get these recommendations right, but some elements are less straightforward than others. Where we have been able to get on with them, we have done so, with, for instance, the apology. “LGBT veterans: support

and next steps” went live today on gov.uk. It refers to the process of helping to restore medals, which we have done, and helping to inform the veterans communities about, for example, the fact that their pension rights were not abolished. Many, as they left, were misinformed or bullied, and told all sorts of things—for example, that their records would disappear completely, and that they would have no pension. That is not true. There are some pensions still to be claimed, and we should do everything we can to help the people concerned.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from the hon. and gallant Gentleman, Crispin Blunt.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I found a way of accommodating myself to the laws and to the rules of society of the time. I then overtly followed a successful journey through my life and career. This report—an outstanding piece of work—is causing me to re-evaluate the damage done to me, and the price paid by those closest to me, as a result of having to make that accommodation. I am profoundly grateful that I now live in a society, and under laws, that allow me to be myself. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that all 49 recommendations are delivered in a spirit that meets the author’s intention?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is a good friend of mine, and I remember him making that brave decision. Many of us on this side of the House who know him well—and many on the other side—pay tribute not only to his decision to come out at that moment, but to his ongoing campaigning for LGBT people and, indeed, for all those across society who have had to make such difficult decisions in their lives. I can give him an assurance that we will absolutely hold to the spirit and the intention behind the recommendations, that we will do everything we can to implement them, and that only when we encounter difficult technical challenges will we seek another way of fulfilling the intention. All that will be done in a transparent manner, not behind closed doors. We will ensure that when we have a problem, we discuss it; and when there are two sides to the argument—as with the veterans badge—we will consult the community as closely as possible. I also ask Members to recognise that in the case of some of the recommendations there will be no perfect answer: some people within that community will have a different view, and we must find a way of accommodating that as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Scottish National party spokesman.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I hope you will indulge me for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I know that this may be the Secretary of State’s last time at the Dispatch Box in this role—let us see what the summer brings—and I have to say to him, as a former member of the Defence Committee, that I found him hard-working and determined. We might not have always agreed on a few things, but when it came to issues that I found particularly important as a member of that Committee, especially the High North and the north Atlantic, he always answered the questions in a way that the Committee wanted to hear. I commend him for his work in his current role, and you never know—we might see him back in Holyrood, where it all started.

I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I think it quite appropriate that this last appearance—possibly—at the Dispatch Box should be one in which he rights, as he said, a historic wrong. I also commend those who have played a part in bringing us to this point—I see Craig Jones and Caroline Paige in the Public Gallery. I commend them and everyone else who has worked for this so hard for so many years.

Those of us on these Benches welcome this statement. Being a member of the gay community has never been a barrier to martial accomplishment. Let me give a little history lesson: from Achilles to Frederick the Great, and from James VI to even William III, we should be clear that LGBT people have served with distinction at every level of the armed forces for as long as humanity has existed. I appreciate the Secretary of State’s candour about his own time in service. I also appreciate his clear use of the term “the LGBT community.” It is indeed welcome that his Department has not sought to play a part in other issues that are a distraction from the reality of the LGBT community, and I am extremely grateful for that.

While acknowledging the work that has brought us to where we are now, can I ask the Secretary of State what work his Department is doing not only to widen access for LGBT personnel, but to push back against the pernicious idea that LGBT inclusion is contrary to the interests of the armed forces and our national security? While we may want to talk about medals, which is great, perhaps we could hear something about pensions for the spouses of those who have not lived to see this point in time.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my honourable colleague across the Floor. As he says, we never know: he may find me back in the Scottish Parliament, where it all began.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: An independent one.

Mr Wallace: I am not going to live to the age of 200, so I do not know, but I have always enjoyed working with the hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right: there is no barrier to the success of gay men and women and what they can achieve in this world. Dr Turing was probably the greatest hero of the second world war, in my book. His achievements shortened the war, saved thousands of lives and helped to defeat the Nazis. The story of how society treated him is a sad one. I remember campaigning for him to appear on a £50 note, and I think that the empty plinth in Parliament Square, rather than featuring the Mayor’s various gimmicks every five minutes, should feature him as well. That would be the greatest tribute to the success of someone from the LGBT community and what they have done in this world.

The hon. Gentleman asked about pensions. As I said earlier, pension rights are still there for those veterans. I trust that the website I mentioned will lead those who were not aware of that, or who were badly informed or deliberately misled, to the true position, and to the fact that with those rights will come the rights of their dependants. I would be very happy, as a Back Bencher in this House, to take up that cause and make sure that they have access to that as well. Diversity and inclusion are often knocked and ridiculed by the media, as are our efforts to try to accommodate all in our armed

[Mr Wallace]

forces, but our armed forces are only as good as the society they reflect. We cannot afford not to have the talent of the LGBT community, just as we cannot afford not to have the talent of women, in the armed forces. It would be simply ridiculous if we were not to encourage it, support it and make sure that it thrives.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, and also the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins)—for all they have had to say about this excellent report. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), whose testimony moved us all. This is a very fine report, and Lord Etherton has done a first-class job in bringing it forward. I very much welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has made a real and heartfelt apology—as did my right hon. Friend in his statement—for this historic outrage. However, would the House agree that the real outrage is that nothing at all has happened for 22 years? It has taken us as a nation 22 years, under all parties, to put this thing right. That is quite wrong. I therefore think that the sincerity of the Prime Minister's apology will be judged not only by how well he does in achieving the 49 recommendations in the report but by how enthusiastically, how rapidly and how well he brings those things forward. The LGBT community are waiting to see what he does. We look forward to the debate in the autumn and we will judge him by the enthusiasm with which he adopts these recommendations.

Mr Wallace: I cannot answer the question of why it took 22 years. All I can say is that, from the authority I have in my office for now, having been able to commission this report and start this process is something that I am proud and pleased to have done, ably supported by the Veterans Minister and the Office for Veterans' Affairs, and by my colleague the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I can only speak for that. As for the enthusiasm and support for getting this implemented, I will be sitting alongside my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and I can hold whoever comes to this Dispatch Box to account to do it. I absolutely think we should do it with enthusiasm. At one stage we thought about just having a full debate on this today, but that would have involved coming here with no solutions. That would be the worst thing to do to the House. The best thing is to come here with this statement today and come back after the summer and hold the Government to account. I will be there, beside my hon. Friend, holding them to account on whether they uphold these recommendations.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my own interest in this, including my past service as an openly gay Army reservist after the ban. I strongly welcome the apology today, but I am acutely aware that I was able to serve openly only because of the repeal of the ban, and that I had a very different experience in service than that of so many here today, including the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). I cannot praise enough the work of the veterans who have campaigned so tenaciously, and also their service and the courage that they have exhibited so many times during and after their service careers.

I wrote to the Ministry of Defence a few years ago on behalf of a lesbian constituent who had been discharged for her sexuality. It was the first time she had told anyone about this when she came to see me in my surgery, and she told me that it was recorded in her record of service and her discharge that her services were no longer required, although of course she was discharged for being a lesbian. She told me of the horrific experiences she had gone through, including the invasion of her privacy, and the impact that had had on her for decades. The MOD told me that her service record could not be amended because it had been administered correctly and that it would be inappropriate to do so. Given the recommendations in the report, particularly recommendations 26 and 27, can the Secretary of State tell me whether records will now be able to be changed to truly reflect the service and bravery of so many of our veterans?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question and for his service. When I think of my own experience, I know that being friends with and getting to know men and women from the gay community—which I did not really do in my childhood or in my service because it was never talked about—is what has brought me to a position where I regret voting against gay marriage, for example. My relationships and friendships with people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and the former Member for Arundel and South Downs, and meeting friends and colleagues from throughout the House, is part of the experience for all of us.

On the hon. Gentleman's question of making sure that those veterans who want their service record to say what they want it to and being open about it, we absolutely should see a way of how we can accommodate that. It is not going to be easy, but that does not mean we cannot do it. There was clearly a policy running through the armed forces where the real reasons that people left were not put on their records. I think that applies to thousands, or even tens of thousands, of people. Of course that is going to be a challenge, but it is not insurmountable. We must find a way to do this, and I am clear that we should do so.

However, I also remember a debate about pardons when I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Ministry of Justice. At that stage, there was a longing for people's records to be removed because people did not want a record of a criminal offence that they felt should never have happened. That was the driving force behind the police chiefs' discussions that led to the destruction of those records. As I have said, it was not a cover-up. There were some people who said, "This is wrong and it should not be on my record. Why should I be known for that?" So we just have to find a way through. If there is anything we can do to find a way of doing this, I will do my very best to do it and I know that the Defence team will as well.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the review report throw any light on the strange paradox that this ban was so rigidly enforced in peacetime, yet during the first and second world wars there was mass conscription, as a result of which many gay military personnel served with distinction and were awarded the highest medals for gallantry?

Mr Wallace: That is a pretty cruel reflection on a state, and it affected not just LGBT people but women. In the first and second world wars, women kept industry going. They kept the home fires burning and kept the factories going. Women were not allowed to fly fighter planes in war, but they were allowed to deliver them. Then, after the war, everyone went back to treating women as, in some cases, second-class citizens in the workplace. It is a good observation that we should not repeat this, and that we should embrace the fact we now have great achievers serving in our armed forces who are gay. This is the way to ensure that we set the right example for the future.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement. With 270 pages and 49 recommendations, it is a lot of summer reading. I welcome the Government's apology to LGBT veterans today. Those veterans served their country but a number of them were stripped of their medals. Will those medals now be returned swiftly and will the ban on LGBT veterans wearing their uniform at ceremonies be lifted?

Mr Wallace: In answer to both: yes. Also, some veterans were told that they did not qualify for medals in the first place. They, too, will be able to have their medals from now on.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement, which, as a proud LGBTQ+ champion, I strongly support. I wonder if he might indulge me the opportunity, as a former commanding officer, of presenting him with his annual appraisal on his final tour of duty with the MOD. It says here, quite clearly, that Captain Wallace is strident, forthright, spirited and fearless in the pursuit of an outcome, which we have just seen in this statement. I have regretfully graded him A- for potential, given that he is moving on from the top job, but we can all agree that he gets an A+ for performance. Does he agree that he is leaving the MOD a much better place than it was when he arrived, not least for LGBTQ+ personnel?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If the truth be known, I do not think I ever got an A in anything. Maybe I am finishing this job without being found out.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I warmly welcome the report and pay tribute to the campaigners. Recommendation 16 refers to pensions, and the issue has already been raised as to whether survivors will be beneficiaries. Can I stress that that needs looking at? Recommendation 28 relates to financial compensation. The MOD set the Committee a maximum of £50 million as a cap on what could be paid in compensation. I urge the Secretary of State not to use that as a way of keeping compensation payments down to keep the Treasury happy. Could he also clarify—I know that the Veterans Minister is not here today for the announcement—who will implement the recommendations?

Mr Wallace: I am happy to write to the right hon. Gentleman to clarify the pathway to the pension, which is important.

First and foremost, we recognise that there should be a financial award. Secondly, as I said, it is important that we work with people like Fighting With Pride on

how we can do that. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs is sitting right above the right hon. Gentleman, and the implementation will predominantly be done by the Ministry of Defence, but some recommendations are cross-Government. No doubt the right hon. Gentleman and I, from the Back Benches, will write to the Treasury.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his courage and openness, and I thank the Minister for Veterans' Affairs for his work. The report makes for incredibly difficult reading. We are a proud service and military community in Rutland, Melton, the Vale and Harborough villages. I take this opportunity to recognise that community and to put on record that we see them and hear them, and that it was the senior military of the time who stole careers and stole futures. They are the ones who should feel ashamed, not those who served or who sought to serve our country.

I also put on record the House's sorrow that there was the same ban on diplomatic staff, with an apology being made only in 2021. We see them and thank them for their work.

We work with, train and equip many militaries around the world that continue to persecute LGBT people who simply want to protect their people. What are we doing to make sure that, when we work with, train and equip those militaries, we do not allow them to repeat the mistakes we made?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend's last point is incredibly valid. Yes, we train people all over the world to protect their societies, but what is the point if we do not also train them to uphold international humanitarian and human rights laws? On many occasions we do that. I once stood in Lebanon to listen to former British soldiers, under a British scheme, train the Lebanese army in human rights. That is incredibly important, otherwise what is it all for?

I understand my hon. Friend's point about senior commanders, but it would be wrong to focus on only one cohort. Ultimately, the institutional organisation, culture and mindset—and society's mindset that affected diplomats, the judiciary and everything else—were collectively responsible for the environment that led to this. As a rather junior officer I did not have a role and did not come across anyone who was going to be locked up or prosecuted, but I take responsibility as much as the senior people in the Department who made the policy.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome this statement, and I sincerely welcome the manner in which it has been delivered. It shows the Defence Secretary's leadership qualities, which have been all too lacking in many other leading politicians in recent times.

I pay tribute to my constituent Simon Hinchley-Robson, who urged me to bring his case to the Floor of the House in an Adjournment debate. He was horribly physically abused after being outed by a doctor who had given him a medical examination, before being summarily dismissed from the RAF. He was denied his pension and his opportunity to serve his country. He, like many others, deserves redress.

What I do not want to see are the interminable cases we are seeing with contaminated blood, Grenfell and

[Clive Efford]

the Post Office. What can the Secretary of State say today to ensure that we do not see such delays and obfuscation in this case?

Mr Wallace: Some of the delay and obfuscation was driven by a rush to get a scheme that satisfies speed. The obfuscation is not always deliberate. We have seen a list of examples where things have been written incorrectly. I remember the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) campaigning on the vibration white finger scandal. The intention was good, but the lawyers were the ones who profited, so we have to get it right.

If the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) would like to write to me personally on behalf of his constituent, I will make sure of his pension rights, which were not taken away from these people. They may have been informed as such, so we must make sure that their pension rights have not been taken away. If there is a reason why they were taken away, I am very happy to explore making sure they are restored.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Whether it is the cadets, the battle of Britain memorial flight or the Red Arrows, the military's reach goes far beyond simply their personnel. Does the Secretary of State agree that the least the military can do, in the light of today's report, is use their influence to try to break down broader anti-LGBT prejudice in our society?

Mr Wallace: I totally agree. When people join the armed forces, they want to belong. One of the best parts of basic training is when they are finally given their beret or when they finally pass their weapons test. Believe it or not, being on guard for the first time feels like they are being treated like a proper soldier, and they just want to belong. The fact that they all look the same and are wearing the same uniform is actually part of the attraction. That has to be the quality we sell to people. It does not matter if a person is gay or straight, or whatever they are. They are part of the collective defence of this fine nation and its values. The Red Arrows, trooping the colour, the cadet forces and all those other symbols are, in a sense, about belonging to one thing.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): LGBT+ veterans were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and risk their life to protect our country. They were our nation's heroes, but they suffered such a gross injustice. I am proud that Labour repealed the ban on LGBT+ service personnel in 2000, and I welcomed the Etherton review when it was first launched. Does the Defence Secretary agree that the Prime Minister's very welcome apology is merely the first step in the healing process, as we attempt to correct this historic wrong? Does he also acknowledge that how compensation is dealt with will be the true barometer of the Government's success in dealing with our LGBT+ veterans?

Mr Wallace: The true barometer will be how we implement all 49 recommendations. Yes, financial awards will be part of it but, for some, the restoration and the valuing of these people is just as important.

I hear the hon. Gentleman's point, but not a single other Member has talked about party politics or political parties. My point about the overall culpability of society

is that my party opposed lifting the ban and his party opposed lifting the ban. The European Court of Human Rights ruled against them and forced them to do it. I came to this House in the spirit of honesty and openness about the culpability of society. Let us not make it party political.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the apology, which will go some way towards correcting the hurt that our veterans faced. As a proud member of the Royal Navy branch of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have seen at first hand the vital role of our LGBT personnel. What efforts is the Secretary of State making to ask the service chiefs to redouble their efforts to make our armed forces even more welcoming in the recruitment of LGBT people?

Mr Wallace: We have a strong and dynamic D&I plan to make sure we talk about it. We are sometimes criticised, and it is not an easy line to follow, as we saw with the RAF's issue in promoting the recruitment of women. We are guided by the Equality Act 2010, but we are also guided by the desperate need and importance of having the whole of society in our armed forces.

I would not appoint a Chief of the General Staff, First Sea Lord or Chief of the Air Staff who did not wholeheartedly believe in having a diverse armed forces community. They would not get past me in the appointments process. As I finish this job, I have appointed all the armed forces chiefs. Every single one of them embraces that requirement and actions it.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I mention my political party only to associate the Liberal Democrats with the Defence Secretary's comments. I respect him a great deal, and I thank him for what would be referred to as long service and good conduct in another career. My thoughts are with former LGBT service personnel whose family members died before the policy changed and before the apology was made.

Have there been discussions with homelessness charities, such as St Petrocs in Devon, on identifying veterans who were dishonourably discharged and found themselves on the street?

Mr Wallace: Some of the recommendations will go across government, including those on homelessness, which the hon. Gentleman rightly highlights. It will be important that the MOD and the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families work closely with the Minister for Veterans' Affairs to make sure that we have that grip not just across national Government, but across local government. If we are really to implement some of these recommendations, we require our approach to involve not only the whole of the government sector, but the charitable sector.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I absolutely support the Defence Secretary's campaign to put a statue of Dr Turing in Trafalgar Square if that is what he is launching. Today's apology is particularly welcome and will make a huge difference, but a large part of the community left the military of their own accord. They were not hounded out and they did not have marks on their service record, and this report has to ensure that it takes those people into account, because they left and gave up successful long careers in the military because they felt that the environment was not supportive of

them. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me and my constituents that the report will make sure that they are kept under consideration?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes not only an important point, but a difficult one. Obviously, there were people who were formally discharged, but there were not that many of them. Others were elbowed out, fished up, set up or pushed out because of other offences. Then there were others who just said, “I am unwelcome and I am leaving.” First, those people will know who they are, and I hope they read this report, which is an easy and good one to read. Someone said it was long reading over the summer, but it is not. It will not take long to read Lord Etherton’s report, and it is a good report. I hope that those people will also use the Government website and that they will find a way in which they can come forward and talk about their experience. We have to find a way to make it up to them if there is something they need.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) said, one of the most humbling and inspiring experiences a parliamentarian can have is taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Earlier this year, along with colleagues, I had the immense privilege of observing our Marines in Norway as part of their cold weather deployment training. We got to meet our proud lesbian, gay and trans service personnel—they are proud to serve our nations, and our nations should be proud of them. They spoke of how the culture has rightly changed, and I thank the Secretary of State for taking part in that culture change and making it happen. However, there is always more to do, so what can his successor do to ensure that all our armed forces, from our cadet forces onward, are inclusive and free of discrimination?

Mr Wallace: The first thing to do is to have exposure to everybody in the community and for people to be able to talk about their sexuality and experiences without fear or hindrance. My children’s experiences and ability to talk about a range of things are very different from those of my generation. That is because these things are much more acceptable to be talked about. Every time a soldier in training meets someone from the LGBT community who is sitting next door to them or is on a patrol with them, we see that that is the strongest way to change the culture. That is the first challenge: let us get more people from the LGBT community joining our armed forces, as that will help change the culture for good.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend for the candour he has displayed in bringing forward this important report, which has been warmly welcomed by LGBT+ veterans in Carshalton and Wallington. May I press him on the issue of marriage on the defence estate? I know that three marriages have happened since the change of regulations in 2014, yet the defence estate still does not allow civil marriages or civil partnerships to take place on the estate. That has a particular impact on the LGBT+ community. I know that he is already looking at this matter, but will he reassure us that the MOD will continue to make this policy more inclusive?

Mr Wallace: I totally hear what my hon. Friend is saying. I have just made certain decisions on exactly that issue that I cannot yet talk about. The relationship between the church and the military is complicated, with respect to church premises and so on. I am happy to write to him to set out the details. My intention is that these military premises or church premises should be open to administer marriages and so on to people of all orientations.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I wish to acknowledge the campaigning work of LGBT+ veterans and others on this issue, and to add my voice to the thanks to Lord Etherton for this excellent report, which is welcome and much needed. The Secretary of State committed in his statement to a zero-tolerance approach to LGBT+ discrimination in the armed forces and he just talked about culture change. As LGBT people, we do not just come out once; we have to come out over and over again, sometimes several times in one day. I welcome his acknowledgement that LGBT+ people joining the military is much to be welcomed, but LGBT+ people cannot be responsible for tackling the culture change that is needed simply by turning up. Will he please outline what the Government are doing today to make sure that the culture change we so desperately need in our armed forces is taking place and that the Government take responsibility for it?

Mr Wallace: Some of what we are doing comes out of the excellent work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) on women in the armed forces, such as allowing people to feel that they can make a complaint about inappropriate behaviour and ensuring that inappropriate behaviour is dealt with outside the chain of command. The service complaints route used to go via the chain of command, which understandably caused all sorts of problems for people about who they complain to and whether they should complain to their boss about their behaviour. Part of that route is about saying, “If you feel something is inappropriate, you can make a proper complaint right through the system. If senior officers or officers are not acting on those complaints, not only will that affect their career, because the ombudsman can rule on that, but something can be done.” First, this is about upholding the standards we wish to have and making sure that unacceptable behaviour is dealt with there and then, on the spot. That is the first thing: to make it a welcoming environment.

The second thing is to make sure that when we are recruiting, or when people are in training, an appropriate level of training and support is given to those people. We must then make sure that the environment is equal all the way through. The same goes for married quarters and for living accommodation: people must be treated absolutely the same, without any discrimination at all. Ultimately, this is about getting more people to join, but it is also about those people who are serving feeling welcome and not having to come out every few hours or days.

The one thing I can tell the House, having been in an infantry regiment, is that the people who know you the best are the people you serve alongside. In those units, you will not have to come out every hour or every day;

[Mr Wallace]

you all know each other. What sticks you together is your friendship and your bond, and sometimes that is formed under fire.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to the House today and for the tone in which he has delivered this statement. May I also tell him that the two friends of mine, one a former naval intelligence officer and the other a non-commissioned officer in the Army, who had to leave in tragic circumstances will both be very pleased with the apology that he and the Prime Minister have given on behalf of the state? Finally, I wonder whether the Defence Secretary would agree with something that a colonel in the Royal Marines said to me 25 years ago: “In a firefight, I would rather have a gay Marine alongside me who can shoot straight than a straight Marine who can’t.”

Mr Wallace: As a Scots Guard, I had better not make a comment on the Royal Marines. All I would say to my first Whip when I joined this House is that that is the point: the men and women of our armed forces all belong to a common endeavour, which is to keep this country safe. That was what was forgotten in all those years. What matters is the skill they bring to bear to deal with the enemy. As my hon. Friend says, I would much rather everyone shot straight.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s tone and the statement itself. Everyone in the House welcomes that, and the Government’s commitment is clear. Unfortunately, some

veterans have taken their own lives, and others have been discriminated against and been traumatised, and their health has deteriorated. Will he pledge to help those who have offered their all for this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland but who have felt on their own for far too long?

Mr Wallace: The feeling of rejection that those men and women must have felt will stay with many of them all their lives, which is something we have to do our very best to help solve. It must have been awful for people to think that they were helping society, and society, at that time, telling them that they did not belong. Wherever they are, we should help to look after them and urge the regiments and the veterans associations—I am president of the Scots Guards Association in Lancashire—to reach out and ask them to rejoin the family if they feel excluded.

The tragedy of those who have taken their lives goes to the heart of the importance of the suicide strategy, which was raised at Prime Minister’s questions today. We must make sure that we are alert to the needs of those people who are taking their own lives and to any sign of rejection, and not just for the time that they are in the military.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes proceedings on the statement. The whole House appreciates the determination and sincerity with which the Secretary of State has come to the House today to make this statement himself. If this is his last appearance at the Dispatch Box, as he predicts it might be—one never knows—then the whole House will join me in wishing him all the very best.

Points of Order

2.11 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It would have been out of order for me to have asked a question during the statement, because I am afraid I was upstairs with some youngsters from my constituency at the beginning, but would it be in order for me to join the general approbation of the Secretary of State for Defence? I note that Elton John has said several times that he has done his last performance, but now that the Secretary of State for Defence is a gay hero, we will all be buying him some LGBT jackets, shirts and rainbow flags.

May I make a serious point about the right hon. Gentleman? He has been one of the very few people in this House who has been clear-sighted about Russia from the beginning—from the very outset. I feel sometimes that if the whole House had listened to him a bit more on Russia, Ukraine might have been in a better place than it is today.

If it is not too obsequious, may I add my obsequies to those of everybody else and praise the Secretary of State. Is that in order?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Chamber will appreciate that it is not in order at all, but I have exercised some leniency, as we come to the end of this long sitting period and approach summer, to allow the hon. Gentleman to make his remarks, because I know that he makes them with sincerity. I think that most of us would agree with him. It is not at all in order for me to say from the Chair that I agree with anything, but the Secretary of State knows that he leaves with the very good wishes of the whole of the House of Commons.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier this morning, a note on parliamentary headed notepaper and a mug was sent to the press lobby from the Scottish National party leader in Westminster, referring to China's one-child policy. Madam Deputy Speaker, this is not what I came to Parliament to do, but sadly I have become used to calling out Sinophobia and misogyny in this place and I would be grateful for your guidance.

Official statistics confirm that as a result of the Chinese one-child policy there were 196 million sterilisations and 336 million abortions. It was a policy that broke families and led to infanticide, mostly of baby girls. In 2017, there were still 33 million more men than there were women in China. When can our diverse communities expect better from Members of Parliament, especially in understanding the history and trauma of other countries? Madam Deputy Speaker, is it appropriate for the SNP leader in Westminster to use parliamentary stationery to make crass political jibes that speak to Sinophobia and misogyny? Should we, especially the east and south-east Asian communities, not expect better on this issue?

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Maybe you could clarify two points for me. Is the British Labour party more rattled by a minor breach of the rules than it is by child poverty? And critically, in June 2018, the following was said:

“The cap reminds me of Communist China's morally abhorrent one-child policy. Now, even the Chinese have abolished that; perhaps the Tories can bring themselves to follow China's example and abolish the two-child cap.”

That was said by the deputy leader of the Scottish Labour party. So in answering those two questions, maybe we can find the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) the telephone number of the Labour sub-branch office in Glasgow.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Neither of these matters are points of order for the Chair. I appreciate that they are matters on which Members feel very strongly, and that they wish to find an opportunity to criticise and to debate what is right and what is wrong in this matter. It is not for the Chair to take any responsibility for Members' correspondence with journalists, for example, but I would always, as the Speaker has done many times, urge that responsible language is used by Members in this House and outside this House. If the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has a specific point about the use of parliamentary stationery, the way to deal with that is to write, with evidence, to Mr Speaker, rather than to raise it on the Floor of the House.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please could you advise me of how I can get hold of a response to my letter to the Minister for Immigration and the international development Minister, dated 2 March—that is four and a half months ago—about the ballooning bill of aid for asylum hotels under their watch? Last year, in-donor refugee costs ballooned to £3.7 billion. The cost per person per night in asylum accommodation has gone up fivefold in four years and the case backlog still stands at 170,000. As we are a day from recess, can you advise me on how I can get a timely response, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the hon. Lady clarify her question? Was the letter written personally by her on behalf of a particular constituent?

Preet Kaur Gill: Yes, of course—many constituents have written to me on this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, I am asking the hon. Lady whether the letter was about a named, particular constituent.

Preet Kaur Gill: The letter was written in my capacity in my current role, but it was on behalf of many people who have written to me raising concerns.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As has been said from the Chair many times—the Speaker has repeatedly said it—it is essential that Ministers answer correspondence in a timely fashion; four and half months is too long to wait. However, if every time a Member of Parliament wrote a general letter about a general matter to a Minister and did not get an immediate response, they raised a point of order here in the House, then we would have points of order for two hours every day. It is not a point of order. I hope that the hon. Lady will get an answer to her letter, but it is not a point of order and Members should not come to the Chamber to complain about a general matter that is a matter for debate.

Offences against the Person Act 1861 (Sentencing Guidelines)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.17 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Sentencing Council to issue sentencing guidelines in respect of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861; and for connected purposes.

I will start by saying what the Bill is not doing, to avoid any misunderstandings. It is not removing sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861; it is not changing any of the regulations on abortion set out in the Abortion Act 1967 that allows, in strict and limited circumstances, abortions to take place, including time limits for those procedures.

I make absolutely no secret of wanting to see far more wide-reaching reform than the Bill delivers, taking women seeking abortion away from the sanctions of criminal law, and I believe a great many Members of Parliament agree with me on that too. I had drawn up that Bill and planned to bring it forward today, but that was not possible, despite widespread cross-party support, so that has to wait, yet again.

So what would this Bill do? This Bill relates solely to sentencing under the Offences against the Persons Act 1861, the criminal law underpinning abortion in the UK. The effect of the Bill would be to ensure that there is sentencing guidance in place for judges to use in court. Sentencing guidance from the Sentencing Council is entirely proper for Parliament to legislate on. While I would prefer complete reform, I also believe that, as parliamentarians, we have a duty to scrutinise how the current law is working and to make the changes that are possible when problems emerge. When it comes to abortion, we should not be surprised that having a 160-year-old law underpinning a medical procedure causes problems for the courts. The law has to evolve to better reflect modern-day Britain. It should be compassionate and applied with an understanding of the medical context of today.

At the moment, there is no such sentencing guidance in place, and, with little case law to draw on, we leave judges bearing the brunt of trying to interpret legislation agreed in this place more than 150 years ago, when the world of women's health was a very different place. Sentencing guidance helps to ensure consistency in how the law is applied today. The council's founding legislation, the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, is clear that the Sentencing Council must publicly consult on new guidance to ensure that professional and public views are properly taken into account and, where necessary, then adjusted.

We saw in the recent case of Carla Foster that the judge specifically cited the lack of guidance in his sentencing remarks. If sentencing guidance had been in place, perhaps Ms Foster would not have had to endure weeks of prison, away from her children, waiting for the Court of Appeal to decide yesterday that her initial sentence should be halved and that it should be a suspended sentence, meaning that she should not be in prison at all. Dame Victoria Sharp, one of the Appeal Court judges, called in her own words for "compassion not punishment". If sentencing guidance had been in

place for the judge at the initial sentencing, it is possible that this heartbreaking situation could have been avoided altogether.

The measures in the Bill already enjoy widespread support. The shadow Leader of the House, whom I can see in her place and whom I informed that I would be referring to her, called for exactly this change just a few weeks ago and has been clear about the official Opposition's support for sentencing guidelines. Following the sentencing of Carla Foster, she said:

"In the wake of this awful case, I hope that the Government will be in a position to take action, at least on sentencing guidelines. This is too important an issue to play politics on. Labour is willing to work with the Government."—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 438.]

The Government have not brought forward such measures, because—they are absolutely clear on this—any changes on the law relating to abortion must be above party politics and come from the Back Benches. That is why I am standing here today, to get action—such as the action that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) talked about in her remarks—for women up and down the country who are fearful when they read of the plight of Carla Foster; or who need to consult a doctor about abortion and may have been absolutely unaware of the sentencing guidance gap, or, indeed, of the criminal law that is in place. I hope that the hon. Lady's support for sentencing guidance extends to my Bill, though of course I understand that it is an issue of conscience.

I am extremely grateful to those right hon. and hon. Members, from across the House, who have indicated their support for the Bill, including the Father of the House. Some have their own experience to draw on, while others have seen at first hand, through their constituents, how the current situation does not work. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who is in her place, and others have shown how distinct and deliberate steps are important in changing attitudes on abortion, and I applaud the work that she does. I believe that this Bill is another distinct step forward from where we are today and would see women given better certainty, while we wait for fuller reform to achieve agreement in the House.

I am also immensely grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House, for her full support and expert guidance in how to take forward this Bill with the Sentencing Council. I hope that the Sentencing Council agrees to meet us to consider a way forward with the responsible Minister, who I think may be the Minister sitting on the Front Bench.

It is worth dwelling on the context of the 1861 Act for a moment. The reason that law was passed in the first place was to protect women—women who were far more likely to die as a result of a barbaric abortion than during childbirth—at a time when women were forbidden by law from even taking part in that debate in Parliament. Today, things could not be more different: women can debate, and regularly do debate, women's health issues. What is even more important is that we now live in a time when abortion is far less dangerous for women than giving birth, so there has been a complete change.

The Bill matters because the fair and equal treatment of women matters. Abortion is the only medical procedure in the UK subject to the criminal law. Women who find

themselves having an abortion outside the law, for whatever reason, deserve our “compassion not punishment”—to quote the words of that Appeal Court judge—and it is difficult to understand how society would ever be best served by placing a woman in prison after she had experienced a pregnancy loss for whatever reason. She deserves our support and compassion, not imprisonment. But these are matters for the Sentencing Council to consult and decide on based on expert knowledge.

The Bill I present to Parliament today is not a panacea for the significant differences between the law and medical opinion on abortion, and it does not pretend to be. But the Bill does demonstrate to those whom we expect to interpret the law that we understand that we make it very difficult for them. The Bill is a small step in the right direction to get a better balance between public opinion, medical opinion and the law. I hope that the House will unite to agree that it should proceed.

Our job as parliamentarians is to find solutions, not to define problems. It is to find common ground and to work together to establish consensus where it may not be obvious and easy to find. In the words of the prayers with which we start every session:

“laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind”

our responsibility to

“seek to improve the condition of all mankind”—

and indeed of all womankind, too. Thank you.

2.27 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I rise with great sadness to oppose this Bill for four very specific reasons, on behalf of many Members of this House who believe, like the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), that there is much agreement on the fact that there is a problem that needs to be resolved, but fear that this approach may end up making things worse.

I start by recognising and respecting the work of the right hon. Lady. I have been proud to stand with her on this issue on many different occasions over the years. None the less, our fear is that the Bill fails to solve the issue, and possibly makes it worse, by normalising the biggest problem of all. That is why we have not received any representations in support of this approach from those working on these issues. The central problem that we face is not that there are no sentencing guidelines, but that there is sentencing at all. The Offences against the Person Act 1861 is not a foundation on which any sensible modern law on abortion can be made, because it is not about healthcare. It is legislation that also criminalises placing wood on a railway with intent to cause danger, casting stones on a railway carriage, obstructing a clergyman, and assaulting a seaman. Alongside that, it criminalises a healthcare decision.

We can be deeply opposed to abortion and still recognise that no other healthcare begins with an offence and then goes on to medical regulation. We can also be concerned about the conduct of a defendant, as in the recent case that sparked all of this. Resolute, as we all are, that there should be time limits on abortion, we can still think that the Offences against the Person Act should be repealed. We have other offences for those who seek to force women to have abortions, and for those who have abortions beyond the term limit.

My first reason to oppose this Bill is that sentencing normalises the fact that women continue to be prosecuted under this legislation and so investigated for a crime even if they do not end up in court. Sentencing guidelines would affect only those women convicted. Guidelines would do nothing to halt the growing number of women investigated for having an abortion, stillbirth or miscarriage under this law.

Freedom of information data shows us that there have been 67 prosecutions in the UK in the last 10 years, but many more women have been investigated. The Home Office tells us that, in 2021 alone, 40 women were investigated. We currently know of two live prosecutions—that is where there has been no decision on whether to charge the women under this legislation—but sentencing guidelines would not deal with the hostile atmosphere that women are facing. We can see that in the recent guidelines issued by the Chief Coroner on the need to report live births following determinations, which state:

“A lawful termination of pregnancy under the Abortion Act 1967 can trigger the coroner’s duty to investigate.”

That guidance means that bereaved parents could end up facing a coroner’s inquest, and entangled in the lengthy criminal justice system, because of the connection between reproductive loss and prosecution. That is why a 15-year-old girl who suffered a stillbirth at 28 weeks suffered a year-long investigation by the police, which was eventually dropped only after a post-mortem found that her pregnancy loss was due to natural causes. She is still under emotional pressure as a result of that.

There is no distinction in the law between reproductive loss that is self-induced and prosecutions of men who provoke a miscarriage, meaning that it leads to the potential prosecution of domestic violence victims. Because of this law, women across the country are having their medical records accessed and being interviewed because they have experienced baby loss, and because of how sections 58 and 59 of the 1861 Act frame how public agencies approach women.

My second argument is that, even if we just focus on keeping women out of prison under this outdated legislation, we are still equating abortion with a criminal act, such as damaging property, stalking or theft, by suggesting community sentences. Indeed, Carla Foster has a suspended sentence that involves 50 days of rehabilitation activity. A woman with a community sentence still has a criminal record. It is still classed as a conviction. It remains on the police national computer indefinitely and can be used in future criminal proceedings. It has to be declared to employers and financial institutions, and could prohibit future work with children. She could be subject to curfews, obliged to live at a particular address, prohibited from travelling overseas or forbidden from taking part in certain activities in certain venues. She could be barred as a solicitor. It could affect a Disclosure and Barring Service check, and the ability of employers to discriminate on the basis of criminal convictions means that women having abortions could be discriminated against. That approach reinforces the idea that there is shame in having an abortion rather than it being a choice.

Even if someone thinks that that is acceptable, my third concern is that, especially since yesterday’s successful appeal by Carla Foster, we do have case law on which sentencing can be based. We need, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said, for compassion, not

[*Stella Creasy*]

punishment, in the application of this. The Sentencing Council is an independent body, so there is no guarantee that it would agree with the approach that many of us would like to see, and that has been put forward today. It could open a can of worms regarding what the sentence could be. Frankly, the women currently facing a court case would not be helped by the Bill because of the length of time that it takes to develop sentencing guidelines. For motoring offences, it was 11 months. For animal cruelty, it was over a year. For perverting the course of justice—a recent one, in March 2023—it was also over a year.

My final concern is that looking at sentencing directly contradicts the call for decriminalisation, and the case for equalising the human rights of women in the United Kingdom. Women in Northern Ireland would never face a prosecution, or indeed an investigation, under the legislation because the law has been repealed there. I do not propose to divide the House on the Bill, although I know that there are many opinions about the way forward, because I recognise that behind it is an ambition that we all share, and the current situation is untenable. I cannot, however, support the Bill, and I know that many others cannot.

I urge the Government not to go down this path, but instead to enable the House to have a vote on the Back Benches, as the right hon. Member agrees that we should, on whether, as a matter of conscience, to equalise abortion rights across the United Kingdom, allowing the many of us who voted for such rights in Northern Ireland to extend them to our constituents, so that we can uphold the human rights of women everywhere. We

know that the public are with us, and that those who oppose abortion on principle will continue to do so whatever the proposal. We also know that the time for real courage and real change is now, because the women facing investigations will not be helped by sentencing guidelines. The women frightened that their rights are at risk need and deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dame Maria Miller, Sir Peter Bottomley, Ms Harriet Harman, Caroline Nokes, Sarah Champion, Wera Hobhouse, Tracey Crouch, Dame Caroline Dinage, Matt Warman, Christine Jardine, Nickie Aiken and Theo Clarke present the Bill.

Dame Maria Miller accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 357).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting-

(1) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of David Rutley relating to Sanctions; and

(2) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Penny Mordaunt relating to All-Party Parliamentary Groups not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the business on that Motion may be entered upon and proceeded with at any hour, though opposed; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply—[*Fay Jones*].

Sanctions

2.36 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I beg to move,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 713), dated 27 June, a copy of which was laid before this House on 29 June, be approved.

The regulations amend the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. The instrument was laid on 29 June 2023 under powers in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. The measures in the instrument, which entered into force on 30 June 2023, have been co-ordinated with our international partners, while refining the approach to accommodate the particular circumstances of the UK's legal sector. By restricting access to additional services from the UK, they will contribute to increasing the pressure on Putin for waging his illegal and brutal war against Ukraine. The measures place further constraints on the Russian economy, and therefore Putin's war machine. They add force to the largest, most substantial package of economic sanctions that Russia has ever faced.

The instrument delivers on the commitment made by the UK Government to ban legal advisory services on specified commercial activities. That will further hamper the ability of Russian businesses to operate internationally. The legislation will make it illegal for any person working in the UK, as well as all British nationals working abroad, to advise on or facilitate certain commercial activities that would be sanctioned by the UK Government if they involved a British national or entity, or were taking place in the UK. In practice, that will make it harder for Russia to benefit from the UK's world-class legal expertise. That goes beyond prohibitions already in place, which cover a range of professional services, including accountancy, architecture and management consultancy. This latest measure demonstrates our determination to ratchet up pressure on Putin for continuing his illegal war.

Although the legislation will close down opportunities for Putin's associates and supporters to benefit commercially from the UK's legal expertise, it is important that we ensure that legal services can continue to be provided where they contribute to upholding the rule of law and compliance with our sanctions framework. By protecting the fundamental right to legal representation, we distinguish ourselves from Putin's oppressive regime. By ensuring that legal advice can continue to be provided for the purposes of compliance with our sanctions framework, we enhance the effectiveness of our regulations and intensify the pressure on Putin.

Legal professionals are under a strict obligation to ensure that their services support their clients to be sanctions-compliant, and do not stray into enabling them to circumvent restrictions. It has become apparent, however, that the legislation can be interpreted as having the unintended consequence of prohibiting persons in the UK and British nationals abroad from providing legal advice to clients seeking to comply with the sanctions regimes of our international partners. It is not the intent of these regulations to prohibit that type of legal service. UK lawyers should be able to support their clients to be sanctions-compliant beyond UK law as we work closely with our allies to tighten the net on Russia's economy.

We have looked at this issue thoroughly and, as an immediate response, we are working across Government and alongside representatives of the legal sector to implement a general licence that will make it clear that that type of activity can continue.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister is addressing a point that the Law Society has made to quite a few of us, and I guess quite a few of us will be referring to it later in the debate. If this had been primary legislation, we would have tabled an amendment. Is it not normally better for us to do all the scrutiny of this kind of work on primary rather than secondary legislation? Then we can always help the Government to get it right first time.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman is generous as ever in offering to assist us to make progress. I hope that, as we bring in the secondary legislation, it will be another step towards tightening the pressure on those who would wish to use legal representation for the wrong things.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the Minister's willingness to engage on the general licence; it is very important to the Law Society, and for good and sound reasons. We all share the policy objective, so will she perhaps agree to meet, at both official and ministerial level, with representatives of the Law Society so we can thrash out the exact detail and get it right?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will be happy to do so. I know that we aim to have this in place in the coming days. As I said, we are working closely with the legal sector and are grateful for its constructive engagement on this important issue. I am happy to commit to my officials meeting the Law Society to hear its particular concerns and indeed, I have no doubt, offers of its views on how we can make the scheme as effective as possible.

Once we have issued the licence, we will consider whether amendments to the SI to address the issue are appropriate and necessary. We will do that in conjunction with the legal sector and bring such amendments forward, if needed, at the earliest opportunity.

As with all other sanctions, this latest package has been developed in co-ordination with our international partners. We will continue to work with the legal community to monitor the effects of the legislation to ensure that it is achieving its objectives. We will also continue to co-ordinate with our international allies to identify and address any gaps or loopholes that emerge in our respective sanctions regimes.

To conclude, this latest measure demonstrates our determination to target those who participate in or facilitate Putin's illegal war of choice. Through our sanctions regime and those of our allies, Russia is increasingly isolated, cut off from western markets, services and supply chains. Key sectors of the Russian economy have taken a significant hit and its economic outlook is bleak. The UK Government will use actions to intensify the military and economic pressure on Russia until Putin ends his brutal invasion of Ukraine. We welcome the clear and continued cross-party support for this action and for the sanctions regime. I commend the regulations to the House.

2.42 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for setting out the measures we are debating. As the House rises for recess later this week, I am pleased we are able to meet before that, not only to debate new and welcome sanctions measures, but to reiterate our unwavering commitment to and solidarity with Ukraine, its people and its sovereignty. The NATO Vilnius summit last week underscored the strength of feeling across our diplomatic and military alliances that we must stand with Ukraine in all measures—economic, military, humanitarian and diplomatic—until this war is won and provide the guarantees that it needs.

I am also pleased that the House had the opportunity last week to explore and debate the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on illicit finance, the Government's response, the need to crack down on dirty Russian money within our economy and the serious problems we have had with London as a location for that and the whole ecosystem that has facilitated it over many years. On these measures, I want to make it clear, as I have on many occasions, that we will support the Government where we think they have got things right on sanctions and we will not seek to divide this House on this measure.

However, I do have some questions for the Minister. More than 500 days into this conflict, it should not be potentially lawful for a UK legal services provider to support commercial activities that advance Russian state interests and the interests of those who support the egregious and barbaric war in Ukraine, just because said activity does not have a sufficiently tangible connection to the UK, due to the territorial application of the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. It must be the case that no UK person, or person in the UK, can provide legal advisory services to an activity that would be prohibited under our regime.

I hope the Minister can say why it has taken so long to bring forward this measure. I accept that the sanctions regime is a constantly evolving feast, and we have had this debate many times, but that is obviously a significant potential risk, so I hope she can explain what has happened with the timing.

I welcome the Minister's clarification regarding a general licence and the discussions that will be had. I know that other right hon. and hon. Members have expressed, and will express, concerns about the ability to access legal advice for positive purposes, if I may put it that way. On the other hand, I have some questions regarding licences and exemptions that have been granted in the past, including for access to legal services, and the ministerial oversight of those.

One particular case was in January this year, when it came to light that the Treasury had issued special licences that allowed Prigozhin, the leader of the brutal Wagner Group, exemptions and licences to acquire legal support—in fact, I believe it was flown to him in Russia at the time—to sue his critics here in the UK. That is obviously completely unacceptable. I hope that the Minister can explain, given the questions that I and others have asked about that, what role Ministers are now taking in the issuing of exemptions and licences.

The Minister will be involved in developing the general licence that she talked about for legitimate purposes, but at the other end of the spectrum there are an

awfully large number of licences that have been granted. Perhaps she could write to me and to the House with a full list of licences and exemptions that have been granted and for what purposes, and clarify whether Ministers, particularly in her Department, now have oversight of those, or whether that is just being done by officials. These are significant matters and we do not want to see anything sneak through that is going to facilitate or aid Russian activities.

I would also like the Minister to explain how the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation is monitoring the utility of the various exemptions issued under the sanctions regime, and whether they are enhancing the regime or potentially, in some instances—I hope this is not the case—undermining it. The OFSI should be undertaking constant reflection on and refinement of the regime and ensuring that, while we have the strongest text for the sanctions, their actual application is being done in the most effective way to tackle the aggressor in this case.

While I am on the subject of exemptions and loopholes, in the last Committee debate that we had on such measures the Minister committed to write to me regarding some serious concerns I raised about third countries being used to avoid our sanctions regimes in a number of product areas. That would be interesting in terms of the services sector and the legal services we are referring to in this debate, but it also applies to a number of goods. I hope she can write to me before the recess with answers to those questions, because they are significant.

As the House is about to rise for recess, I reiterate the position of the official Opposition, the Labour party, to work with the Government in support of Ukraine, its security, its prosperity and its future, and to co-operate on measures against Russia and those who would aid and abet Putin's regime. We must continue to do that and to see that Russia and all those who support Putin lose. Our sanctions regimes and the way they are applied are crucial to that. We must never again allow London to be part of an ecosystem of lawyers, accountants, company formation agents and others who have facilitated the very people behind the Russian regime and are ultimately aiding and abetting Putin.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

2.49 pm

Sir Robert Neill: I welcome the tone and approach of the Minister's remarks, and I fully understand and support the policy objectives of the regulation, as does every decent lawyer in this country. For completeness, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. We want the UK legal system to retain its reputation as an able, efficient and honest jurisdiction, which it is. However, it is important that we get the detail right, so, with apologies from one lawyer to another, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that, if I say the detail matters sometimes, there may be a little detail to raise with the Minister in the context of her very welcome assurance that she will meet, and have officials meet, to discuss what comes next. I appreciate that the regulations have—rightly—had to be developed at pace, and that we have sought to be aligned with our allies, but there are some bits to which further attention needs to be paid.

I am grateful to the Law Society of England and Wales for the briefing that it has sent to a number of hon. Members. Given that we all endorse the policy objective that Russia must never be allowed to gain from its barbaric and disgraceful invasion of Ukraine, and that Russian entities must never be able to gain from it, we must do it in a way that retains the ability of UK-based international law firms to advise, with the highest level of professionalism, on the way in which clients may wish to divest themselves of interests in Russia, for example, or on the risks or otherwise of potential transactions that might involve an element of a Russian entity of one kind or another. It is in everybody's interest that they are able to do that, but I am concerned, as is the Law Society, that the wording of the regulations, however well intended—I think that they are totally well intended—may have the unintended effect of limiting it.

In particular, there is concern that the very broad language of the regulations is broader than that of our counterparts in the United States and the EU in terms of limitations. The Minister is absolutely right that we should align, so that is something we perhaps now need to revisit. Licensing may be one way, and a revised statutory instrument may be another—perhaps the two go together—to align the language.

I will set out one or two of the practical consequences. The language of new paragraph 8A(1)(a)(i) to schedule 3J—I think I have got that right; it is all in the detail, Madam Deputy Speaker—is quite important. Essentially, it prohibits advice that facilitates or enables activity that would be prohibited if it were conducted in the UK or by a UK person—let us call it “UK-prohibited activity”. It then goes on to prohibit any advice in relation to, or in connection with, UK-prohibited activity. In that context, “advice” includes the provision of legal advice that involves—here is the rub—

“the application or interpretation of law”.

Well, that is pretty much what lawyers do, hopefully: they advise people about the application and interpretation of the law. Early advice is the best way to prevent people from getting into legal problems and prevent needless litigation. There is, I accept, an exemption covering advice, but, as the Minister will know, there is real concern that the exemption is narrowly drawn—too narrow, I would argue.

On the face of it, that means in practical terms that British companies cannot get advice from English and Welsh lawyers on whether their activity will comply with international sanctions regimes, for example. They could go to American lawyers for that. Many American-based law firms have entered the UK legal markets. It would be a bizarre situation if one could not go to the UK law firm for that advice but could go to the New York office of the American law firm. I do not think that was the intention behind the policy. We must ensure that the language reflects the intention.

In the same way, if, for example, an international company wants to know whether a specific activity that it is contemplating for perfectly good and legitimate commercial purposes is prohibited by UK, EU or US sanctions—all of which vary somewhat—the UK lawyers can answer on whether or not that activity is prohibited by UK sanctions, but once the lawyer has said, “Yes it is,” they are not then allowed to advise on whether it is prohibited by EU or US sanctions. That cannot be a sensible or practical approach, and it cannot be what the Government actually want to achieve.

The whole advantage of UK international law firms is, of course, that they have many multidisciplinary lawyers and people qualified in many jurisdictions. Our strength is that people come to us because we can advise on a range of law in a range of jurisdictions. At the moment, however, a lawyer would be committing an offence if they took the obvious step. Instead, they have to say, “Okay, it is illegal in the UK, but I cannot tell you whether it is illegal in the EU or the US.” That is clearly not a situation that anybody wants to see. The difficulty is that the language does not reflect the intention. Surely, giving such advice does not enable or facilitate unlawful activity. It allows a company to know whether, if it does the activity, it might infringe the law, and whether the law is applicable to it. The language does not reflect that policy intention as it stands.

Another example is that the advice exception in regulation 60DB(3) is limited to advice on compliance with sanctions, and not to other forms of compliance advice. The logic is that one seeks advice from one's lawyer on the whole range of potential legal risks that one might run in taking a particular course of commercial activity. The facts will be the same, and may raise questions about sanctions compliance, but as it stands—this is of real concern to the Law Society—a UK lawyer could supply the client only with advice on sanctions, not on whether they comply with other criminal offences. The strict wording of that regulation would, on the face of it, criminalise lawyers giving advice on whether that same form of action falls foul not just of sanctions, but of anti-money-laundering, anti-bribery and export control laws.

Surely we want any UK lawyer to be able to give one-stop-shop, rolled-up advice on all the legal risks that might arise from that activity, but at the moment, once they have established the first part—that it falls foul of the UK sanctions regime—they cannot go on and do the obvious and common sense thing of saying, “And, by the way, you also fall foul of this, that and the other.” That cannot be the intention, but as it stands, that is where we could end up.

That is why the general licence is, in the short term, so important. Individual licences, which were referred to by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), have been tried in the past. Not only is there difficulty in how effective they are in policy terms, but there are practical difficulties as well.

That is where advice about disinvestment comes in, for example, because UK companies might very properly want to withdraw from transactions involving Russian entities or individuals. Surely we want UK lawyers to be able to advise them fully and frankly on how best to disinvest. But if they have either to be caught by the risk of a criminal sanction or to get an individual licence, we know that Russia—not a rule-of-law country, to put it mildly—is well able to take actions to sequester property and prevent the return of assets to British nationals and British companies in a way that we would never countenance in this House. When dealing with people of that kind, we do not have that leisure, frankly. Once a company has taken the decision to disinvest, they want to get the assets out quickly. Waiting for an individual licence would not make that possible. That is why a general licence, rather than individual licences, is important.

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

That is why it is important to sit down with the Law Society, hear the lived experience of law firms in the UK, and get the regime right so that it sticks. Regrettably, this war, and therefore the sanctions, may go on for longer than any of us would wish—however long it takes to get Ukraine its freedom and to get rid of that wretched regime in the Kremlin—so we must have something that will stand the test of time. That is why I am so anxious for the Minister to engage in detail with the Law Society about this.

I have a final example. We could have a situation in which an EU firm based in the UK can go to their Paris office for advice on different terms of legal trade from the UK office. That cannot be to the advantage of the UK legal system, and it does not help us to align with our allies.

I have greatly shortened the briefing that I received because everyone wants to get away for the summer recess. I hope I have flagged up some serious practical points. There is an issue of principle, but the detail matters. If we can work together to get that right, I hope we can come back to the House after the recess with the general licence and a revised approach to the SI, which will give us a permanent system through which to bear down on the evil of the Russian regime while enabling British lawyers, with their expertise, to play their part in that fight. At the moment, they would have one hand tied behind their back, which was not the Government's intention.

3 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the knowledgeable hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill). Given his legal expertise, I can now take three pages out of the speech I was going to deliver, and I hope the Minister was listening.

This is a serious issue. For the Scottish National party, our stance has always been clear, unambiguous, and unwavering: we vehemently support the principles of democracy, peace, and the rule of law, and we unyieldingly oppose any entity or individual that would act to undermine those bedrock principles. It is worth recollecting the context here. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a blatant breach of those principles and an affront to the international community. The unjust and unprovoked aggression caused immense pain, loss, and destruction to the people and the critical infrastructure of Ukraine.

There is much more that the UK Government could and should do. We have heard from the Labour spokesman about the lack of action, in my view, about Progozhin, and the issue of dealing with third countries. As we have just heard, the details are important. The issue needs to be properly scoped, and the detail needs to be agreed as quickly as possible. Speed has been lacking in delivering some of the sanctions that are so greatly needed.

It is in that context that we put our support behind the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2023, which further the United Kingdom's stance that Russia bears full responsibility for the damage it has wrought in Ukraine. This is not a matter of politics: it is a matter of basic human rights and justice. We believe that those who cause harm should be held

accountable and be made to pay restitution. By supporting the regulations, we are not just voting for sanctions: we are voting, ultimately, for justice for Ukraine.

We note and support the provision for a defence under section 68(1) of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 relating to the prohibition on exportation of certain goods to non-government controlled areas. That thoughtful addition will ensure that sanctions do not inadvertently penalise innocent parties, and provides a fair balance in extraordinary circumstances. Again, we await the legal details.

Since the start of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the SNP has consistently backed the UK Government's sanctions regime against the Kremlin. We see the regulations as a natural, necessary and meaningful extension, albeit more can and should be done. In conclusion, the SNP supports the regulations. We stand for justice, for peace, and for holding those accountable who disregard those values. We stand with Ukraine and will, as indicated, support the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2023.

3.3 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I want to comment briefly on the Minister's remarks about international partners and our relationship with them. The Council of Europe recently held a summit in Reykjavik, which the UK attended, and we also signed the resulting declaration. The Council of Europe has always seen sanctions as a rule of law issue, because Russia has acted illegally in invading Ukraine. The Council of Europe has had a tremendously robust response, not least from me: I was the first member to call for Russia to be expelled from the Council.

The Reykjavik summit asked member states to support it on the rule of law issue, by bringing legislation to make sure that the changes happened. I am glad to see that we have done that, and we are making a very good change. I hope that the Minister will include the Council of Europe among the international partners with which she will maintain contact, because it has a vast amount of expertise. It is not just me, there are many distinguished members who have enormous expertise in dealing with Russia and these issues. I hope that she will both use that and feed into it, because there is a lot we can do—subject to what we have just heard—to set a model that other countries can use.

3.5 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a joy to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). Since we have been in valedictory mood today, with the Secretary of State for Defence earlier, it is a sadness that the hon. Gentleman will not be with us in the next Parliament. Obviously, I want Labour to take every seat in the land, so I would not want to go too far in that. None the less, the hon. Gentleman has been admirable in his work in the Council of Europe in this regard and on human rights generally across the continent. Our membership of the Council of Europe is an important part of the structure of human rights across Europe. It is one of the reasons I support our remaining in the European convention on human rights and adhering to the European Court of Human Rights, which I understand to be a necessary aspect of our membership.

John Howell: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I hope to stay in the role for another year.

Sir Chris Bryant: Long may he persist.

I support the measure before us today. The Minister knows that I and other Members have campaigned for as robust a set of sanctions as possible. I have been critical sometimes of the processes we have used to get there. Oliver Bullough wrote a splendid book that lays out why it is important to deal not only with financial instruments but with some of the people who have effectively enabled others to bypass sanctions regimes and hide their money from prying eyes in the UK.

It was a joy to hear the extremely learned hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), not least because he referred to “every decent lawyer”. I detected a characteristic wink at that point, because not every lawyer is decent, m'lud. I gently suggest—

Sir Robert Neill *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: Now look what I have done.

Sir Robert Neill: I have prosecuted some less than decent lawyers over the years, so I take the hon. Gentleman's point. But he knows just how good the English legal system is collectively, and I know he will want to recognise that.

Sir Chris Bryant: I have great admiration for lawyers, especially those who advise me, as is occasionally necessary—[*Laughter.*] It is a serious point: if the UK stands for anything in the world, it is the rule of law. The hon. Gentleman and I have often had to join cause on occasions when we have worried that the Front Benches have not quite seen things in exactly the same way as we do.

I will not rehearse all the arguments, which were laid out so beautifully for the hon. Gentleman and others in the Law Society's note. He understood it better than I did. The important point is that all British businesses should be withdrawing from Russia. It is extraordinary that any British businesses are still doing significant business in Russia. I do not wish to make any partisan points, but I think it is still true that Infosys has a substantial presence and has not managed to wind down its presence in Russia. That is worrying. Mantrac is certainly still operating in Russia, and some of the money it has earned there will have made its way into its recent £5 million donation to the Conservative party. We should be doing more due diligence about these matters.

I do not understand how Unilever can still claim that it is only selling Magnum ice creams in Russia because they are an essential item. They might be an essential item for somebody who is going to watch the “Barbie” movie later this year—that sort of fits—but in all seriousness, I honestly do not think that Unilever should still have a significant presence, or any presence, in the Russian Federation. Its remaining there is a problem. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to the point about British companies being able to advise on how to disinvest as fast as possible. If the regulations were to make that more difficult, that would be a bit of an own goal on our part.

I have some other, very minor, points to make. One is that the sanctions regime is now getting very complex. These are No. 3, the third regulations in this Session. I know that this Session of Parliament has gone on a bit—one could argue that the whole of this Parliament has gone on a bit, maybe a bit too long—but we are

relying on lots of statutory instruments and secondary legislation. The amount of such legislation has grown enormously over the past 20 years, not just since 2010 but before then, and there is a danger that it is very difficult for lawyers to keep up with what the law is. Of course, there is no excuse for lawyers to say that they do not know what the law is, but none the less, these regulations came into force on 30 June—they are already in force. That is the problem with the way in which we are legislating these days. When there is a Labour Government, I hope that we will use secondary legislation much less frequently, because we need to be able to amend legislation on the Floor of the House or in Committee to make sure that Governments do not make silly mistakes.

I note the subtle difference in the exemption that exists for advice. Of course, advice can cover a multitude of sins and is sometimes designed to do so, but I note the subtle difference between the exemptions granted in the UK, those granted in the US and those granted in the EU. If I heard the Minister correctly, she attributed those to the different legal systems that exist in those jurisdictions. That may be true, but I would like her to expand on that and explain why it is necessary for us to make distinctions in that way. Otherwise, the point made by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is absolutely right: an international law firm could just say, “All right, I'm popping over to Paris, Madrid, Berlin or wherever for the weekend, and we will do it from there.” That would be a mistake. I also think that sanctions need to be a stiletto blade, not a blunderbuss, if they are to be truly effective in peeling away support from Vladimir Putin within the Russian Federation.

In a previous debate on sanctions, I referred to the former leader of UKIP. Let me be absolutely clear: I have had no correspondence of any kind—electronic, in writing, or digital—with Coutts bank about him, or for that matter about anybody else, because I do not have many constituents who bank with Coutts. I have no idea why Coutts has closed his bank account, but I should have been more careful with the words that I used a year ago. The figure I gave was for his total income. I think he himself has stated that he was paid for his appearances on Russia Today, which is of course a part of the Russian state, and he has made clear his respect for Vladimir Putin as a nationalist. However, I do not think that the figure I gave was anywhere near the accurate figure, so I apologise if I have inadvertently misled the House. I had no intention of doing so, and I hope that puts the record straight. I had hoped that this afternoon's debate was going to include a debate on the Procedure Committee's report into allowing all Members of the House to correct the record, rather than just Ministers, but that option is not yet available to us. As such, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have rather stretched your generosity in making these comments.

3.13 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank all hon. Members who have made contributions this afternoon. I will do my best to address the questions they have raised, and as ever, where I do not have the information to hand, I will ensure that I write to them.

This latest measure reflects the reality that legal advisory services can play a fundamental role in facilitating border trade and investment, and that by restricting

[*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

those services, we will further constrain the Russian economy and Putin's war chest. While we have worked to ensure that Russia cannot access our legal expertise in relation to certain commercial activities, we have not hindered work, but have helped to provide judicial rights and access to justice. We have also not hampered legal advice that facilitates compliance with our sanctions network and framework, and we are working to ensure that advice in relation to compliance with the sanctions laws of our international partners is also permitted.

I absolutely commit to write to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) about the questions he has raised, including his important point about third-party circumvention risks. Discussions and work are ongoing with a number of colleagues; I have been talking with colleagues internationally about how we tackle those risks and find tools to address the enforcement challenge they present.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) has brought his wisdom to the debate about this important piece of legislation. I will ensure that he and the Law Society are able to discuss their concerns about the detail of the general licence in the very near future, conscious—as a number of colleagues have said—of the timeframe over which we are keen to move it forward. He made the important point that access to legal advice should be taken early to reduce the risk of error or breach. We must ensure that the general licence will work in practice, providing the right support while constraining those who wish to abuse the system.

I put on record that the continued leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) at the Council of Europe is hugely welcomed and appreciated by all Members across the House. I thank him for his offer of support and for sharing the expertise that sits in the Council of Europe. As we continue to work in what is a complex and, sadly, ever-changing and ever-developing environment, we continue to get ahead of those who wish to abuse the system.

Stephen Doughty: It was good to hear the Minister confirm again that she is going to work on the issues that have been raised about the general licence. However, can she say whether Ministers such as herself are actively involved in the issuing of all licences and exemptions in relation to our sanctions regime, or is it still just being done by officials without ministerial sign-off?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Obviously, the hon. Member would not expect me to discuss the detail of matters that are live and ongoing. However, we work as a team and across Government: while it is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office that holds the pen, and it is me at the Dispatch Box today, the legislation, work, management and enforcement issues are covered across Whitehall. We all work together very closely on

those issues, and as I say, it is a live and continually changing environment as we keep track of what we are trying to achieve. One part of that, of course, is ensuring that enforcement can be monitored. The commitment of £50 million following the integrated review refresh was an important part of that and it will help us build even stronger enforcement tools to ensure we make the most effective use of the sanctions we bring in.

This, Madam Deputy Speaker, is the latest edition of our package of sanctions. We will continue to use sanctions to keep up the pressure until Putin ends his horrific, senseless war and Ukraine is allowed its territories back to live peacefully once again.

Sir Chris Bryant: Will the Minister allow me to intervene before she sits down?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Yes, I will.

Sir Chris Bryant: I would just like to put on the record how much we respect and admire the team of roughly 150 people who work in the sanctions group. It is not easy work—it is tough to get it right—and they are magnificent. Is that in order?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That is in order.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind and thoughtful intervention. They are an extraordinary team—they are working flat out all the time. Sadly, until such time as Putin loses this war, we will continue to work flat out to ensure that we have as many sanctions tools available to us as possible. In the meantime, I hope and trust that the House will support the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 713), dated 27 June, a copy of which was laid before this House on 29 June, be approved.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

That the draft Official Statistics Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 19 June, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Capacity (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 June, be approved.—
(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

All-party Parliamentary Groups

[Relevant document: Guide to the Rules on All-Party Parliamentary Groups approved by the Committee on Standards.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Minister, Mr Johnny Mercer. *[Interruption.]*

3.19 pm

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): I beg to move,

That this House approves the Eighth Report of the Committee on Standards, Session 2022-23, HC 228, on All-Party Parliamentary Groups: final proposals and, with effect from 16 October, the Rules for All-Party Parliamentary Groups contained in the Annex of that Report, subject to any transitional arrangements agreed by the Committee on Standards.

I think I heard the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) shout "Really?" from a sedentary position, at the thought that I am here for this debate, but he must understand that I have had a deep and long interest in all-party parliamentary groups.

APPGs play a valuable role in our parliamentary system. They bring together parliamentarians and external experts to further cross-party consideration of important issues. It is paramount that any new rules do not deter APPGs, particularly those that are self-funded, from meeting, because these forums aid the development of public policy on matters that otherwise may not be considered by Parliament. Rather, the new rules should seek to increase transparency, limit undue influence and secure the parliamentary estate, while allowing APPGs to perform their vital functions.

The Government are grateful to the Standards Committee for reviewing the rules governing these groups to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. It is right that we give existing APPGs an opportunity to comply with the new system, so I am grateful to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for outlining the need for transitional arrangements to implement the rules.

APPGs are able to play an important role in Parliament by virtue of their informal status, but I believe these groups should be held to high standards and operate in keeping with the broader principles shared across the Houses, which are that Parliament should be transparent, protected from undue influence, and boast a reputation that is cherished at home and envied abroad. The reforms being proposed represent an important step towards this objective, and as per the Government's response in June, we welcome the Committee's consideration of whether the rules on foreign contributions could be strengthened at a later stage. I look forward to this debate, and I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

3.23 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise to support the motion. I must confess that I was a little taken aback at the brevity of the Minister's speech, but the points he made were absolutely right. We are here to support the Standards Committee's work. I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this important motion, and I join the Minister in his full thanks to the Standards Committee and of course its Clerks, who we can see have put in a lot of work.

This work follows on from previous investigations, such as the report published in 2013. I of course agree with the Minister that this motion will help to safeguard Parliament from various things that could be improper, such as improper lobbying and hostile state actors, and that is why I support it. The Standards Committee is right to have conducted the inquiry now, because the current rules for APPGs were last agreed by this House almost 10 years ago.

APPGs have a long history, and they have made a significant contribution to the life of Parliament. I understand from the 2013 report that the first, created in 1939, was the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. It was established to help with the war effort and focused on the big scientific issues of the day over many years; of course, it still thrives. It is a great example of the longer-term focus that APPGs can have, compared with the shorter-term thinking of many Governments.

Another example of the value of APPGs is the APPG on autism, with which I had the pleasure of being involved for many years while on the Back Benches. I pay tribute to its former chair, dear Dame Cheryl Gillan, whom we all loved and miss very much. It is still one of the biggest and most active groups in Parliament, and much of that was down to Dame Cheryl, with her dedication and her warm and welcoming style, which drew in Members from all political parties.

That is what APPGs at their best can do. They effectively bring together and organise supporters of a particular issue or country from across both Houses and all parties. They provide space for longer-term policy development and a strong voice to Back Benchers, and they therefore have a rightful place in our Parliament.

However, the Committee found that APPGs can pose a "significant risk of improper access and influence by commercial entities or by hostile foreign actors".

Looking down the list of APPGs, as I did ahead of this debate, there has been a significant rise in their number since we last looked at their governance, which makes it harder for the House to monitor their practices. The Committee noted the

"real possibility of APPGs having been set up at the suggestion of, and as a result of lobbying by, a commercial interest."

That is clearly bad practice and—this is the very thing the Standards Committee has been working so hard to prevent with its work in other areas—it could enable commercial entities to, in effect, buy access to or the influence of parliamentarians and decision makers. Throughout its inquiry, the Committee undertook extensive consultation, received written and oral evidence and came to clear conclusions, and we have to act now in support of the motion to strengthen how we run APPGs.

I think the two-tier approach to governance and regulation proposed by the Committee strikes the right balance. It safeguards Parliament where there is the greatest risk—for example, focusing on those with external financial benefits of over £1,500 in a calendar year, and having a lighter touch on those that do not. I also support the recommendation that the number of APPGs an MP can be an officer of is limited, as should be the number of officers per APPG. It is also right that we take a stand and say that no secretariat should be allowed to be provided or funded by a foreign Government,

[Thangam Debbonaire]

and that external members of a secretariat should not be granted parliamentary passes. I think I have understood the report correctly there.

This is about us, the House and Parliament clamping down on the risk of improper lobbying. For the record, I am not speaking from any particular experience of it having happened, but from the risk that it could, and that is very important. We all have a role to play in maintaining Parliament's security, and I urge Members and secretariats to do their bit and to follow the new rules carefully. I think APPGs should welcome them, because they are a great opportunity to showcase that we know how to do our work properly and professionally, which can only increase the respectability and credibility of APPGs.

The Committee has said that it will provide an updated guide on APPGs, which will consolidate all the existing guidance. I think it is an excellent idea to have that in one accessible place. I suggest that it is sent in physical form to every MP's office and that copies are made available in the Vote Office and the Library, as well as online.

Finally, I would like to see these changes as just part of a package of reforms to restore trust in politics, and in Parliament in particular. The Leader of the House and I have a shared desire to increase the transparency of ministerial interests and, for example, to make information on the Register of Members' Financial Interests more accessible. Will the Minister convey to the Leader of the House that I reiterate my offer to support her in bringing forward these reforms as soon as possible? In the meantime, I urge everyone to support the motion if the House divides.

3.27 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I think I have to declare an interest because—I have totted them up—I am the chair of nine APPGs at the moment.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Ten.

Tim Loughton: All right, the figure may be 10 if I have missed one out, but, in hurriedly putting some notes together, I could remember nine.

I chair the APPG for children, which is a substantial group. Over many years, it has produced some reports that have led to changes in the law, and I do not think that anybody is going to challenge the legitimacy of that. I chair the 1001 critical days group, or the APPG on conception to age two—first 1001 days. That was the genesis of the Government's "best start" policy, brought in by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), which has played an important part in early years provision. I chair the APPG on archaeology, which briefs parliamentarians on changes to the law regarding the influence of archaeology on the environment, agricultural matters and cultural matters, and it is very active.

I chair the British Museum APPG, which met only yesterday. It has an important job, given that it was this House that established the British Museum back in the 18th century. When there are serious challenges ahead—the future of collections such as the Elgin marbles, for example—this House must have a voice. I chair the

APPG for Armenia, which I took on reluctantly from my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) because he was a Minister again. I was told there would be very little going on, and within a few weeks Azerbaijan invaded Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia became a very hot topic. I have virtually weekly conversations with the ambassador and others on this subject, so it is an active group.

I chair the reformed Wilton Park group, an important foreign affairs melting pot financed by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I chair the all-party group on mindfulness, which has done so much good for the mentality, mental health and camaraderie of Members in this House since its formation about 10 years ago, with the strapline of "disagreeing better"; that is very relevant, and it is one of the more active groups. I chair the all-party group on Tibet, which has been absolutely essential to the whole issue of China's abuse of human rights not just in Tibet but in Xinjiang and beyond.

I chair, too, the all-party group on photography. I took that role on after the murder of our former colleague Sir David Amess. Because I was the next named officer, very shortly after his murder I was, disgracefully, contacted by the registrar to say, "You must have an EGM within 30 days to appoint a new chair," completely oblivious to the circumstances of the loss of our previous chair. That was how I got to take on that role. The group exists largely to organise the annual photography exhibition, which Mr Speaker very kindly supports and will be attending again later in the autumn. So those are my interests—and there is apparently a tenth one that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) will tell me about. I will therefore automatically be caught under these rules, so I have a double interest.

I do not criticise the report, although I disagree with some of its findings, but I think it has gone largely under the radar and many Members are going to be very surprised if and when it goes through that they will be impacted. I absolutely take the point from my right hon. Friend the Veterans Minister, who I am delighted is here to defend these measures today, that the all-party group system is an important part of Parliament—the report itself says that as well—and that new rules should not deter all-party parliamentary groups. I am afraid they will, however, for some good reasons and for other, unintended not-so-good reasons.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I, through my hon. Friend, invite the Minister before he winds up to read pages 55 to 74 of the "Guide to Rules" and see how long that is going to take and how sensible it is?

Tim Loughton: All right then, I will, but my concern is that there has been very little profile for this report and study. I notice that only one Member of Parliament submitted written evidence and only one gave formal evidence to the Committee, and I cannot see that there were any submissions or calls to give evidence face to face from any chairs of all-party groups, let alone multiple chairs of all-party groups.

Sir Chris Bryant *rose*—

Tim Loughton: But the Chairman of the Standards Committee is probably about to correct me.

Sir Chris Bryant: Yes, I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the second round. We had a first report, for which quite a lot of people submitted evidence—both members of the public and Members of Parliament—and we also did a survey of all Members, which a large number responded to. We had other submissions as well, and various Committee Chairs appeared before us.

Tim Loughton: I am referring to the second report because we are discussing the second report. Because there was quite a gap between this study being initiated and this final report being issued, with final recommendations with imminent implications, many people thought this would not happen and might be kicked into the long grass. We all have to take responsibility if we have not noticed things, but the fact that very few people took part in the second report suggests there was a large degree of ignorance that it was taking place.

I agree that there is a problem: there are too many all-party groups—over 800—and I came to that conclusion some years ago when I was invited to the inaugural meeting of the all-party group on meetings. That was not a joke; it did get established—although I do not know whether it is still going or whether it has just had one big meeting right from the start. There are a number of all-party group subjects that clearly stretch credibility, and the fear is that too many of them are in danger of being hijacked by lobbying groups, commercial trade bodies and other interests to give them a platform in Parliament that they otherwise would not be able to get. I absolutely understand that that is a problem and something needs to be done about it. That demonstrates the case for making it harder to set up APPGs in the first place and having stricter rules for the way they operate and their transparency. Everything in the report on transparency, including financial transparency and having a much better check on financial contributions or freebies to certain Members, is essential. I have no issue with any of that and will certainly support it.

On the issuing of passes, none of the groups I am involved in have, to the best of my knowledge, issued passes to any outside bodies, which I think absolutely goes beyond the pale. I agree, too, with having an annual income and expenditure statement and an annual report. Those are all sensible recommendations, and there might be a compendium of all the activities that go on through all-party groups, which would be a good selling point in highlighting why the all-party groups are an important part of this House and the work they do.

Many all-party groups, including many I am involved in, commission reports. In some cases, we act as quasi-Select Committees to take evidence and produce reviews that are intended specifically to influence Governments and political parties and feed into legislation. They get publicity and are generally a good thing.

Sir Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman betrays something I have worried about for some time when he refers to quasi-Select Committees, because APPGs do not have the authority of the whole House. It is a really important distinction that they are not constituted like Select Committees or any other Committee of the House. We have striven very hard to make that important distinction, which is why a specific rubric has to be put on any APPG publication saying it is not from a formal Committee of the House.

Tim Loughton: That is absolutely right, but although they are not Select Committees they can adopt a Select Committee style in taking evidence in order to produce reports. The Select Committee system works really well. I have sat on the Select Committee on Home Affairs for nine years, and those Committees are one of the strengths of this House, but they cannot cover everything. The all-party groups can drill down into more specialised, niche issues that a Select Committee would never have the time or capacity to take on, in order to produce a report on something specific. A few years ago the all-party group for children produced a report on stop and search by police of young children. We took some very important evidence and produced a report with recommendations that led to a change in guidance. So there was a very clear role for doing that group, and the then Select Committee on Home Affairs did not have the time or remit to be able to cover the issue. We produced a valuable report that had a clear implication at the end of it. So all of those things are good, which is why we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

It is sensible to have a two-tier approach for groups that have outside funding, but that funding includes benefits in kind. The National Children's Bureau is the secretariat to the all-party parliamentary group for children. It does not give us any money. It will organise receptions occasionally to promote our work, it will pay the hire fee for one of the rooms here, for example, and it gives us its time for free, which is a benefit in kind, but none of us receives any money or any perks because of that. The NCB would certainly be caught by this measure, and so would a lot of smaller groups and charities acting as secretariats.

On groups having a minimum of four officers rather than the unlimited amount at the moment, I have been involved with groups that have had large numbers of officers. We do not necessarily need so many, but four is too few. One strength of all-party groups is in the name: they are all-party groups. One wants to get as many parties represented as possible, including in the Lords, as groups are made up of Members of both Houses. To limit them to four officers may limit representation to only two parties—I think it would still apply that they would have to have an Opposition Member as an officer—would not give us a broad spread, so I do not understand the logic of having just four officers.

On limiting each individual Member to being an officer of only six APPGs, I would instantly fall foul of that. In some cases, it may be an excuse for me to be able to say, "I'm very sorry, I can't be a chairman of that anymore" and I can stand down. But the groups I have taken on—I have given up others in the past, and perhaps there are too many—are on subjects in which I have a strong interest, are active and I think serve a good purpose for the House that I would not be a part of otherwise. So I instantly have a problem. If the new rules are coming in on 16 October, subject to any transition rules of which we know no details—the motion states they will come in when we come back after the conference recess—how is that going to work? The Chairman of the Standards Committee is about to tell me how it is going to work, which may delete my next paragraph.

Sir Chris Bryant: It might be best if the hon. Gentleman waits until I make my speech, because I will lay it all out very clearly. It is printed in the documents, but groups

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

will have to have had an AGM or an extraordinary general meeting, which they can do virtually or by correspondence if they want to, by 31 March next year.

Tim Loughton: Therein lies the problem. There is no common year end for all APPGs. We had the AGM of the all-party parliamentary group for photography at the beginning of this week, because yesterday was the end of our year when we had to do that by. There is another group for which I have another two months to hold it. After 16 October, when the AGMs start coming up, which groups do I then have to drop to take me down to six or below? It may be ones that I do not necessarily want to drop.

The point is, why are we bringing in this change at the tail end of a Parliament? This is quite a significant change and the obvious thing, surely, is to bring it in in the next Parliament, when none of the groups will exist until they are formed again if there is sufficient interest and a sufficient number of Members interested. There may be a larger number of Members required to set them up—that is a better way of doing it. At their genesis, APPGs, whether they are renewing from a previous Parliament or are genuinely new groups, need to justify the need for setting up that group. That could involve a higher threshold of Members needing to sign the form and somebody scrutinising in more detail whether it is a credible and legitimate APPG that will serve some positive purpose for the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley: This may be slightly unconventional, but what we are dealing with actually matters to the House. Would it be possible, during this debate, for the Minister and the Whip to consult with the Leader of the House, the official Opposition and the Chair of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), to see whether it is possible for us not to make a decision on the motion today, but to come back to the issue in September? That would still allow whatever timescale is needed, and would allow more MPs to be aware of the implications.

We also have to hear from the Chairman of the Standards Committee, which will tell us more, but it might be sensible if the Government, the Opposition and the SNP considered not coming to a decision, having the debate and then coming back in September when minds will be clearer and more MPs know what is going on.

Tim Loughton: The Father of the House, my constituency neighbour, makes a very helpful suggestion. I do not understand the rush in any case. As the motion stands, I cannot support it. It would be a bit unusual if we had to force a Division on it—I am not one who usually likes to have Divisions on reports by the Standards Committee. There is a need for change—I absolutely agree—but I think we are going to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There will be damage and harm done to APPGs, which is specifically what the Minister says he does not want to happen and goes against the thrust of a report that wants APPGs to continue to play their very important role.

There are other details in the new rules, for example putting up the quorum for an AGM from five to eight. We all know it is often difficult to get five MPs to attend

a meeting to form a quorum because of the competing priorities in this place, and unwitting MPs are literally dragged in from the cafés to boost numbers. Again, I am not entirely sure what that is aiming to achieve. We have the idea of having outside chairs to chair these AGMs, but who will those people be? Will Mr Speaker have to create another pool of chairs or whatever? Again, I will leave that for the hon. Member for Rhondda, if he is going to explain more in his speech.

In conclusion, I support reform of the all-party groups, because there has been abuse, they are open to abuse and we do not need as many as there are. However, we do need a great many of them and we need greater transparency in how they operate. I fear that some of the detail around the implementation of these rules, though well intended, will undoubtedly have the result that many APPGs will not be able to continue in their current form, and this House will be at a loss for it. That is why I air those points in good faith.

Having had some experience of being chair or holding other offices of all-party groups over the years, I can say that the report is a good report, but in its detail it is still lacking. I would like the Minister and others to agree that further work needs to be done to come back with a more suitable solution. Preferably, the whole lot will be put into the next Parliament, which will probably not be that far away, so that we can start afresh without people involved in all-party groups now being unwittingly penalised for it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

3.46 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I had better start by declaring an interest, in that, although I am not a chair of an APPG, I am a member of a number of APPGs, several of which I am an officer for. The APPGs I am part of include the APPG on Malawi, the APPG on immigration detention, the APPG on HIV and AIDS, the APPG on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, and the APPG on electoral campaigning transparency, to name just a few.

I agree that APPGs play a significant role in the functioning of this place. As rightly stated by the Standards Committee, they keep Members informed on a wide range of topics and provide a platform for diverse groups that might otherwise be excluded from the political system to present their arguments to engaged parliamentarians. I can think, for example, of the excellent work by the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, which I joined after being contacted by constituents whose family lives had been devastated by that scandal.

It is important for our democracy that Members engage with broader society and address topics of wider public interest, but it is clear that the current APPG system lacks sufficient transparency and oversight. The existing rules are not stringent enough. Currently, all APPGs must be registered and provide funding details, but many do not produce or make readily available a detailed breakdown. Numerous APPGs have routinely broken transparency rules by failing to disclose their financial records or to provide them upon request. That lack of accountability can allow for undisclosed private donors to exert influence.

The SNP supports strengthening the rules at this point to prevent any undue influence from state actors, commercial entities or dark money through APPGs, and we back the proposals to do so at the earliest opportunity. It is vital that we know who funds APPGs to understand where the influence lies and who is driving the agenda.

Many APPGs operate perfectly legitimately and with clear transparency and oversight, but those with more opaque funding streams could mean Members being unduly influenced by those in the private sector or even hostile state actors, risking corruption and endangering democracy through inadequate scrutiny. Analysis by *The Guardian* and openDemocracy in 2022—I pay tribute to their work on this—found that more than half of the £25 million-worth of donations to APPGs since 2018 has come from the private sector. Over the past four years, for example, arms manufacturers have contributed £256,000 in cash, services or a combination to APPGs, and significant donations have been made by large companies such as Facebook, Huawei and British American Tobacco. Private health and social care companies have donated more than £1 million to several APPGs where health-related issues were discussed, with the funding increasing every year.

In considering the risks that may be associated with groups accepting financial benefits, the Committee's suggestion of a two-tier approach appears reasonable. I also welcome the report's recommendation that all APPGs should publish an annual income and expenditure statement. Although they are currently obligated to provide accounts on request, half of the 190 APPGs approached by openDemocracy failed to do so. The Committee's proposed 28-day time limit for providing accounts therefore seems sensible. The additional rules applying to groups that receive outside financial benefits totalling over £1,500, which include producing the annual report at the end of the year and AGMs being chaired externally—I look forward to the Chair of the Standards Committee providing more details on the make-up of those chairs—also seem justified. The report also indicates that there are simply too many APPGs, which makes it challenging to ensure adherence to House rules.

May I suggest that membership lists should be updated far more regularly when MPs join and leave APPGs? I have experienced the frustration of trying to remove myself from an APPG and finding, months later, that my name still appeared on that list. I wonder whether thought could be given at some stage—perhaps the Standards Committee is looking at this—to a more centralised administration system, so that MPs and the public can access more accurate and up-to-date information about membership details and, indeed, how active a group is.

Parliament will always be a target for hostile foreign states, but better regulation and transparency around APPGs can ensure that they continue to make a positive contribution. Of course, country APPGs help to promote understanding, co-operation and cultural and economic partnerships between the UK and other nations, but evidence suggesting that some foreign Governments may be exploiting APPGs to promote their views should raise alarm bells across this place. That also emphasises the need for greater regulation. The Committee's proposal that groups should not be permitted to have a secretariat either provided or funded by a foreign Government

seems appropriate. It is certainly right that group officers should apply due diligence as to whether a foreign Government may be the eventual funder of a secretariat or other benefit. I note the Government's support in particular for that recommendation. I wish that they were a little more willing to require greater due diligence on political funding from unincorporated associations but that, no doubt, is for another day's battle.

The Prime Minister spoke about his Government's mission to ensure integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level. APPGs perform a key role, but action in this area is clearly necessary to live up to those values and make this place more transparent. I thank the Committee—and the Clerks who support it—for all its work. I know that it has been some effort and the House very much appreciates that. I support the motion.

3.53 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I agree with many of the points made—particularly those made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—and fully support the report's aims in respect of transparency and financial accountability. However, I have a few concerns, similar to those expressed by my hon. Friend. For example, I am the trade envoy to the western Balkans, which is six countries. I happen also to be an officer or a member of those six country APPGs, which I think is advantageous to my role as the trade envoy. It may be that showing an interest in those countries before I was appointed to be an envoy played a part in my appointment. I do think it is important that I take an interest in those all-party groups because they give me wider knowledge and an interest in aspects of those countries other than their trade and economy.

I am also an officer of a number of other APPGs, usually because of a personal interest or because they are relevant to my constituency. I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Iceland because my constituency is heavily reliant on its trading relationship with Iceland; thousands of my constituents who work in seafood processing are totally reliant on supplies of fish from Iceland. There seems to be a particular logic to that. I am a member of those APPGs because of the trade envoy role, interest in the countries or relevance to my constituency, but why should that stop me from being the treasurer of the all-party parliamentary group on heritage rail? I happen to have a passion for steam railways, some of which are in Wales, I say to the Chair of the Standards Committee. The restriction on membership to six APPGs is perhaps over-egging the pudding to some extent. There is an issue with transparency in some APPGs, but we are perhaps looking for problems that do not exist.

On the issue of 20 Members being a member of an all-party group, on the face of it, that would seem perfectly possible. However, some all-party groups deal with illness and disease—virtually every illness or disease known to man probably has an all-party group. There are the headline ones such as strokes, cancers and so on, but some are rather obscure illnesses that may have affected Members, or their families, who have a particular passion to deal with that and to work with the charities and support groups. To find 20 members could be challenging and make it a little more difficult to do that important work.

[*Martin Vickers*]

The report says:

“There appears to be the real possibility of APPGs having been set up at the suggestion of, and as a result of lobbying by, a commercial interest.”

I set up the all-party parliamentary group on freeports a number of years ago because it was a policy concept I wanted to push that would be beneficial to my constituency and others. We have seen the Government adopt the freeport policies around the country. I set that up because I thought it was advantageous to my constituency, not because I was being lobbied by any commercial interest. However, I was aware that commercial interests were interested in the establishment of freeports—port operators being the obvious candidate. I agree wholeheartedly with the vast majority of what is proposed, but, in respect of the points I have made, it goes too far. I certainly support the suggestion by the Father of the House that we delay a final decision on this.

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

3.58 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): First, may I put on record my gratitude to the members of the Standards Committee—both the MP members and the seven lay members—to all the Clerks and, in particular in regard to this paper, to James Davies, the registrar, and Philippa Wainwright, the other part of the team running the APPG register.

We have 762 APPGs at the moment. It is virtually impossible to have any kind of proper regulation or oversight of them, or examination of whether they are doing their job properly when we only have two members of staff, one of whom also does the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. So I pay enormous tribute to them for their work. They try to be as helpful as they possibly can be and to ensure that Members do not inadvertently break the rules, because the rules are complicated and there are too many of them.

We have rules for what we are allowed to do in the Chamber, the code of conduct, the behaviour code and the rules on APPGs. Then there are the stationery rules, the rules of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the ministerial code. All those bodies are different. Frankly, it is very difficult for most Members of Parliament to keep up. I am desperately keen, as is the Standards Committee, to try to have rules that are coherent, consistent and, to use a valleys word, “tidy”.

I used that phrase when we were introducing Ofcom, many years ago, and *Hansard* rendered “valleys” as “valets”. We do not have many valets in the valleys, so I usb hope people understand what I mean. We are just trying to bring a bit of tidiness to the sets of rules that we have. Some of you may have valets who do that for you—I do not know why I am looking at you, Madam Deputy Speaker—or indeed batmen, if I am looking at the Minister who opened the debate.

Sir Peter Bottomley *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: And here comes my valet.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It does depend on how many Ls there are, and whether there is a T.

Sir Chris Bryant: It does—and I have new hearing aids, so I am now quite precise about what I can hear and what I cannot hear in the Chamber.

The serious point here is that we have been lobbied incessantly, ever since I became Chair of the Committee, for new rules on APPGs, by successive Leaders of the House, shadow Leaders of the House, the Speaker, the Speaker in the Lords, Members of the House of Lords—because these are bicameral bodies—a large number of Members of the House of Commons, and external bodies which have been campaigning for changes in the rules because they think that the existing rules are far too flimsy and leave us exposed to a potential new scandal.

I did not like the way in which Sky presented the so-called Westminster Accounts. I thought that some of that was very unfair to individual Members, not least because it lumped any financial benefit that an APPG had received together with the financial interest of the individual Member. It looked as if some individual Members had received hundreds of thousands of pounds of financial support which had gone into their own pockets, whereas all the APPG was doing was trying to bring to the attention of Parliament and the voting public an issue relating to, for instance, a medical condition.

I am therefore keen to get a new set of APPG rules through. I have listened to everything that has been said in the Chamber, and I hope that I will have answers for pretty much everything. I am now looking at the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), because I am rarely able to satisfy him—the Member for Del Monte in his suit over there.

Tim Loughton: He say no. [*Laughter.*]

Sir Chris Bryant: One thing the hon. Gentleman said which I think is really important was that there are too many APPGs. That is true: 762 is just daft. One Member—I do not know who it is; I have not asked—is an officer of 88 groups. I admire their dedication, but I do not think that they can possibly exercise due diligence on 88 APPGs, especially those with financial interests. That is why we wanted to address the question of how many groups someone could be an officer of, and how many officers there should be for each one.

Tim Loughton: I hear what the hon. Member says, and I do not demur. I said at the outset that I thought there were too many APPGs. For example, dozens of them have some connection with children, which is why I recently brought as many of them as possible together to try to establish a common children’s manifesto. I am contacted virtually every week by someone asking whether I would be interested in setting up a new all-party group, to which my answer is invariably “No, we have too many already.” We need to merge more of these groups into one overarching interest. If there were more scrutiny at the outset, with someone asking, “Can we really justify setting up this APPG? Can it not be part of another one?”, that would be one way of cutting down the number at the beginning of each Parliament when they are set up.

Sir Chris Bryant: That was an idea that we toyed with. It was put to us that we should have a gatekeeper who would decide whether there could be, for instance, an all-party group for each of the Caribbean countries

and one for the Caribbean as a whole, and one for each of the overseas territories as well as one for the overseas territories. The danger with that is the question of how to set the criteria for that person to be able to decide. It would mean putting a great deal of power in the hands of one individual, and that is why in the end we rejected the idea. We have reached a different set of conclusions, which we hope will lead to the same eventual outcome: that someone who currently chairs, or is an officer, of three APPGs in a fairly similar field will say, “Do you know what? I am going to try to get them all to combine, and I want to be the chair of the one.”

The guiding principle for us has been, first and foremost, that APPGs are, broadly speaking, a good thing, but there is a danger that they can be a very, very bad thing. It is certainly a bad thing if a commercial interest is effectively suborning Parliament, gaining a kind of accreditation by virtue of the APPG name. I would argue that this gets particularly acute when the secretariat is provided by an external body that is not even a charity but a PR company or a lobbying company. It seems to me that there is a commercial interest in their making APPGs just to keep themselves in business, and that is an inappropriate way for us to proceed. It leaves us open to real reputational risk for the whole House.

I will go through some of the points that have been made, starting with those made by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). He said that he was a trade envoy and an officer for six groups. I know that some trade envoys have decided no longer to be officers of the relevant groups because they are the trade envoy who has a relationship with the Government in relation to those countries. I gently suggest to him that that is a better, or perhaps more appropriate, way of proceeding. I understand fully why he may have ended up being a trade envoy, which is a good thing to be, although I worry about quite how the Government make people trade envoys and retain their commitment to the Government by virtue of doing so. I understand that he might have got there because of expressing his interest through those various groups. I would also say to Members that being a member of an all-party group is a perfectly satisfactory way of signifying to the country and to their constituents that they are supportive of it. They do not have to be an officer in every instance.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: Has the hon. Gentleman been in for the whole of the debate? [HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] In which case, I will not. I am sorry.

Sir Christopher Chope *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is not giving way.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am not giving way. It is a courtesy to the House that if you are going to start intervening in a debate, you should have been here for the ministerial openers.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think it is within the orders of the House not to accept an intervention, but to make a

derogatory comment while not accepting an intervention does not allow the hon. Member who has been referred to to answer back.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Sorry, could you do that again?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I was suggesting that it is all right for the hon. Member not to take an intervention, but that to go on to make remarks that might be regarded as adverse to the person trying to intervene when he does not have the opportunity to respond seems unfair.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that that is a point of order—it is perhaps an opinion—but I think it is courteous for those who are intervening in a debate to have been here for a long time. My feeling about this is that a lot of different views have been expressed and it is important to have heard the whole debate. I do not think it is unreasonable for the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) to say that the reason he is not allowing an intervention is that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has not been here for the whole of the debate. He is perfectly within his rights to give a reason why he will not take an intervention.

Sir Chris Bryant: Having said that, I now feel that I have been discourteous and I am going to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The point I was going to make is that there seems to be an issue about the definition of membership of an APPG. My understanding is that anybody who is not a member of the Government is a member of an APPG. The hon. Gentleman himself was once involved in a contested election to become chair of the APPG on Russia, and some 200 Members across both Houses were dragged into voting in that election. They were not registered members of that APPG, but they happened to qualify because they were ordinary Members of Parliament.

Sir Chris Bryant: The rules specify that anybody who is not a member of the Government can be a member and an officer of an all-party group. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I remember the occasion when he, among many others, came to a meeting on the top floor and we had about 350 people voting at an APPG extraordinary general meeting just to get rid of me—over Russia, ironically enough.

The important point the Committee is trying to underline is that an all-party parliamentary group should only be an all-party parliamentary group if it has enough support among the 1,450 Members of this House and the other House to be able to have a proper AGM attended by five Members, for heaven’s sake, and with 20 Members expressing support. That is important because, otherwise, it is very easy for an APPG to be run by an individual Member on behalf of a commercial interest or in pursuit of a personal agenda, bringing along their friends just once a year. That is the evil we are trying to address.

Sir Christopher Chope: Unfortunately, the proposed rules we are being asked to adopt this afternoon say:

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

“A Member of the House of Commons may be an officer of a maximum of six Groups.

An APPG must have at least 20 members”.

I think the hon. Gentleman is talking about 20 registered members, because all Members of both Houses, other than members of the Government, are automatically members of APPGs if they so wish.

Sir Chris Bryant: No, they are not automatically a member of all APPGs, otherwise every APPG would have 1,450 members. The hon. Gentleman needs to read the rules and the guide to the rules, both of which are available from the Vote Office, as they make all of this perfectly clear.

The point the Committee is trying to make is that every APPG should have a properly constituted annual general meeting, should have a limited number of officers—who have full responsibility for the running of the APPG, and for making sure it operates under the rules of the House and does not expose the House to further reputational damage—and should have enough registered members on the list it submits each year to be able to qualify as a proper all-party parliamentary group.

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) refers to the guide to the rules on all-party parliamentary groups. I went out to try to get a copy of this document from the Vote Office and was able to get one copy, but there were no other copies available. The Vote Office is currently trying to print more copies. Considering how few Members there are in the Chamber, it seems most unsatisfactory that we have such a small number of copies of the guide to the rules, which extends to a very large number of pages. Why can we not all see this before we reach a conclusion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): What is the point of order?

Sir Christopher Chope: This debate should not conclude until all Members present have had an opportunity to read the guide to the rules on all-party parliamentary groups, a copy of which is not yet available to every Member.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received no other complaints from hon. and right hon. Members that they do not have a copy. As the hon. Gentleman says, he has not been here for the whole debate, so he has not heard a lot of the other arguments. It is a bit discourteous to keep disrupting the debate in this way. We should allow the Chair of the Standards Committee to finish his speech without interruption through points of order, which is a poor approach when we are having a debate. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is on the Panel of Chairs, so I hope he would understand.

Sir Chris Bryant: I will come on to the Panel of Chairs a little later.

I rather enjoyed that point of order, because I think the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is complaining that he has a copy of the relevant document that he wanted.

APPGs are great, but we have too many. There is a great deal of duplication, and I suspect we are all guilty. Many of us end up creating another new APPG on another new medical condition that is somewhat similar to other APPGs, and so on. Colleagues are often a bit naughty in trying to make every APPG publication look remarkably like a Select Committee report, knowing perfectly well that, when it is referred to on the “Today” programme or on ITV, the APPG will be referred to almost identically as a “Committee of MPs,” which is unfortunate because we should rigorously protect the authority of Select Committees and official communications of the whole House.

As I said earlier, I sometimes feel that APPGs are the soft underbelly of the way we do parliamentary lobbying. One Member, who I am not naming—I do not even know who it is—is an officer of 88 all-party parliamentary groups, and I do not think they could possibly do due diligence on all 88 groups.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I was not here at the start of the debate. I tuned in and have been following it on the television. I heard the speech from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and I found that there was more to this than I had previously realised. I make all the due apologies, but I think it is better to make a late intervention than no intervention.

The point the Chairman of the Committee makes about the quasi-Select Committee reports has some substance, but he has to remember that not everybody or every party in this House has an automatic right to be a member of a Select Committee. That privilege is given to the three largest parties only. The Liberal Democrats, the Democratic Unionists, the Green party and others do not have that opportunity to be part of the Select Committee structure. For that reason, our voice being heard through APPGs is very important.

Sir Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point, which I fully take on board. However, ever since APPGs were first created, the House has repeatedly wanted to ensure a clear distinction between reports produced by a group of MPs and ones produced officially by the House. That is an important distinction.

Not every grouping of MPs needs to become an APPG. I have chaired an APPG on acquired brain injury, and it was often difficult to get it going, because all the Conservatives on it kept on being made Ministers—they then got sacked and then they were made Ministers again. One of them, the right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), may be about to become Defence Secretary—I have co-operated with him on this subject for a very long time—and another is the Northern Ireland Secretary. Keeping APPGs going is sometimes problematic, because the people who are most interested sometimes get other jobs that mean that they cannot take part. But there is no reason why someone cannot continue the work without being in an APPG.

I am not sure whether the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was irritated when he kept getting text messages from APPGs saying, “Can you come to Room R for two minutes at 2 o’clock because otherwise we will not be quorate for our AGM.” That is an inappropriate way of doing our business. If we

cannot get five genuinely interested people along to an AGM, it probably should not be an APPG, especially if it has some external financial interest. The danger is that nobody is exercising proper due diligence over the finances.

For some of us, APPGs have become a bit of a tyranny. The hon. Gentleman says that he is chair of nine, and he is also an assiduous member of a Select Committee and he is regularly in the Chamber. It would benefit us all if there were fewer all-party groups and, as I say, there is reputational risk here. The Committee expressly asked me to say that it expects that the rules we are introducing will lead to fewer all-party groups. That is the express intention of what we are doing.

Let me be clear about what we are doing. As has been mentioned, we propose that APPGs will be able to have only four officers. The intention is to make sure that every one of those officers takes a proper interest in the running of the APPG. Rather than having 10 vice-chairs, four treasurers and all the rest of it, we propose that there be four officers, who are charged with making sure that the group is run properly. We also propose that all APPGs must have an up-to-date list of 20 supporters—registered members. Thirdly, we propose that a Member can be an officer of only six all-party groups, as has been mentioned. Again, part of the reason is that we want these people to be able to exercise due diligence over the running of the group. I am not questioning the hon. Gentleman here; I belong to nearly all the all-party groups that he chairs and he has admirably driven forward issues, including on the British Museum—that was an all-party group that I founded. I admire all that work, but we do want to make sure that we do not imperil the reputation of the House.

Tim Loughton: It was David Heathcoat-Amory who set up the British Museum group, but that is neither here nor there. On most of the all-party groups where I am chair, I am actually co-chair, so it is not a question of the chair having to do all the work. Does he take my point that limiting the number of officers to four means that there will not be such a wide spread of parties to make it a genuine all-party parliamentary group? Those four people will now be key and will have greater control, accountability and scrutiny over the activities of that group.

Sir Chris Bryant: No, I do not buy that, I am afraid, because what we are trying to say is there are officers and there are registered members. All the registered members should express an interest in the running of the group, and that will demonstrate the cross-party nature of the body.

We recognise that there are many APPGs where there is no financial interest at all. There is no money or external secretariat; it is simply done out of the goodness of the office of the individual Member. We have left most of the rules for APPGs with no financial interest unchanged in all other regards, and the quorum will remain five people.

However, we are introducing a quorum of eight for APPGs where there is a financial interest, and we are saying that the chair for an AGM or extraordinary general meeting of those APPGs will be provided by Mr Speaker, as was requested by Mr Speaker and the Lord Speaker. They want a clear, independent body to

be able to administrate whether there has been a proper annual general meeting and that all the rules have been abided by.

I know that Mr Speaker has had some conversations with the Panel of Chairs. It may be necessary to have a couple more members of the Panel of Chairs. We are fully cognisant of the fact that it will take time for all groups to have their AGMs and extraordinary general meetings to be able to comply with the rules, which is why we are making transitional arrangements, although we want the main body of the rules to apply from 16 October, as the motion says.

It might help if I read out the transitional arrangements, because they are important for everybody. They are at the beginning of the document referred to by the hon. Member for Christchurch, and they were in the resolution of the Committee yesterday.

“(1) The rules prohibiting foreign governments from providing or funding (whether directly or indirectly) a secretariat come into force with immediate effect on 16 October 2023.

(2) APPGs need to comply with any other new rules from their first AGM following the new rules coming into force, or 31 March 2024, whichever is the earlier; except that the additional rules applying to APPGs that meet the £1,500 funding threshold will apply only from 31 March 2024.

(3) APPGs will be able to hold EGMs virtually or by correspondence during a transition period (to meet the requirement for 4 officers and no more; and to ensure that those officers are officers of no more than 5 other APPGs) ending on 31 March 2024.

(4) An audit of compliance will be carried out in April 2024. Any APPG that has not complied with the Rules by 31 March 2024”—

which happens to be Easter Sunday—
“will be deregistered.”

I hope it is helpful that I have read that out, because we want to make it as clear as we possibly can.

Sir Peter Bottomley: When was what the hon. Gentleman has just read out agreed? How is it available to us now?

Sir Chris Bryant: It was agreed yesterday at the Standards Committee. We only knew today that this debate was going to be happening today; we thought it was going to be later in the year. It is available on the front page of the document referred to earlier, “The Guide to the Rules on All-Party Parliamentary Groups”, which is available from the Vote Office. It was agreed yesterday, under the authority granted to the Standards Committee.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I have “The Guide to the Rules”—I am one of the ones who managed to get a copy. I don’t see it—

Sir Chris Bryant: It is on page 2.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Transitional arrangements? I have read through every other page, starting with page 3—I did not read page 2. I do not believe any other Member of this Chamber, except for the other members of the Standards Committee, has read that. To take a decision on the arrangements this evening, given the impact it will have on every all-party group, is not necessary, wise or advisable.

Sir Chris Bryant: I think that was a speech. Perhaps the hon. Member will be able to catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am conscious that I have spoken for quite a long time and I had not intended to do so.

Tim Loughton *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member.

Tim Loughton: Those sort of details are helpful. I understand how the transition arrangements impact the all-party groups themselves. However, to take my situation, I will have to give up the next AGMs coming up to get down to a quota of six, and they may not be the AGMs that I want to give up, but I will have to do so. That means that I have a problem, does it not?

Sir Chris Bryant: The thing is that I have a problem, too. We have been working on this and consulting the House repeatedly for three years now. We have been repeatedly told by Members that we have to come up with a new set of rules. The new rules that we have produced—all the individual elements that have been referred to so far—were available months ago. The Government responded to them, and we published the Government's response to them several weeks ago, and we have the debate today. I am not convinced that, if we were to delay the decision today, we would come up with better rules, or a new version of the debate, in September.

Deidre Brock *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: I will give way to the hon. Lady, and then I will not give way anymore, because I am keen to leave the stage.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I wish to start by correcting the record. Although I am not a stand-alone chair of an all-party group, I am a co-chair. I was reminded by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the Father of the House of the BBC all-party parliamentary group. On the requirement for the four officers to be held jointly and severally liable for compliance with the additional rules for the groups, who will they turn to for advice and guidance should they require it?

Sir Chris Bryant: At present, they would turn to either Philippa Wainwright, who is the registrar of the APPGs, or to James Davis. If they really wanted to, they could also turn to either Eve Samson, who is the Clerk of the Journals, or Daniel Greenberg, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. All of these arrangements have been agreed between the Clerks and the two registrars. Everyone stands ready to provide people with advice. I know Mr Speaker stands ready to provide chairs for AGMs or extraordinary general meetings when we get back in September. One thing that we have exceptionally allowed is that people will be able to do extraordinary general meetings virtually—online—which will make it much easier for people to comply.

I will try to stop now. I know that there is some frustration in the House and I fully understand that. As I have said repeatedly to the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and Mr Speaker, I am not sure that there is an easy consensus to be found on proceeding.

Mr Carmichael *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: I am not giving way again. I am really sorry, but I have been trying to leave the stage for some time.

This is the next scandal coming down the line. I know that the vast majority of Members want to address the matter. We cannot possibly do so if we remain with 762 all-party parliamentary groups. That is more than there are Members of this House. It is almost as many Members as there are in the other place. If a group cannot get five people to an AGM, it probably is not really an APPG and should not have the imprimatur that the APPG title guarantees it. I urge the House to support these measures today. Actually, the authority is vested in the Committee; it does not need to be agreed to by the House, but we thought that it was best for the House to be able to take a view as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

4.28 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I say to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) that he should use the word “vale” when he says goodbye? For those who were not here earlier, we were having a discussion about how “valet” was spelt and sounded.

I have obviously been remiss in not paying enough attention since the publication of the first report on all-party groups. That concluded that the risk of “influence by hostile foreign actors through APPGs is real.”

It said that there had been

“a dramatic increase in the number of APPGs”,

commercial interests and the like.

That did not prepare me for the motion, and the conclusions that the Committee came to. The motion contains the words

“subject to any transitional arrangements agreed by the Committee on Standards.”

I had not realised that the Committee would make transitional arrangements without consulting us. I do not believe that I saw draft proposals that alerted me to that. That is my fault. I am not blaming the Committee, but I think that the Chair of the Committee is not right that delaying a vote on this would not allow for improvement; it would.

Mr Carmichael: Had I been able to intervene on the Chair of the Committee, I would have said that I agree wholeheartedly with his analysis, and his starting point about the need for reform. I fear that the proposals will result in a variety of unintended consequences coming down the track, but I am prepared to go with them for today if I hear some sort of undertaking, from the Committee or from anywhere else in the House, that there will be a review of them, so that if my fears about unintended consequences prove to be correct we can revisit them, and not just say, “We’ve done that; we’re not going back to it.”

Sir Peter Bottomley: We have heard that the Committee could, so to speak, impose the proposals even if the House rejects them. I think that we probably should vote on them, just to ensure that Members who are paying attention have the chance to express their view. I will vote against them on the basis that they should be reviewed.

I am happy to co-operate with the commissioner, the hon. Member for Rhondda, the Committee, the Clerks, the Lord Speaker and the Commons Speaker to help to

make the improvements that people desire and that are necessary. Some implications of the proposals are not improvements; they are retrogressive.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am trying to be helpful to the House. The rules on APPGs are the prerogative of the Committee. That was already a decision of the House, but we did not want to proceed without the House taking a view. I hear quite a lot of discomfort about several elements of the proposals. I think that it will look terrible if we decide to pull them this afternoon—it will look as if the House does not want to take action, and that will be seen badly. What might be right is that we reassess the issue of transitional arrangements if people want to make representations to us, which the Committee could hear at its first meeting in September. One option is obviously that none of the proposals applies until the next Parliament. The Committee was hesitant about that—I am sorry that this is a long intervention, but I am trying to be helpful—only because it might look as if this Parliament was not prepared to put its house in order; it just wanted a future set of people to do it.

Sir Peter Bottomley: That is potentially helpful. I am grateful, and the House will be as well. If the transitional arrangements concentrated on foreign Governments, or significant commercial beneficiaries, effectively supporting groups, that would be understood. It is the other parts that I do not understand. I say that as someone who was asked to chair the Austria all-party parliamentary group when Angus Robertson became leader of the SNP group at Westminster and felt that he could not do it. I stood in and did it, and I remain the chair of that group. In co-operation with the Austrian embassy, which provides no money and no resources, we welcome Austrians here. I guess that alternative arrangements for some functions of that kind could be made quite easily within the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

I am chair of the BBC all-party parliamentary group because one of our colleagues became the interim Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. To keep the all-party group going, given the importance of being able to hear from the BBC and liaise with it on controversial and non-controversial issues, I thought that it was important to stand in.

I am, I think, the chair or co-chair of 12 groups. I am the person the hon. Member for Rhondda referred to as being an officer of more than 80 groups. I could quite cheerfully take him and the House through each of the groups and why I am a member of them. [HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] I will not go through them all, but I will give some illustrative examples.

I am the parliamentary warden of St Margaret’s Church on Parliament Square. I saw the lights on one evening and went into a service, which was the 12-step addiction service. All kinds of people with addictions, whether alcohol, gambling, sex, stealing or whatever else, were giving their witness. That gave me an interest in 12-step recovery programmes and, when a Member of the House of Lords asked whether I would help to set up an all-party group, I agreed. That is one of the groups of which I am a co-chair and registered contact, and I think it is worthwhile. The idea that we would necessarily get four members together at the same time or have 20 people registering as members is unlikely, but

the work done by that group is important to all kinds of people inside the House, both Members and staff, and outside it.

I was once asked by Tristan Garel-Jones, a humanist, whether I, a member of the Ecclesiastical Committee who had been a trustee of Christian Aid and chairman of the Church of England Children’s Society, would be prepared to get a humanist group going. I said I would; I said that I was not a humanist, but it seemed to me that it was a line of thought that deserved some kind of parliamentary opportunity. The group has since grown and I am no longer a member of it.

I could go through the various other groups, but there are two that I am keenest on. The first is the group on leasehold and commonhold reform, where for more than 10 years, working first with Jim Fitzpatrick and now with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and with the help of the campaigning charity Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, we have fought to look after the interests of 6 million residential leaseholders. Even in the last couple of days we have had success with the Financial Conduct Authority on trying to ensure that those people are not ripped off on insurance, commissions and the like. That group can get large numbers of Members interested, but not get them all together at the same time.

The same applies to the group on park homes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has been in charge of for a long time with Sonia McColl, one of the campaigners. To show the kind of interests that we were up against, when her mobile home was being moved from one place to another, it was stolen.

I have some incredible things going on. If I were brought down to six chairmanships, I would not be able to do half the good that I do, and I do not always know which group will become important. When one of my hon. Friends became a Minister, he asked if I would take on, with the Astronomer Royal, the group on dark skies. We are co-leaders of the world in astronomy, and it is important to have parliamentary interest, so that Members of the Lords and Commons who are interested can come to meetings and we can liaise with outside groups.

I think very few of the groups I am involved in—although there are some—would not do worse if I were not interested. I say this to the Government, to those on the Front Benches and to the SNP: it is not necessary for this motion to pass. We have been told it does not matter to Parliament, because the Committee itself can set the rules, but it is possible to get through to the beginning of the next Parliament with suitable transition arrangements that are variations of what is on page 2 of the guide to rules.

Tim Loughton: I think the compromises my hon. Friend is putting forward will be helpful here. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), the Chairman of the Committee, is concerned that if we pulled this motion now and deferred it to the next Parliament, it would look like a cop-out. This matter needs to be resolved by this Parliament, but it does not need to be resolved this month. I would certainly ask the Standards Committee to come back with some small revisions to parts of the rules, particularly the transitional rules that have been queried. This is not about the bigger issues of

[Tim Loughton]

foreign intervention or transparency, because I think we all agree on those. If the Committee came back with those revisions as a matter of urgency in September, the rules could still come in on his timeline—although, frankly, I think that if we resolved the matter now but they did not come in until the next Parliament, most of the problems would go away.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree, and I hope others have heard what my hon. Friend said.

I refer again to pages 55 to 74 of the guide to the rules. It may or may not surprise colleagues that that is appendix 5, on data protection and APPGs—page after page after page of MPs who run groups telling MPs who may be members of the group, or who may be on a mailing list, how we handle their data. That is one of those things where we move ten places across, from one thing to another, without anybody on the Standards Committee understanding at all what was being put forward.

I do not know whether the Chair of the Standards Committee has experience of trying to administer all-party groups. Getting the detail right is important. We try to get it right, and we make some mistakes, but to add in an extra 20 pages for each group that we may be involved in, even if we are limited to six groups, gives us more than 100 pages to fill in. It is bureaucracy. If the only people who can be members of those groups are Members of Parliament, what on earth are we trying to do? That should not be there, and I hope that it is taken out.

Sir Christopher Chope: Another unintended consequence is that, if a group is allowed only four officers, and one of those officers is appointed to the Government, or falls under a bus, the group will be unable to operate until it has had a formal meeting to elect a replacement. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is so rigid as to be unworkable?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This debate has to finish in nine minutes, and one more Member wishes to speak before the Minister. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has been speaking for 12 minutes, and I would like to give five minutes to the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett).

Sir Peter Bottomley: First, I believe that the Chairman of the Committee is wrong to say that people are not members of groups. We are all members of groups. Requiring 20 names to be put down is, again, bureaucratic.

Secondly, I say to the Chairman: do what I have suggested, which makes sense. Do not push the motion to a vote now—I will vote against it if he does. Whatever the result of that vote, he should consult again. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I, and anybody else who wants to, will come in to have a roundtable and solve the problems. I believe in controlling foreign Government and big commercial interests; I do not believe in wrecking the purposes of all-party groups. Most of those I am involved in have no foreign Government or big commercial interests.

4.41 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): This has been a fascinating debate—I almost used the word “delay”, but I would not dare to when speaking about the Father of the House. In the few minutes I have, let me try to make the case against a vote. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee has listened—we all have—and maybe some refinement can be achieved.

My hon. Friend might have made a stronger case if he had recalled to the House the distinction that his report makes between two types of all-party group. Many of them are benign, as we have heard. When I came to Parliament in 1996 through a by-election, they seemed relatively benign to me, but then I worked twice in Government—in No. 10 and the Cabinet Office—and then for 10 years on the Opposition Front Bench. Over the years, I reflected on the asymmetry of power between the people who have money and, as a result, access to power, including access to this place, and the millions of people around the country who also have interests but are not always heard. I therefore resigned from every APPG—I may be the only person here who is not in a single one. Maybe Members will say that I am not a very effective MP, but it seems to me that, if I want to speak to MPs, commercial interests, or private and civil society groups, I am capable of doing so without being in an APPG.

On the other hand, I would be happy to be party to many of the groups that have been mentioned today, which seem benign. However—and this is the point that I think sticks in the craw—commercial interests have dominated so much of our political life that that asymmetry of power and access to wealth and to this place is so profound that it is eating away at the body politic itself. We have funding coming from the arms industry, the tobacco industry, polluters, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, private healthcare and so on. They are all putting money into APPGs.

Members might ask, “Well, what’s wrong with that?” I am not against the arms industry—I am not a pacifist—but it is one of the largest beneficiaries of state procurement with taxpayers’ money. The private sector in health has an interest in trying to undermine the way in which the health service works. Tobacco is clearly regularly the subject of regulation. They all have access to the House and to Members of Parliament simply because they have the capacity to buy influence through the APPG system. I am not suggesting that anything about that is corrupt, but people outside, such as Peter, who I met yesterday in my constituency, where the local bank has closed—he is 88 years old and nearly blind—want to know that we operate on their behalf and not purely in the interests of large commercial operators.

Then there is the problem of foreign influence. The Committee made it clear in the report that foreign countries have not only attempted to influence our Parliament through APPGs, but succeeded in doing so. Some hostile countries, as we would define them, have sought to influence, but it is not just them. From the news today, we know that Britain was in competition with Spain over the location of a battery factory—I am glad we have got it for the UK. There is a Spain APPG, and I do not suggest in any way that it is malign, but foreign countries—allies or not—have an interest in understanding how our Parliament works.

I am glad that the Committee has recommended changes. If we can get through today without a vote against, the Committee can go away and reflect on the debate and tackle the malign aspects of APPGs. Parliament would then be in a much better place.

4.45 pm

Johnny Mercer: I will be very brief. It has been a fascinating debate and there are strongly held views on all sides. The Committee has been tasked with looking at how we tackle this problem, and I think everyone agrees there is an issue with APPGs. I urge colleagues not to divide today—

Sir Chris Bryant: Again, I will try to be helpful. If we vote down the motion today, it will mean that we cannot even take action on telling APPGs that they cannot take money from foreign Governments and I think that that would be a terrible mistake. If we carry the motion today, I undertake, having listened to all the contributions, that, at the next meeting of the Committee in September, we will make such adjustments as we think suitable—we are entitled to do so under the rules—to meet some of the issues that Members have raised. I would be grateful if Members could write to me with specific suggestions that they think might help, but we might also revisit the idea of when the transitional period will end.

Johnny Mercer: I strongly urge Members to take that course of action. Voting down the motion would be extremely self-defeating.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I hope that what the Chair of the Committee has just said can be interpreted as including not only the transitional arrangements, but some of the minor arrangements that are no threat to the major purposes behind this.

Johnny Mercer: I am sure the Chair of the Committee has heard that remark—

Sir Chris Bryant: I have taken my hearing aid out, but I did hear what the Father of the House said.

Johnny Mercer: Fantastic. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the Eighth Report of the Committee on Standards, Session 2022–23, HC 228, on All-Party Parliamentary Groups: final proposals and, with effect from 16 October, the Rules for All-Party Parliamentary Groups contained in the Annex of that Report, subject to any transitional arrangements agreed by the Committee on Standards.

PETITION

Barclays Kidsgrove

4.48 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Today, I am presenting my petition, which has gathered 522 signatures and counting. Residents and businesses of the great town of Kidsgrove and surrounding areas of Talke, Newchapel, Butt Lane, Goldenhill and Tunstall were rightly outraged when Barclays announced the closure of its Kidsgrove branch. Many of my constituents—some of whom are elderly and vulnerable—rely on the face-to-face services provided by Barclays Kidsgrove, and the closure would leave the entire constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke with just one physical bank. The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Barclays in order to keep their branch open in Kidsgrove.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North,

Declares that following the planned closure by Barclays of their bank branch in Kidsgrove, this would leave the constituency with just one physical bank.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government work with Barclays in order to keep their branch open in Kidsgrove.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002848]

Retail Crime

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

4.49 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate the opportunity to open this Adjournment debate so early in the day. At the outset, I want to register the fact that I am a member and officer of the all-party parliamentary group on retail crime. Given the debate that we have just had, it is very important that I do so. I have no pecuniary interest in that matter: it is about ensuring that our high street is protected, and that parliamentarians are aware of issues that are important to high street independent retailers and consumers. I believe that the APPG plays a vital role in doing that and in giving a voice to voiceless people on those important issues.

I thank the British Independent Retailers Association, which is one of the consumer voices for thousands of retail shops across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. It tries to make representations for those groups and bring together their views. I also thank the Association of Convenience Stores, which represents thousands of businesses across the country—small businesses, shopkeepers and traders—and aims to make sure that their issues are properly represented. I will make a prediction, Madam Deputy Speaker: my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will intervene on me at some point this evening. I think it is important that that happens, and I look forward to it, but I am glad that other colleagues have indicated their interest in this matter, because it is something that affects the entire United Kingdom and every single one of its component parts: Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

This is a matter of concern because, quite frankly, the high street is under threat from a host of things. The modern way in which we shop has driven people from actual shopping to online shopping, which has an impact on retail trade. That, in turn, has an impact on the issue that I hope to bring to the attention of the House: retail crime. Survey after survey shows that the public feel it is important that we have a thriving local high street, and that they prefer to shop at smaller independent businesses that are unique—that have a connection to the local community and offer uniqueness, opportunities and, importantly, choice to the consumer.

However, independent retail shops such as those represented by the British Independent Retailers Association have indicated that they are under threat from a number of challenges. Those businesses are working on tighter and tighter margins, not only because of the lack of a level playing field with online retailers, but because of retail crime. Retail crime is not a victimless crime: it costs the UK economy approximately £1.9 billion a year, and policing it and putting protections in place costs businesses about £600 million a year.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing tonight's Adjournment debate. Something I have noted from conversations with retail workers in my constituency is a reduction in the provision of security guards by many companies, despite increasing crime rates. While I understand the budgetary considerations, does he agree that companies need to take their duty of care to both workers and customers more seriously?

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Member for raising that point. The protection of workers is very important to us all—I suppose we could all recount stories where members of staff in high street shops have been verbally or physically abused. That has to be taken seriously. Of course, with crime increasing, the availability of cash has also depleted. ATMs have moved inside shops and away from banks because banks on the high street have closed, and consumers are now charged for taking their money out of those cash machines. All those knock-on effects have an impact on retail trade and crime up and down the country. Those matters will bear heavily on shops.

I want to put that statistic on record again: retail crime costs the UK economy £1.9 billion a year, and it costs businesses about £600 million a year—over half a billion pounds—to put protections in place. Retailers across the UK report that one of the biggest threats to their businesses is customer theft, which comes as no surprise. Customer theft affects the productivity and competitiveness of smaller shops, not least because if those shops make a claim against their insurance, their premiums increase. Because they are working on margins of 4% to 5%, any theft impacts the profitability of a business. So a shopkeeper or retailer is actually discouraged from claiming off their insurance, which is there to protect them from this, because it will have such an impact on their profit margin that it could ultimately put them out of business, and that matter is incredibly important.

Of course, we all know that the cost of living crisis means that more people are desperate, and despair can cause desperate measures. However, that cannot mean people have free rein. On that point, I for one will not draw a distinction in saying that, because there is a cost of living crisis, that will make people want to steal. That is not the nature of the average citizen in this kingdom. The average citizens in this kingdom are good people and they want to do good things. But there are increasing pressures that drive other people to crime and I think we have to be very clear about that. The cost of living crisis is affecting everyone and it is affecting shops. More people have less to spend and, if retail crime is left unchecked, businesses will just buckle and fold.

Retailers do take responsibility and arm themselves against this type of crime by investing in loss prevention measures, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) has said. Loss prevention measures include CCTV, special mirrors, panic alarms, shutters, high-value items secured behind counters and overhead gantries. However, many independent businesses do not have the financial capability or the size of store to invest in the same way that large national chain companies are able to do and that have a physical security presence. Even if they do, the £1.9 billion cost is passed on to the consumers. Again, that highlights that this will drive the cost of living crisis even further, so it is a vicious circle. We in this House have an opportunity to challenge it and I hope the Minister, through his actions—I know that the Minister is committed to this—has the ability to help to break that vicious chain.

In addition to the financial loss, there is also the emotional impact. If the shop worker is unable to go back to work after they have been verbally abused, spat at or physically abused, that has a dire impact on the

economy of that family or of those people. The fact is that 47% of retailers have reported that vulnerable customers are not visiting their shops at night due to the fear of crime, which again reduces their ability to participate in the community, because shops are about community. They are about the high street flourishing and about people within the community meeting and greeting, and engaging in business.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, can I congratulate my honourable colleague and good friend? He is right to outline all the things that shops can do in relation to, No. 1, safety for their workers and, No. 2, safety for their customers. I have been the representative for Strangford in this House since 2010, but I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly before that and a councillor. Over those years, I have watched the shops in my constituency and seen shop workers who have been verbally abused, who have been attacked with knives and who have had to call the police after having been beaten up in their shops. Yet, with all the precautions that are taken in a shop, and it is right to take those precautions, it only ever works if the police are accessible, and the problem for us in many cases is that the police are so busy that they are not able to attend incidents in shops at the time when the people need them to be there. CCTV can retain the evidence, but the police need to be there. Has my hon. Friend experienced that in his constituency as well?

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I think he has over 26 or 27 years of elected experience between these two bodies, and with that on Ards Council, over 30. I think it is telling that he has probably, like me, seen an increase in this and an increase in the threats to shops. Of course, that has been impacted by the things I mentioned earlier: the change in shopping habits with online shopping and therefore the inability sometimes to invest in some of these issues.

Everyone who works in a shop has the right to feel safe behind their counter and that their livelihood is not under threat. That is why I am pleased to be a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on retail crime, safe and sustainable high streets and to be leading on this debate and pushing the matter forward. We want to ensure that high streets remain at the heart of our community, but unless shop theft is regarded as a serious crime, it will continue to grow. We need to flag up that this is not shoplifting and this is not petty; it is serious and at times organised and it must be addressed. We are talking here about serious and organised crime: this is a serious crime and we must deal with it.

I went through the history of parliamentary questions asked on this issue. From the response to a written question by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to the Ministry of Justice in 2018 we learned that a perpetrator of retail crime would, appallingly, have to be convicted 30 times before they were given a custodial sentence, up from 27 in 2017. In 2016, one offender received their first custodial sentence after—wait for it—435 previous offences; in 2017, the figure was 279 previous offences, and in 2018 it was 287 previous offences. For a prolific daily offender it took hundreds and hundreds of offences before they received a custodial sentence. What message does that send out to the kleptomaniac and the person who says, “I just need that item”? It sends the message that they will probably get away with it.

That is not good enough, and this issue is not being treated seriously enough. It is therefore no surprise that according to the British Retail Consortium only 15% of shoplifting crime is reported, and a majority of businesses—over 56%—say that they believe the police operate “poorly” or “very poorly” when dealing with retail crime. I understand that. I deal with the police regularly in my constituency, and this refers to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Talking exclusively about Northern Ireland, when police budgets have been driven down and when the chief constable rightly puts out the message that people will notice the lack of policing because those budgets have been driven down, this sort of crime is only going to go one way—up. I know the situation in England and Wales is slightly different because the police here have been given additional support, which is very welcome. I would love for that support to be cross-applied to Northern Ireland. I have deliberately not made this debate specifically on Northern Ireland because that would let the Government take the easy path of saying that calling the Assembly back would lead to this being sorted out. That is not the resolution, however; this is about budgetary support from the Home Office for policing. We do not have that support and we require it.

So what needs to happen? All of this means that the retail industry feels largely unprotected. Unfortunately, that is the case across the entire country. From Abbott’s in Devon to Mackays of Cambridge and across to Fermanagh in Ulster, many members of the British Independent Retail Association have been campaigning on retail crime and have given evidence directly to the Home Office on this issue. They have found that, even with video evidence, there just is not the interest or imperative for some of the authorities some of the time to get involved. They feel ignored and let down. We must address that, because it is not in the interests of us as lawmakers or of those of us who want this country to flourish. We want to make sure that the law is seen to apply, is seen to apply fairly and, where it has to be, is seen to apply strictly and to punish people engaged in this crime.

Reductions in resources available to police forces are undoubtedly posing challenges, but, more pertinently, there is still a lack of consistency in responses to retail crime across the country. This has not happened by introducing the crazy £200 arbitrary figure that the Government set in the guidelines to the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which advises police forces that they do not need to respond if the value stolen was below that figure. A written question from the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who is a fellow vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on retail crime, safe and sustainable high streets, showed that the percentage of shop thefts dealt with by the justice system stands at 13%, down from 36%. That is simply not acceptable and I hope the Minister agrees.

Prosecuting shoplifting needs to be quicker, easier and cheaper from the point of view of police forces and retailers. With the use of compelling CCTV evidence and technology, processes can and should be modernised to increase the conviction rate. At the moment, data protection often means that shoplifters are protected from identification, even though they are a danger to the public and other retail businesses. That needs to

[*Ian Paisley*]

change. I am not saying that we need to put “wanted” posters up all over the country, but sometimes we feel like that when we know that a particular person in our village or high street is a menace. In the town of Ballymena, the shops have a radio connection so that when certain people are seen in the town it goes around like wildfire: “So-and-so’s in the town today. Try to prevent them coming into your shop and, more importantly, be alert and make sure they don’t do it.”

When an arrest is made, the punishment must reflect the seriousness of the crime. With that in mind, it would be much better if part of the process for reporting this type of crime was a mandatory victim impact statement so the court can hear the dilemma shop owners and shopworkers are placed in and the pain they feel. It would help to ensure that criminals are more likely to get the sentence they deserve if the real impact of their crime is laid before the courts and the judge hears the impact it has had on the community. All retail crime needs to be treated seriously. We need to expunge the words, “This is just shoplifting”. It is not. That phrase has to be removed from our lexicon. That type of terminology implies that it is somehow less of a crime and not as important.

I will leave those thoughts with the Minister. I understand that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) wishes to make a contribution. He spoke to me earlier behind Mr Speaker’s Chair and I am more than happy to agree to that. In conclusion, this is an important issue on which we can have cross-party co-operation. Let us show retailers that that is the case and implement these simple solutions that will help our retailers live and thrive, and help the high street thrive again.

5.7 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for letting me make a short—perhaps uncharacteristically short, some might say—contribution rather than interventions. I agree with everything he said. I just want to focus on one particular aspect, which is the use of security guards in shops and a recent incident that happened in my constituency, and also attacks on retail workers. The Home Affairs Committee did a report on that a little while ago and pushed to make it an aggravated crime, in particular when retail workers are attacked because they refuse to sell restricted goods such as alcohol or tobacco to people because of their age and are effectively policing that in place of the state.

I had an incident in my constituency a couple of weeks ago that went viral for all the wrong reasons. I will not go into great detail, because although it is not currently subject to any legal action it may become so. A Co-op store in my constituency has, I am afraid, something of a reputation for shoplifting, particularly by gangs of young people who have been causing problems in an area close to a railway line recently. Somebody, a teenager, was drunk and blatantly shoplifting in front of a security guard who declined to do anything about it. A member of the public stepped in to say, “Hold on, you shouldn’t be doing that.” She was assaulted and then the teenager legged it. Somebody who had witnessed

that then drove around the corner, where there was a police car with a PCSO sitting in it. He pulled up to the police car and happened to have his dashcam on. He recorded a conversation where he said, “You need to get round to the Co-op sharpish, because there is an incident going on”, only for the officer—I am not going to pre-judge, because this incident is being looked at—basically to say, “I cannot get involved.” What was supposed to happen there? Obviously the police need to be called and should intervene, but they had not arrived at that stage, although they did later. A member of the public was being attacked. A security guard who had been employed by the Co-op to look after the goods in that store should surely have intervened.

The Co-op is a good store, a good employer and it does some good things. The Co-op lobbied members of the Home Affairs Committee and we took evidence from it in particular about attacks on retail workers, but it needs to do its bit, too. We were told that retail workers would be fitted with bodycams, so that they could record the evidence to prosecute people. I have to say that in Sussex, largely down to our police commissioner, Katy Bourne, the Co-op has taken the lead on taking shoplifting—or however we want to term it, and I entirely agree with the hon. Member for North Antrim that we should not downplay the importance of the act. It is being taken far more seriously, and the police will now respond to shoplifting incidents more rapidly and with greater seriousness than they perhaps have in the past. It is not enough, but it is better than it was.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman is making a valuable point, and I am delighted that these proactive measures are being taken. One of the points that concerns me is that some shops and businesses will not be able to afford to take them. That is the problem. We have got to have something holistic that allows the small retailer the same benefit as those retailers that are better off. What he talks about is an expedient step in the right direction.

Tim Loughton: Absolutely. I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said earlier about how we underplay the significance of this issue, which acts as a green light for other people to come in saying, “Nobody is being prosecuted.” If, as in the case the hon. Gentleman mentioned, it is taking 400 times before somebody is actually incarcerated, it sends out a strong message that nicking from a supermarket or a store is fairly easy and people will probably get away with it. I am afraid that is the message that has been sent out from stores such as the one I have mentioned. They are not doing enough to prevent shoplifting by employing people to intervene—where they do employ security guards—so that a clear message goes out, saying, “We take shoplifting seriously here, so please do not try it.”

My point is that companies such as the Co-op need to employ security guards where there is a problem, but they need to be security guards who can intervene. There is nothing in the law that would stop that security guard intervening, restraining the person responsible for the incident I just mentioned, and detaining them until a police officer arrives and can take appropriate action. They chose not to, and that is policy in certain stores. That is not protecting the goods in the store or members of the public who were in danger, and, in this case, were assaulted by this person, allegedly. It is also not protecting the staff.

My ask out of all of this is that the police do more. We need to do more to up the conviction rates to show that this is an important crime. Stores, particularly larger stores, need to do more to ensure that where they do employ security guards, they are security guards with a purpose who do not just stand there and say, “I cannot intervene”, which is completely and utterly useless.

Another branch in my constituency does not employ security guards at all. On Friday evenings, as I have recently found out, two young women are in charge of that store. People are coming in, potentially aggressive or drunk or to commit crimes. Retailers, particularly the bigger ones, need to take this issue seriously and step up to the mark if they want to protect their customers and their goods, and particularly if they want to protect their staff. I hope that the Co-op has heard that, because I have invited it to come down urgently to my constituency to talk about the problem that we have with stores in the area. It is sending out entirely the wrong message and creating a bigger problem for the future.

I am grateful for the opportunity to hijack and leap on this debate, because it is an important subject that is not treated with the importance that it needs.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am, as always, grateful to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for securing this important debate. It is of course relevant to my ministerial responsibilities, but I should add that my first formal paid employment at the age of about 16 was in a supermarket in south London, close to my constituency, so I greatly sympathise with the issues raised. Years later, I ran a business that supplied convenience stores up and down the country, so it is a topic close to my heart.

I would like to start by saying clearly that any form of retail crime is completely unacceptable. I agree with the hon. Member about the importance of emphasising that this is a serious form of crime and that it should not, at any point, be dismissed or treated by the police or anyone else as somehow minor or to be disregarded. That is important because shop workers often get assaulted, which is serious for them. The hon. Member pointed out the enormous financial losses that result from widespread shoplifting and, if it is left unchecked, it simply escalates. What might start off as pilfering or what some would wrongly describe as low-level theft can escalate into something much more serious and widespread.

We have seen that elsewhere in the world—I think in particular about San Francisco, as well as other American cities—where both the police and store security guards appear not to intervene and, as a consequence, stores are raided and stolen from on a large scale multiple times a day. In San Francisco, a number of shops have had to close down completely because shoplifting has become so rampant and out of control. For all those reasons, it needs to be taken extremely seriously. There is a very compelling case for doing that.

The Government do take it seriously—I certainly do, as does the Home Secretary. In fact, just a couple of days ago—I think it was on Monday—I chaired a

meeting of the national retail crime steering group, bringing together the retail industry and law enforcement to sharpen our response to retail crime. It was attended by, among others, the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores and representatives of all kinds of retailers, as well as police and crime commissioners and various people from the policing family. We discussed a number of things, one of which was the impact of section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which made assaulting a public-facing worker—particularly retail workers, but also others, such as bus drivers—a statutory aggravating factor. That, again, is designed to send a signal to the public as well as to the police and the judiciary that such crimes are taken seriously. During that meeting, we considered an article that appeared over the weekend in *The Times* by Dame Sharon White, the chair of John Lewis, raising concerns about this matter. We talked about the need for a proper police response at all times when shoplifting occurs.

The hon. Member mentioned resources. Of course, we now have more police officers across England and Wales than at any point in history—149,572 police officers, which is about 3,500 more than the previous peak in 2010—so there are extra resources, certainly in England and Wales. I take his point about Northern Ireland being a bit different. With all those officers in place, I do expect, as Policing Minister, an appropriate response, by which I mean that proper investigations should occur, as do the public and Members of this House.

There is often CCTV footage of somebody shoplifting. We now have extremely advanced and capable means of matching images taken on CCTV cameras against the records held on the police national database, and there is often a match. That is what I would expect to happen in every case. Where there is a lead, I would expect it to be followed up.

Similarly, I would expect an appropriate police response where an incident is unfolding of the kind that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned. I would expect the police to attend. From what I have seen in the video he refers to, it was not handled appropriately. Where an incident is unfolding, the police should respond. If the police need to attend to gather evidence that requires their physical attendance, they should do that.

Obviously, the police are operationally independent and I do not have the power to direct them, nor should I. However, I will convene a further meeting with the National Police Chiefs’ Council leads in this area, together with the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores and others, to make sure that there is an appropriate response at all times, that those crimes are investigated and prevented, and that there is appropriate prosecutorial follow-up.

Under section 176 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, where the shoplifting relates to goods under £200 in value and the defendant pleads guilty and does not want the case heard in a Crown court, it is treated as summary only. In fact, the police can charge it. That change was made, but there was categorically no requirement set out in legislation or guidance that offences where the amount of goods stolen is under £200 should in any way be ignored. They should certainly not be ignored.

Ian Paisley: I welcome the Minister's point, which needs to be driven home to local police services and, importantly, to shop owners. On the group that he set up and is taking advice from, it is brilliant that progress will be made, but I encourage him to invite the British Independent Retailers Association and the Association of Convenience Stores to that group, so that smaller businesses can have their voice heard.

Chris Philp: The Association of Convenience Stores was at the meeting on Monday and will come to the subsequent meeting that I referred to. I will be happy to invite the other group that the hon. Gentleman referred to. Officials are listening and will make sure that the invitation is extended.

To repeat the point on goods that are stolen with a value under £200, the previous Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), wrote to all chief constables and police and crime commissioners to make it clear that section 176 does not restrain the police's ability to arrest and prosecute. Further to that, in 2020 the National Business Crime Centre surveyed police forces in England and Wales, asking if they had a policy of not responding to shoplifting where goods are worth less than £200. No police force said that it had any such policy, which is reassuring. However, I want to make sure that the practice on the ground is appropriate. I was concerned by the points raised by Dame Sharon White, the chair of John Lewis, in her article in *The Times* over the weekend, saying that she felt the police response was not adequate. That is why I will have further discussions with the relevant NPCC leads and others in the near future.

I would like to address the short but excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham. I have touched on the incident he mentioned, but he also made a point about security guards, and he is right to say that even though they are not warranted police officers, security guards have the right, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, to physically intervene when there is no police constable on the scene and a crime is being committed. They can make a citizen's arrest, as any member of the public can.

Interestingly, I was refreshing my memory about section 176 of the 2014 Act, which I mentioned. When the crime of stealing goods worth less than £200 was made summary-only, it would have fallen outside the scope of offences where a member of the public, including a security guard, can make a citizen's arrest, were it not for an express provision in section 176 that makes it clear that shoplifting goods under the value of £200 does still trigger the right to make a citizen's arrest under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. Back in 2014—I was not a Member of Parliament then, but my hon. Friend was—Parliament legislated expressly to allow that power of citizen's arrest to apply specifically to shoplifting when the goods are worth less than £200.

Of course we need to be conscious of the safety of security guards, but I would urge them to intervene when they see someone shoplifting. If they do not, that simply allows shoplifting to go unchecked, and people will be almost encouraged to shoplift if they think it will go unpunished. I have seen plenty of video footage from the United States in which store security guards do not intervene—perhaps because people in the United

States often have guns, which, thankfully, is not normally the case here—and the problem escalates out of control. I agree with my hon. Friend that security guards should intervene appropriately, unless they really believe that their safety will be at risk, because that acts as a deterrent. As I have said, they have the legal powers to do so.

There are also some very good technical solutions that retailers can adopt to be proactive. One company that works in a number of retail stores, including the Co-op in parts of the south of England—it is a private sector company, so I will not name it—uses a live facial recognition system that hooks into the CCTV cameras. It is connected to a database containing images of known prolific shoplifters. When one of them walks into the store, an alert is triggered so the staff know that a prolific shoplifter has just walked in. The company recommends that a staff member should approach the shoplifter and do nothing more than say, politely, "Excuse me, sir, can I help?" The mere act of doing that often acts as a deterrent, and the shoplifter simply leaves, knowing that he or she is being observed.

The company has shown me data revealing that the number of assaults against retail stores deploying the system has dropped by about 20%, while in the stores that have not deployed it the number rose. In the stores where it has not been deployed, there has been a significant rise in the incidence of theft—part of the wider increase that we have discussed—whereas in those that have deployed it, there has been a very slight decline. The system was recently scrutinised by the Information Commissioner's Office for the usual data protection and privacy reasons, and, following lengthy consideration, the company is being allowed to proceed. I think that systems of that kind can be extremely helpful.

I do not want to try the House's patience by going on for too much longer. Let me conclude by reiterating my agreement with the view of the hon. Member for North Antrim that this is a serious form of crime that causes enormous financial loss, leads to many assaults on hard-working staff members and, if it goes unchecked, escalates to a point at which widespread disorder permeates society. For all those reasons, I think that we need to do more, and I commit myself to doing that through the meetings to which I have referred. I thank the hon. Member again for drawing the matter to the House's attention.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think a point of order is the only way in which I can say this. I want to thank the Minister, because his was one of the most helpful responses I have ever received during an Adjournment debate. I just wanted to put that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It was rather removed from the actual Standing Orders, but there we are; I am sure that the Minister appreciated the hon. Gentleman's words.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 July 2023

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

Universal Credit Deductions

9.30 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): It is a little warm in here today, so if Members want to remove their jackets, that is perfectly allowable.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Universal Credit deductions.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Maria. This is a matter of considerable interest and concern to me, as it will be to many other Members, each of whom will have busy caseloads from worried or despairing constituents, many of them describing how the universal credit system has worked for them or, more to the point, has abjectly failed to work for them.

In March last year and earlier this month, I questioned the Secretary of State on how many universal credit claims were having deductions taken from them in the most recent month for which data was available in each parliamentary constituency, what was the average size of sums deducted in each constituency, what was the total sum deducted from claims in each constituency, and what proportion of each sum was deducted to repay advance payments. The figures in the Scottish context were quite revealing to me. For example, I learned that in one month alone in 2021, 180,000 households in Scotland had an average of £60 deducted from their social security payments, and that between December 2022 and February 2023, the UK Government deducted £12.1 million a month from 206,000 Scottish households. The number of households affected by deductions and the sums being recouped seem to be increasing.

Those figures were disturbing but maybe not surprising. After all, last year the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I was then a member, published a report on the cost of living, which called on the Department for Work and Pensions to pause the deductions and restore them gradually only as the rate of inflation reduced, or when benefits had been increased to accurately reflect the rise in prices. The Government rejected the report's recommendations, stating that pausing deductions is not

“necessarily in the claimant's best interest.”

But claimants know that since then, inflation has remained very high, and the rise in the price of basic foodstuffs for the poorer has been ferocious. It is time to take a broader look at the problems with universal credit deductions. That is why I secured this debate.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I cannot tell my hon. Friend how many times a constituent has contacted me to tell me that, as a result of the universal credit calculation and payment cycle and the fact that their employment paydays are not exactly a month apart, they are trapped in an endless

cycle of recalculation and financial hardship. Does he agree that it is clear the current assessment cycle is not fit for purpose?

Chris Stephens: I do agree, and I point my hon. Friend to the written answer I secured, which gives the statistics for every constituency in England, Wales and Scotland. She will see that the rate of deductions is around £60 in her constituency, but she will also notice that the number of households affected by deductions is increasing. She makes an important point about looking at an individual's pay cycle and whether it is four-weekly or monthly.

Let us look at some examples of people affected by deductions. The Trussell Trust tells us that almost half of people referred to food banks in its network are subject to deductions from their benefit payments due to repayment of a benefit advance or a benefit overpayment. We will see that linkage repeatedly during the debate. The Trussell Trust goes on to remind us that

“The five-week wait for Universal Credit means many people have no choice but to take an Advance Payment to manage essential bills like rent and utilities”,

which immediately places them in debt and reduces their income below the standard allowance.

Deductions for overpayments, including tax credit overpayments, often take people by surprise because they are historical or are the result of DWP error. Like other deductions, they can be taken from people automatically at unaffordable rates. The standard allowance of universal credit does not provide enough income to cover the cost of life's essentials, so any deduction taking people below that already low level will push them further into hardship. Key phrases are advance payments, overpayments that are historical or due to Department for Work and Pensions error, and the cost of living essentials. I will come back to each of those.

We then hear from the Trussell Trust about consequent mental health wellbeing, which is often impaired by people struggling to understand what they owe, and why, and how to access support. The Trussell Trust is not alone in making those observations. The organisation Feeding Britain has

“a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry”.

I should also mention Good Food Scotland, with which I do a lot of work in Glasgow South West.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward, and I will be making my own contribution to the debate. The Trussell Trust in Newtownards in my constituency was the first in Northern Ireland, and what it has to say about vision reinforces what the hon. Gentleman has said. According to Newtownards Trussell Trust,

“our vision is for a world where food banks, like ours, don't need to exist.”

That is what we want to see, and I know the hon. Gentleman wants the same.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that intervention. As he knows, he has relatives of mine among his constituents in Newtownards. He is absolutely correct about our vision: we all want to see a world in which food banks do not exist. I know he is very supportive of my Food Poverty Strategy Bill, which is a private Member's Bill that I recommend to all hon. Members.

[Chris Stephens]

Feeding Britain has talked to many people who are having to go hungry. In the days leading up to the debate, food banks in Brighton, Derbyshire, Leeds and High Wycombe reported speaking to individuals who all cited deductions as a key reason for referrals to them, and described some harrowing cases. For example, a client in Chichester has some £55 a week to live on after deduction of rent and other deductions for advances and loans from universal credit. The client received no prior warning or notice of the deduction, and even her work coach was unable to explain why the deduction had been made. That client is a lone parent with three children. She is worried that even if the deduction is found to be a mistake, she will be waiting until the next payment to receive the money that was deducted.

Feeding Britain has also told us of a client in Manchester who had £72 deducted for rent arrears. The first he was made aware of that was three days before payment when he accessed his payment statement. Living off the standard universal credit allowance is difficult as it is, but so much being deducted with so little notice makes it almost impossible. The gov.uk website states that universal credit will place a note on the journal when a third-party debt deduction is about to start, but no such information about the debts—how much was owed or how long the client would be paying off the debt—was provided in that example; there was not even a note telling them how further information could be obtained by telephone. The closing comment from the Manchester office was that

“the most efficient aspect of Universal Credit is debt retrieval”.

In the report “UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK”, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlights that key design features of the social security system, including having to wait five weeks for the first universal credit payment and universal credit being deducted to pay off debts and arrears, directly lead to higher food insecurity and have contributed to the rise in food banks.

The Child Poverty Action Group has shown that across the UK the number of children living in households with debt deductions being taken from their universal credit has risen to more than 2.2 million, making up more than half—53%—of all children in households receiving universal credit. Those families are missing out on an average of £73 a month as a result. Every commentator seems to express similar views on where the system is failing, and there is much commonality on where they think the appropriate solutions lie.

Margaret Ferrier: The use of a predominantly online system has led to many cases being raised with my office. In particular, vulnerable constituents without consistent internet access or phone credit may be unaware that they have been sanctioned until the payment is made because they are not able to access their journal. Have the hon. Member’s constituents experienced that? Does he agree that DWP’s communication needs to be improved?

Chris Stephens: Yes, I do agree. My hon. Friend is right again about the lack of information in journals. The example I gave of the individual in Manchester is typical of what happens to universal credit claimants who get caught up with deductions and other aspects of

the social security system that I want to see resolved. The Government have recognised some of the problems and have reduced the rate of deductions by lowering the cap and extending repayment periods, but that is not enough; significant reductions to already low incomes remain, and there is no affordability assessment to ensure that people can afford the payments.

What action can we take? Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that support has eroded over decades, and that universal credit standard allowance is now at its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings. Together with the Trussell Trust, it is calling on the Government to implement an essentials guarantee to ensure that the basic rate of universal credit at least covers life’s essentials and that the support can never be pulled below that level.

Rather than offering one-off payments to shore up the incomes of struggling families, the UK Government should reverse the damaging policies impacting on our most vulnerable, including by reinstating the universal credit uplift of £25 a week, removing the benefit cap and the two-child limit, and halting punitive sanctions regime, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) outlined. In addition, the Scottish National party recommends that the Government immediately introduce an amnesty on deductions resulting from the Department of Work and Pensions’ own errors. Advance payment loans should be turned into non-repayable grants after a claimant has been deemed eligible, as the Work and Pensions Committee recommended in our report. Too often, we hear that advances are not loans, but if someone is paid money and is expected to pay it back, that is indeed a loan, not an advance.

We are also arguing for the cap on the monthly rate of deduction to be lowered, and for the widespread use of sanctions to be stopped, as there is clear evidence that they do not work. A London School of Economics study found that the impoverishment of larger low-income households has helped few parents to get a job, and is instead pushing families further into poverty and damaging their health.

I said at the start that I will intersperse my contribution with comments, examples and solutions from Scotland, so here are some. Social Security Scotland can take deductions from some benefits—the adult disability payment, the child disability payment and the Scottish child payment—to pay back an overpayment, but when overpayments occur, it engages with clients to discuss their circumstances and agree a payment plan that takes them into account. Its debt management strategy states:

“Where the repayment method is voluntary deductions from benefits, we will mutually agree a value with client as part of Affordability Assessment. Where enforced deductions are applied due to client not engaging with us to agree a payment plan, a maximum deduction of 10% of Scottish Benefit Entitlement will be applied unless the overpayment is due to Fraud, in which case a maximum of 15% will be applied.”

That social security philosophy and those actions work.

The Scottish National party believes that social security is an investment in the people of Scotland and a key part of the Scottish Government’s national mission to tackle child poverty. It continues to do everything it can with the limited powers and fixed budgets it receives from this place. That includes investing £5.2 billion in benefits expenditure in 2023-24, supporting more than

1 million people. I have stated clearly that we need to tackle child poverty. The Scottish Government's tackling child poverty delivery plan estimates that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year, as a result of the policies of the Scottish Government. However, the Scottish Government should not have to pick up the broken pieces left by this place, or keep using their limited powers and fixed projects to mitigate damaging Conservative party policies.

With every day that this Government fail to fix the known problems of universal credit and the social security system, and fail to use their reserve powers to tackle the rising cost of living adequately, they demonstrate that independence is the only way for Scotland to boost incomes and build a fairer society. The rest of the United Kingdom needs to fix its broken social security system; Scotland is already determined to do so.

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I remind Members that they need to be here for the full debate if they are going to take part. I was also going to ask Members to bob if they want to take part; I thank Members for doing that. I call Jim Shannon.

9.46 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My goodness! Thank you, Dame Maria. That threw me off. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second day running. It has come to the point when you and I are in Westminster Hall almost as much as each other. Well, maybe that is an exaggeration. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who rightly brought forward this topic. We met on the Terrace this morning and he said, "Jim, will you come and do your bit?" and I said, "Does the Pope have red socks? Absolutely, I will be there. There is no doubt about it." I am here to endorse what he said. A person from the food bank wrote me a letter, and I will quote the best part of it. He illustrates very well what happens, and why it is important.

I can well remember the fear at the outset of universal credit—the fear that people would be worse off, and that families would struggle. Boy, do they struggle. I am sorry to say that, but they do, because I witness it every day. I witnessed it on Friday in my office, with a person who had the same problem with universal credit. We were able to sort it, by the way. I find it incredibly hard to understand how universal credit works, and I am far from stupid. Once through the technical details and the machinations of the whole thing, one has to ask, "How on earth does anybody follow this?"

For some, this fear has become a real struggle, and the deductions from an already sub-par universal credit is enough to push some families over the edge. I have seen that in my constituency office. My staff have a continuously good relationship with the social security offices round the corner. I have to put on record that they are brilliant. The number of problems that they have sorted out when my staff speak to them illustrates that they have grasped how the system works and how to get through it, but the ordinary person cannot do that. I have struggled to understand it as well.

It should be remembered that those who are unemployed or unable to work have a set rate that remains pretty stable. However, self-employed people have different

work weeks, and the flexibility that universal credit was supposed to offer has resulted in deductions from overpayments. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned that, and I endorse it. The deductions are so hard to work out that families are left not even understanding how they owe money. It is incomprehensible.

The Minister understands. I am no different from anybody else here. Whenever we approach the Minister and explain the issues, he always tries to respond in a positive fashion. I appreciate that, and want to put that on record, because it is good to have a Minister who really wants to do things and help out. We are all working in our constituencies, advocating for our constituents, and we know well the issues that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West outlined.

I was contacted last week by the phenomenal manager of the local food bank, a man with the largest heart for helping families and vulnerable individuals. I want to read out his comments, as time permits. My speech is his letter to me, because it illustrates the issue really well. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West has friends and relatives in Newtownards. I know them—and think they vote DUP, by the way, so maybe they are not nationalists.

Chris Stephens: Not a chance.

Jim Shannon: I think they do; he does not know them as well as I do. The letter states:

"As a food bank operating in Newtownards, we are writing to you to raise our concerns about rising numbers of people in our community who are needing to turn to food banks, like ours, because they cannot afford the essentials we all need to survive." These are his words: "This is not right". I say amen to that.

"In the last financial year we saw a 30% increase in clients coming to the Newtownards Foodbank compared to the previous year. We are aware that our summer has started really busily with an average of 24 different families attending each week since June in what is normally our quieter spell.

Many attendees are struggling with the inability to feed their families and provide fuel for their house needs. A significant proportion are actually working but their outgoings outstrip their income. Those on benefits clearly don't get enough to match their basic needs.

While the cost of living crisis and the pandemic have placed additional pressures on incomes, this year's rise is part of a longer-term trend in levels of need. Support has eroded over decades and the basic rate ('standard allowance') of universal credit is now at its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings. Alarming, the number of parcels provided this year is more than double the amount distributed five years ago."

I will say that again, because that is an important line:

"Alarming, the number of parcels provided this year is more than double the amount distributed five years ago.

No one should be forced to turn to a food bank because they cannot afford essentials, including food. We provide immediate support to people in our community when they are struggling the most, but our vision is for a world where food banks, like ours, don't need to exist."

I said that in an intervention on the hon. Member for Glasgow South West. That is his vision, mine, the vision of every Opposition Member and, I hope, of the Minister. The letter also says:

"Research by the Trussell Trust shows that inadequate social security is the main driver of food bank need and there is a known link between issues with the benefits system and food bank use. This can and must change.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Alongside the Trussell Trust, we are calling for our social security system to Guarantee Our Essentials by making sure that the basic rate of Universal Credit is at least enough to afford the essentials we all need, such as food, energy and basic household goods – and that deductions can never pull people below this level.”

He asks me:

“Will you support the principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should always protect people from going without the essentials?”

That is Richard’s letter to me this week. I will say on the record that I fully support what he said.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend has succinctly summed up the issues in the letter from his constituent. Does he agree that faith-based food bank providers in my constituency, his and others are doing excellent work, and that most people in society, including universal credit recipients, support the principle of the universal credit system, which is to encourage people back into work? The problem is that when there are deductions, and almost a penalistic regime, people suffer. That problem must be solved in our society, because people are being driven further into poverty, rather than lifted out of it.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend has succinctly made his case in his intervention. The key issue for the Minister—this is from me, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, who set the scene very well, and, I suspect, everybody on the Opposition Benches—is that there is a delay in the system, and difficulty understanding the system. Whenever we go to the local office, the office manager and staff can respond, but there are many people other than those who come to us—and there are many who come to us, by the way; many come to the office with this issue, because they still cannot understand it. We are asking the Minister for the extra help that is quite clearly needed. There is also the five to six weeks’ delay that many people seem to have. Whenever they earn more money, they fall back down again. They are often sick, and their housing benefit is so complicated; it is almost hard to try to comprehend it.

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Member has talked about budgeting. For many, short-term budgeting is a necessity. The housing element of universal credit is paid directly to claimants, not landlords, which contributes to an entirely foreseeable problem. Does he agree that, especially given soaring living costs, it would help claimants budget if we removed the direct payment of this element to claimants?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady has demonstrated clearly the complications of this system, and others will, too, because they have the same knowledge and interpretation of it as I have.

I will finish with this. My answer to Richard, the manager of the food bank, is clear: yes, I support what he said. I hope that his letter has clearly illustrated what is needed. Will the Government support that, make things easier for my constituents and do things differently? I hope that the answer to that is also yes; I am sure that it will be. Families—my constituents in Strangford, constituents across the whole of Northern Ireland, and

constituents across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—must be able to depend on their Government, rather than their local food bank. That is my story today.

9.55 am

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing a debate of such enormous importance to our constituents. It is good to see the Minister in his place. I hope that in his remarks he will do away with the prevarication and tired excuses that we so often hear from the Dispatch Box on this subject, and that he will have the courage to confront head-on the disastrous consequences of this Government’s cruel and pernicious benefits regime for millions of people across this country.

The design and roll-out of the universal credit system have proven to be a catastrophe for the worst-off in our society. In my constituency of Birkenhead, nearly 14,000 people are in receipt of universal credit. With the exception of housing, there is no issue that constituents come to me about as frequently as the inadequacy of universal credit payments during the cost of living crisis, the questionable and often downright wrong reasons for which deductions are made, and how the five-week wait is forcing many people even deeper into debt.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that this is a nationwide crisis. The basic level of universal credit now stands at its lowest level as a proportion of average earnings, and 90% of low-income households on universal credit are going without essentials. When we talk about people who have deductions made from their payments, it is important to acknowledge that most claimants struggle to survive even when they receive their payments in full.

We should also remember that a significant proportion—around 40%—of the people we are talking about are already in work. Although Ministers talk about deductions being a necessary incentive to ensure that claimants fulfil their obligations under the scheme, the vast majority of deductions are in fact debt repayments, either to the DWP or to third parties.

Universal credit deductions are now one of the leading causes of destitution in this country, and the most vulnerable are paying the price. Families with children, and families in which somebody is unable to work because of illness or disability, are significantly more likely to have deductions to their universal credit payments, and 2.2 million children are growing up in households in which deductions are routinely made from universal credit payments. Although it has been reported that the average reduction amounts to 15%, nearly half of all households with a deduction have over 20% of their basic allowance deducted.

Yesterday, I met Victoria Benson, chief executive of the charity Gingerbread, which provides invaluable support to single parents, to discuss the impact of the two-child limit and universal credit deductions on single-parent families. She explained that single parents are disproportionately over-represented among universal credit claimants. Some 70% of single-parent households are in receipt of universal credit, and that figure is likely to rise to 90% by the summer of next year as a result of the managed migration from legacy benefits.

The struggles of being a single parent—raising children on one’s own, trying to make ends meet and searching, often in vain, for affordable childcare—are very real. Now, many single parents are also forced to grapple with deductions that leave them with an uncertain income each month and unable to afford the essentials for either their children or themselves. The result is parents going without food so that their children can eat, and falling even deeper into debt.

We are all entitled to a basic level of comfort and dignity. If the universal credit system is not guaranteeing that to the millions of people who rely on it as a lifeline, it is simply not fit for purpose.

9.59 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—sorry, the hon. Member, though I am sure he will be right hon. at some point—on securing it.

I did have a much longer speech. However, I cut it quite severely for this debate, thinking that there might be a mass of Conservative Back Benchers here to defend their Government’s policy. Clearly, I was mistaken. Given First Minister Mark Drakeford’s statement last night that Welsh Labour would oppose cuts and stoppages to universal credit, I had rather hoped to see a mass of Welsh Labour MPs here as well. I confess that cannot spot a single one, though I commend the three Labour Back Benchers who are present, and look forward to their speeches.

Arfon is one of the poorest constituencies in the UK, as the Minister will know, having stood against me there some time ago—but we will not go into that. For the poorest of the poor, the outlook is very bleak. In February this year, 4,500 people claimed universal credit in Arfon, and 2,100 of them, or 48%, were subject to deductions—nearly half of them. The average deduction was £59. The total deduction taken from the very poorest people in Arfon every month is £125,000; grossed up, that is £3 million a year. Every year, therefore, the poorest people in Arfon are returning £3 million to the Treasury. They cannot afford that. They are on universal credit—a sum assessed to be the very minimum needed to live. I could not live on universal credit, and certainly not on universal credit that is reduced by £59 every month. I have a straight yes/no question for the Minister: could he live on universal credit that has been cut every month by £59?

I did a surgery specifically on universal credit some time ago, and did a budgeting exercise with a constituent of mine from a housing estate on the very edge of town. She knew exactly how much she had to spend. There was nothing spare at all. Looking at the figures, I said, “Look, you’ve got a pound spare.” She replied, “Once a week, I take the bus home with heavy shopping, rather than having to walk the whole way every time.” I do not know exactly how much I have to spend every month. Does the Minister know? My constituent did. She is an expert. It is unlike the picture that is often conveyed of people on universal credit—that they are somehow feckless.

In Wales, in February, 114,100 children lived in families who are on universal credit and paying deductions. The percentage of Welsh children in universal credit households

paying deductions was 57%. Three of every five children are in families on universal credit living below the minimum sum assessed to meet their needs. That is the level of deprivation that the system causes. The Trussell Trust has been mentioned several times; it is no surprise that people on universal credit are being referred to its schemes in Wales. Over half of them are also paying deductions. It is quite clear from the evidence where the problem lies: with deductions for half of people on universal credit.

The monthly deduction from universal credit households with children in Wales was £4,208,000—over £50,496,000 every year. Wales is a poor country. Other parts of the UK are poor as well, such as north-east England and Merseyside, but I can say this for Wales as a Welsh MP: our poorest people cannot afford to lose £50 million in income every year. We cannot afford this Tory Government. Indeed, we need a coherent Welsh benefit system, among other things, starting of course with the devolution of benefits administration—that is my party’s policy.

On 24 April of this year, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), a very straightforward question:

“Have the two-child limit and the benefit cap increased child poverty?”—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 491.]

Now, I would imagine that most people here know the answer to that. The Under-Secretary of State, however, replied with 88 words of evasion but no answer. Put simply, that answer is of course, “Yes”.

The two-child limit affects nearly 19,000 families in Wales, and abolishing it would give each child an extra £3,235 every year. On a UK basis, it has been calculated that this change would cost £1.3 billion. To put that in perspective for hon. Members, the most valuable premier league squad is Manchester City, which is valued at £895 million. But let’s not be too ambitious! The fifth most valuable is Man United at £645 million; for the value of two Man United squads, we could take all of these children out of poverty. This Government will not do it, but for pity’s sake, what about the official Opposition angling to be the next Government? Are the lives of children blighted forever by poverty not worth two football teams? Would that not be better on day one of a new Government—better than scrambling to balance the Tories’ books?

The shadow Minister should consider the words of Raymond Williams, one of the giants of socialist thought in this country in the last century—although a member of my party, not his—who said something very striking, with which I will finish:

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.”

10.7 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a real honour to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I thank my good friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech, and other hon. Members for their fantastic contributions.

The DWP has the power to make direct reductions from benefit payments to pay certain debts and costs owed by an individual. This can include money paid to the Government due to a benefit overpayment, or a loan to a third party such as a landlord, utility provider,

[Ian Byrne]

local authority or the courts. It is worth noting that the majority of benefit deductions are for DWP debts, including those related to universal credit advance payments, overpayments and budgeting loans.

I want to draw attention to several factors of universal credit deductions that seem to be having an extremely negative impact on my Liverpool, West Derby constituents. First, many new universal credit claimants now take out an advance while they wait for their first payment, and the advance is usually recovered by deductions of equal instalments over a period of 24 months. The pain that our constituents are facing right across the UK has been outlined today, but taking out that advance payment seems to be actively encouraged by the DWP. Secondly, when someone moves on to universal credit, any outstanding tax credit debt is now transferred to the DWP, allowing it to recover the debt through any of the methods available to it, which are far more extensive than those available to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Universal credit rules allow the DWP to make deductions for overpayments caused by DWP error, which was not the case with legacy benefits.

A major area of concern with deductions is the basic premise of affordability. It is staggering that there is no requirement for the DWP to determine whether someone can actually afford a deduction, or to consider what that deduction would do to their and their family's life. From the weekly emails I receive from desperate Liverpool, West Derby constituents, and from speaking to people in my surgeries, it is plainly clear that many simply cannot afford the deductions enforced on them. The levels of universal credit deductions faced by far too many of my constituents, including extremely vulnerable people, are causing them to struggle to pay for essentials such as heating, fuel, food and toiletries—the very essentials of life. It is driving them into absolute, abject poverty.

At the mobile food pantry that we run in Liverpool West Derby every Friday with Fans Supporting Food Banks and St Andrew's Community Network, I hear many stories of people being forced into using emergency food aid as a result of DWP deductions. This is replicated across the city at the other five services that we run, and the pattern repeats across the UK, as we have heard from Members today. The Government argue that their deductions can help claimants to better manage their finances, but in December 2022 the Trussell Trust reported that more than half of all universal credit claimants who experienced deductions in their benefits had one day when they could not afford to eat at all or only had one meal because they could not afford to buy enough food in the previous 30 days. We need to remember that we are the sixth richest country in the world, and to drive people into these circumstances is completely immoral.

The Trussell Trust highlighted new research showing that 47% of people referred to food banks had faced deductions to their or their partner's benefits income to pay back a benefit advance, benefit overpayment, DWP loan, or any other debt or fine. That rose to 57% among those referred to food banks who were in receipt of universal credit. In its June 2023 report, "The welfare debt trap: Adjusting the level and priority of deductions from benefits to prevent hardship", Citizens Advice

found that the deductions have created hardship and are applied disproportionately to households in which someone has at least one long-term health condition or disability and to households with children, which are also more likely to have deductions applied at a higher level. Those people are the most vulnerable.

The current system of deductions clearly targets our most vulnerable citizens and is driving millions of people into poverty. It is supposed to be a safety net. Let us be crystal clear—amazing, I can see the Minister puffing his cheeks—that the current universal credit deductions system is not fit for purpose and needs fixing urgently. Where do we go from here? I urge the Minister to take the following measures into consideration for the benefit of the huge number of people, many extremely vulnerable, who are suffering as a consequence of these actions. The DWP must place affordability at the heart of deductions and prioritise the reduction of the total amount being deducted from households. At the heart of the calculations must be the basic human right every citizen should have: to be able to afford food, water, shelter, clothing and heating. The DWP must not be allowed to push people into abject poverty.

The Government must provide immediate breathing space for low-income households that are under extreme pressure due to the cost of living crisis. The priority order for deductions must be changed to put greater emphasis on debts where non-payment has the most serious consequences and less emphasis on debts to the Government. The Government must get serious about helping people not to accrue debts in the first place, especially through the use of advanced payments or loans. Deductions for overpayment owing to DWP error should not be made. Minister, my door is always open to discuss how a right to food could be implemented to tackle the scourge of food poverty, which we see across all our communities and have heard about so bleakly today. The ball is firmly in his court.

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): We come to the last Back-Bench speech and will then move to Front-Bench contributions at 10.28 am.

10.13 am

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): Thank you, Dame Maria, for allowing me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I want to congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), on securing this very important debate.

The UK is a country shamed by the poverty of millions of its people, yet this Government sadly seem endlessly able to find ways to penalise and humiliate people for being poor. There are 14.5 million people in this country living in poverty, with many of them claiming universal credit, and in the middle of a cost of living crisis, the DWP is making deductions from a staggering 45% of claimants. My constituents in Leicester East face deductions significantly above the national average. As we have heard, around half of the deductions imposed on claimants are for advanced payments, which they are forced to request because the universal credit system is constructed to deprive claimants—already in need—of support for at least the first five weeks following their claim.

A survey by the TUC found that 86% of universal credit claimants had been put into financial difficulty because of the mandatory waiting period. Those are

figures from 2020, before the current cost of living crisis. Financial difficulty has caused “immense misery”, resulting in

“many being forced into debt, relying on food banks or going without food. Many said it had impacted their mental health through stress and anxiety and that they had felt degraded by the process.”

Claimants in need are then forced to pay back advance payments at a rate of up to a quarter of the already meagre support that they receive through universal credit, prolonging and intensifying their hardship. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West for tabling his important written question. In his answer, the Minister claimed that the payments are “not a debt”. The deduction at source from a paltry benefit—just £747 a month on average based on the figures provided by the Minister—certainly makes it look like a debt, handled in just the same way as debts to other bodies.

The Government appear to have decided to structure the benefit in that way with the help and for the convenience of the DWP, simply because they can, putting people into hardship. That is an act of class warfare and a clear abuse of power. Advance payment deductions amount to about half the total monthly deductions from universal credit payments, exposing the fundamental, structural unfairness and harshness of the universal credit system.

To make a bleak picture even worse, the data provided by the Minister in his 4 July response to the written question asked on 29 June 2023 by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West shows that the amounts deducted do not include sanctions under the draconian conditionality regime. In the same period as the one covered by the Minister’s response, the latest official statistics report that 6.18% of claimants were under sanction, with 44,000 new adverse sanction decisions in a single month and a year-on-year increase of 2.5%.

As well as the directly inflicted hardship of applied sanctions, just under a third of claimants are in conditionality regimes and under the threat of sanctions. The regime means that tens of thousands of people, already struggling, are facing unbearable hardship and the abject terror that they could suddenly become penniless. However, last year, the Government blocked the release of data from an academic study to find out whether such deductions were linked to ill health, poor mental health, suicide or attempted suicide, despite having previously promised to provide it.

The evils of the current system are clear and beyond any reasonable dispute. This is class war; it is neoliberalism writ large. The aim is to punish and control working-class families, targeting the most vulnerable through increased social and material losses. To coin the term of Friedrich Engels, it is actually “social murder”. Advance payments that have to be repaid—which are a debt, whether or not the Minister chooses to term them as such—must urgently be replaced for those in dire need and in destitution by a system of non-repayable grants, to alleviate at least some of the onerous burden that the Government have placed for too long on the shoulders of those least able to bear it.

10.19 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank my very good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for securing this timely debate. I say “timely” because it is almost a year

to the day since I raised a similar issue in the Chamber. With that in mind, it is incredibly worrying that the situation outlined today has not improved. Instead, it has continued to spiral out of control, thanks to the British Government’s inaction.

I have listened with great interest to the contributions made this morning. Given the announcements this week, there is no better time to stress the damage that has been caused by this fatally flawed universal credit system. Last week, Citizens Advice published new data showing that families are operating in negative budgets, which means that their income no longer meets the basic costs of covering food, energy and housing. According to its latest analysis, two in 10 households have £100 or less after paying for monthly essentials, and of the 40,000 people who Citizens Advice sees with debt problems, over half cannot be helped, as they have already cut back so much on the bare essentials.

This all comes as a result of an austerity agenda pursued by the British Government—a Government who refuse to make the necessary change to universal credit deduction rules, despite households facing severe financial destitution and uncertainty. As we have heard today, the impact of deductions is significant and all the more pertinent to our constituents as they continue to be gripped by the cost of living crisis.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, the average Scottish household has had £59 deducted from their universal credit. In a cost of living crisis where every single penny counts, that is the difference between putting food on the table and having to go hungry. As he outlined, the deductions affect almost half of Scottish households on universal credit, with the DWP clawing back around £12 million a month. Nearly half of those deductions are to pay back universal credit advance payments because struggling households cannot wait five weeks for their first payment. This is a system that is fundamentally flawed.

It is therefore no surprise that since January this year, 60% of universal credit claimants whom citizens advice bureaux have helped with deductions have also required help accessing food bank or emergency charitable support. Trussell Trust data indicates that people with deductions were around twice as likely to go without food, toiletries and utilities as those on universal credit without deductions, and over two thirds of people in Scotland who were referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in receipt of universal credit were facing a deduction.

Furthermore, the latest statistics from Citizens Advice show that, of the 84% of people who had their benefits deducted, 43% have had to borrow money to cover the essentials. In addition, the Child Poverty Action Group reported that more than 2.2 million children are living in households with debt deductions from their universal credit. I know from speaking to constituents in Parkhead, Shettleston and Tollcross that the uncertainty of how much a deduction is or when it will be taken causes significant and, most importantly, unnecessary hardship for claimants.

In their reports, charities refers to universal credit deductions as “wiping out people’s finances” and “trapping them in a spiral of debt”.

“Trapping” and “spiralling” are words that I would never wish to associate with a social security system, yet the system that this Conservative Government have designed and presided over continues to push individuals

[David Linden]

into a never-ending cycle of debt and financial insecurity. As a number of Members have stressed, the British Government are subjecting vulnerable people to heinous deductions that push them into further debt and destitution. Debt, in and of itself, has a profound impact on the cost of living, and that is only exacerbated by this broken system, which is forcing people to make impossible choices that amount to their being unable to even meet the most basic needs.

When the root cause of the issue is poor system design, it is astounding that the Government continually refuse to make the necessary changes to rules around deductions. We are faced with a British Government in denial, who do not believe

“that pausing deductions by default is necessarily in the claimant’s best interest.”

What is it about being unable to afford basic food, buy household essentials or heat their home that is in the claimant’s best interests? People are already diverting limited resources towards debt repayments and that is only compounded by unexpected deductions.

Despite continued and constrained resources, the Scottish Government are doing what they can to mitigate the impact of this broken system, but the root cause undeniably starts here in Westminster. We know the Government can make solutions and immediate changes today that would make a huge difference to those struggling the most and make our constituents’ lives somewhat more manageable, as so many continue to face impossible household budget decisions. Those changes need to be made sooner rather than later, as millions face food insecurity, soaring debt and unnecessary hardship.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. We must ask the Minister to consider the need for some discussion between claimants and the DWP, particularly where the DWP’s own errors are causing the deduction. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be a discussion about an affordability assessment between the claimant and DWP in future?

David Linden: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. When the permanent secretary of the DWP gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, I raised the issue of the recovery of some of the payments. The permanent secretary acknowledged at the time that despite the heavy-handed wording in the DWP’s letter, there was scope for a discussion between claimants and the Department. The fact that the Department has not been willing to amend the text of that rather hard-hitting letter makes the point.

We have a broken social security system that is perpetuated by the UK Government. Moreover, I say to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), that there is no point in his party winning the election and coming into Government but continuing the policies of this Government. He and his party should be thoroughly ashamed of being thirled to a two-child policy and an associated rape clause that is the very opposite of what the Labour party should stand for. The hon. Members for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) are good socialists who are appalled by the policy. If the hon. Member for Reading East wants to stand up and take the opportunity to apologise for his party pursuing a policy that is

tantamount to social engineering, I will be happy to hear that. If he does not do so, my constituents will conclude that the only way to ensure we do not have disgraceful social security policies is with the powers of independence, because this lot clearly have nothing different to say.

10.28 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing today’s debate. The issue of deductions is both incredibly important and sadly often neglected. We often discuss the adequacy of social security as if it were simply a matter of looking at the value of benefits, which has fallen in real terms since 2010 as a result of below-inflation uprating and freezes. However, that is only part of the story.

As we have heard today, we cannot assume that people are even getting the amounts set out in benefit rates. About 2 million households, or about 42%, on universal credit have their benefits reduced below the standard rates every month to repay debt to the Government. Deductions and debt to the Government are at a scale we have never seen before and have become a routine aspect of social security administration under the current Government, and I am afraid to say that that major change to the benefits system has largely escaped scrutiny.

The official Opposition are not opposed in principle to deductions, but the problem is the scale. There will probably always be a need for benefit deductions in social security. For a start, it is unlikely that any system will ever completely eliminate incorrect benefit payments, and taxpayers expect overpayments to be recovered wherever possible. There is also—views differ on this—a role for repayable loans to smooth out the pressure of unpredictable costs, as other hon. Members have said.

We need to recognise that deductions cause hardship for many families that, by definition, are on very low incomes. The Trussell Trust reports that 57% of universal credit households that use food banks face deductions—we have heard accounts of that today. Its evidence shows that 50% of people on universal credit with deductions have had more than one day in the previous month either having only one meal or having gone without eating altogether. That compares with 26% of those without deductions. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has shown that decisions particularly hit families with children and people with limited capability for work, more than half of whom face deductions.

There is little doubt that, in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis for decades, benefit deductions are pushing families that are already struggling into destitution, as hon. Members have said. I hope Members from across the House agree that, as far as possible, the Government should aim to minimise deductions, but unfortunately the opposite seems to be happening. Nearly half of all universal credit households face deductions each month, so we need to recognise that the system is not working as it should.

One of the main reasons for that is the timing of universal credit payments—a problem that the Government were repeatedly warned about at the design stage of UC. Families have to wait five weeks for their first universal credit payment, and somehow the Government persuaded themselves that that would not be a problem

for the great majority of families claiming because they would have a pay packet or savings to tide them over. According to the Department for Work and Pensions, about 60% of people making new claims for universal credit have had to take out an advance, and as of February this year, 732,000 households were paying off new claims advances.

In addition, more than 900,000 universal credit families are facing deductions for budgeting advances. In other words, nearly one in five of all UC households have had to take out a loan to get through the month. We were promised that universal credit would deal much better with fluctuations in income and need than the benefits it replaced. The fact that so many people need to take out budgeting alternatives shows that that is unfortunately far from the case.

Although deductions may be a necessity, there is no excuse for using them as a default mechanism to deal with problems that the Government have failed to address. Ministers should be trying to minimise deductions by addressing those problems at source, but that is the opposite of what the Government have actually been doing. Where deductions are unavoidable, the Government need to manage them much more sensitively, as we have heard pleas for today, and take into account households' circumstances.

Qualitative research by the Trussell Trust states:

"Many people who have experienced government debt repayments were not supported to understand the situation they were in"—that is a crucial point.

"They didn't know why the money was owed, they didn't know how much they needed to repay, and they didn't know how long the repayments were going to last. Of particular concern was that they also didn't know what—if any—options or choices were available to them."

Given that deductions cause genuine hardship for so many families, we should expect the DWP to adopt a high standard of customer service. It should proactively contact claimants—I hope the Minister will address that point—take into account affordability and ensure claimants are fully aware of the scale of debt and the options available to them, but improving customer service can go only so far. Debt and deductions are playing a much bigger role in social security than they have in the past, largely because of the failure of universal credit to live up to the claims that were made for it. We should not welcome that situation at the best of times, and certainly not in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis in a generation.

10.34 am

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—my good friend, and I apologise for calling him that, as I realise he will get some opprobrium for it, but we are friends, albeit our views differ—on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to answer on behalf of the Government.

We recognise the importance of supporting claimants to manage their financial obligations, and the deductions policy in universal credit provides a co-ordinated approach to providing that support. There is much that I want to address today, but I will start with the basics: employment is up, vacancies are down, economic inactivity is down and we are pleased to see that inflation has fallen today.

The Government believe that we should continue to have a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty and supporting people on lower incomes. The primary aim of the universal credit deductions policy is to protect claimants by providing a last resort repayment method for arrears of essential services, and to ensure obligations are enforced. It is important to strike the right balance between ensuring protections are in place and allowing claimants to retain as much of their benefit as possible for their day-to-day needs, while understanding that although the taxpayer expects us to recover overpaid benefit debt, that must be done without causing undue hardship.

It is worth remembering that people who are on disability benefits and pensioners have never been more supported. Welfare has never been more supported. Colleagues will be aware that state pensions and benefits were uprated by 10.1% in April this year, the national living wage was increased by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour, and other support includes the energy price guarantee, the household support fund and the various cost of living payments, which I will go through in a little more detail. It is not right to look at universal credit through the prism of what it provides because, for those who require extra support, there are the cost of living payments—£94 billion over 2022-23 and 2023-24—as we continue our support for the most vulnerable households.

Over 8 million UK households on eligible means-tested benefits will receive additional cost of living payments totalling up to £900 in this fiscal year. The first £301 payment was made in April and May this year. Two further payments of £299 and, I believe, £300 will follow this autumn and in spring 2024. That is £900 additional support over and above the universal credit support that is provided.

In addition, 6.4 million people on eligible extra costs disability benefits have also recently received a further £150 disability cost of living payment. In 2023-24 we will spend £276 billion on Great Britain's welfare system, including £124 billion on people of working age and children. Much criticism was made in the debate, which I have taken on board, but those sums have never been higher.

There is also approximately £30 billion for supported housing. Again, a criticism was made that we do not provide enough for that. I remind colleagues that 1.4% of GDP goes on supported housing. That is by a significant margin the largest sum in the OECD—the next highest is 0.9%. Those are the consequences of decisions made to support individuals on an ongoing basis.

Much was made of the deductions policy, which I will try to address.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will always give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) referred to the deductions and the data he had received for England, Scotland and Wales. He had asked for the same information on the deductions in Northern Ireland, but for whatever reason that was not available and I do not understand why. Can the Minister use his powers to enable us to have that data?

Guy Opperman: I can hardly turn down a man who ambushed me with cake not once but twice in Newtownards on my two visits to Northern Ireland. It was a pleasure to join the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues there. I saw not just a thriving business, but some of the difficulties and complexities of life in Newtownards and the work that he and the local support organisation to which he referred very favourably, and rightly so, are doing.

On the Northern Ireland statistics, I am 99% sure that those are due to the changes in Government and the current difficulties in relation to Stormont, but I will do everything I can. I will write to the hon. Gentleman individually—*[Interruption.]*—and to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, of course. I will probably refer the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, with a view to ascertaining the specific data that he seeks. He will be aware that, as we discussed when I visited his beautiful constituency by the lough, I as the individual Minister do not control individual jobcentres or the policy in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman raised a couple of points, which, as he intervened on me, I will try to deal with. One of the points—a general criticism of the roll-out of universal credit—was also raised by the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley). I respectfully reject that point. Disregarding what one thinks of this Government, under no circumstance could the legacy benefit system have coped with covid. Under no circumstance could it cope with and support the cost of living support that we are rolling out on an ongoing basis. Under no circumstance could it allow for the universal approach that we are able to manage because of universal credit. The hon. Member for Birkenhead has a very illustrious predecessor, to whom I send best wishes, because I know he is not in good health. Lord Field would very much have made the case that universal credit was the right thing to do and that it was right to reform, albeit that the roll-out has been a long-term situation.

The managed migration of tax credits was also discussed. With respect, that is an ongoing policy, and there is transitional protection for people moving from tax credits to universal credit. I respectfully invite colleagues to be aware that the migration is going well and that there are ongoing protections.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) raised many points. It is not really for me to get into the disastrous state of Labour policy, whether it is that of the Welsh First Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, colleagues on the Opposition Back Benches or the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who chose to present the Opposition's policy. The best comment I heard was from the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe), who has left—or perhaps the Labour party left her. She quoted Engels, and I think also Marx, in support of her policies. When Marx was talking about the division of labour, I did not know he was actually talking about the Opposition party. The long and short of it is that in Labour-run Wales employment is down, as compared with the rest of the country, where it is up. We could compare and contrast the health service in Wales and in England; the constituents of the hon. Member for Arfon, even on the Llŷn peninsula, are travelling to England for operations.

I believe that I have the time briefly to say that I remember well the summer of 2005, when the hon. Member for Arfon and I were both younger, fitter and probably better looking—*[Interruption.]* He did not have much hair even then, I have to say. We were both standing for the seat of Arfon and the Llŷn peninsula, as the constituency then was, I believe. The hon. Gentleman was exceptionally courteous to this young whippersnapper, who was representing the Welsh Conservative party, particularly when we attended a hustings event that was conducted entirely in Welsh. Although I can say diolch and many other things, can order two beers in Welsh, and have a mother who is a Llewellyn from the Tywi valley, it was an ordeal I will never forget: spending two hours conducting the whole meeting in Welsh, with some rather large headphones for the translation.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised affordability assessments. I will come to that, if he will bear with me, but it is unquestionably the case that changes have been made to the universal credit deductions policy following representations made by a Select Committee and others, and it is right that I try to explain where we are with that.

In April 2021, the cap on the standard deductions was reduced to 25% of a claimant's universal credit standard allowance. That followed a reduction from 40% to 30% several years earlier. At the same time, we doubled the new claim advance repayment period to 24 months. The consequence of that was that hundreds of thousands of universal credit claimants retained more of their award. The reduction in standard cap was warmly welcomed, and we believe that it maintains the right balance.

Colleagues have raised many specifics about deductions, but one must remember, for example, that well over 150,000 individuals have child maintenance deducted in respect of children for whom they are responsible. I could add more detail about individual deductions and the different types of deduction, but the child maintenance deduction in particular is one that concerns the Department because it is the state's obligation to ensure that parents are responsible to some degree for the children they have. Some of those deductions—well over £2 billion—are made in respect of child maintenance, and scrapping all deductions policy, which some have called for, would have a massive impact in that regard.

There are obviously budgeting advances, which help to finance intermittent or unforeseen expenses—for example, essential household items. Those advances ensure that low-income families with an emergency financial need who do not have access to adequate savings or a loan can access funding.

Several hon. Members have mentioned their food banks. I put on the record my support for the Miner's Lamp food bank in Prudhoe, which I visited again recently and supported with a donation. In respect of loans, credit unions up and down the country are doing a fantastic job and should be supported by Members. I was proud to set up the Northumberland Community Bank, which is the fastest-growing credit union in the north. I am not involved with it now, which is probably why it is the fastest-growing credit union in the north, but it was very much set up with the Church of England and with local communities to try to provide low-cost savings and loans to support individuals and keep them out of potential difficulties.

We believe that we have reached the right balance on the level of deductions from benefits, but we are committed to supporting those who might be struggling. I want to try to address that situation. It was asserted by various colleagues that there is no fall-back position. I do not accept that. We strive to set affordable and sustainable repayment plans, and encourage customers to contact the Department if they are unable to afford the proposed repayment rate. When a customer makes contact, we might be able to reduce the rate of repayment or temporarily suspend repayment, depending on the customer's financial circumstances.

The review period for customers with a negotiated affordable repayment rate has also been extended from six months to two years. However, customers may contact us at any time to renegotiate affordable repayment terms.

David Linden *rose*—

Matt Rodda *rose*—

Guy Opperman: I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). The hon. Member for Reading East has had his say.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. It is important that information is communicated slightly better to claimants. As an action point, will he undertake to go away and look at how information could be better cascaded to claimants so that they are aware that there is a bit more flexibility? I would appreciate that.

Guy Opperman: I certainly will do that, and I will also have a look at the individual letters that apply in those particular circumstances. All such letters, as the hon. Gentleman will know having done the pensions job for five long, lovely years, are kept under review, and there is the opportunity to do that.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) is no longer in her place—I know she has to be elsewhere—but she raised in particular the issue of access to a journal for those who do not have the internet. Again, we need to make it clear that, obviously, an individual claimant can attend a jobcentre, which has computers that claimants can use to access their universal credit claim and their individual journal, or they can speak to a member of staff who can support them through the process.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Bear with me. I might give way, but I am going to keep trying to make progress. The hon. Gentleman had 20 minutes and will have more time soon.

Much criticism was made of DWP staff, particularly by the hon. Member for Leicester East. She used various expressions that I utterly reject. I will not dignify them by repeating them, but I want to make it utterly clear that I am proud to work with the 25,000 men and women who work in our 700-plus jobcentres up and down the country. They do a fantastic job in trying to assist everybody. When she impugns the individual character of DWP staff, I am afraid she is utterly wrong. She should reflect on that and visit her local jobcentre.

Claudia Webbe: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I will not; I am so sorry. I do not think I want to dignify the hon. Lady with any further comment in this debate.

The practical reality of the situation is that we believe very strongly that individual claimants have the ability to receive support. I could go on about various points in respect of advances and the five-week wait. During their first assessment period, a new claimant can receive a payment up to the expected amount of their UC award, which can then be repaid over 24 months. It is not possible to make a payment as soon as a claim is made, and colleagues should understand that. The assessment period must run its course before the award of UC can be calculated. It would not be possible to accurately determine what a claimant's entitlement will be in the month ahead. The process ensures that claimants are paid their correct entitlement, which is something we all wish to see, and prevents significant overpayments from occurring.

I welcome today's debate, and I understand and share the concern of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West that we should ensure that we support the most vulnerable in society. I want to finish on a couple of key points. Much criticism is made of the situation in respect of long-standing poverty, but it is a long-standing principle of the Government that the most effective and sustainable way to tackle poverty is by supporting people into work and to progress. In 2021-22, working-age adults living in families in which all adults were working were seven times less likely than working-age adults in workless families to be in absolute poverty after housing costs, and we have made progress. In 2021-22, there were 1.7 million fewer people in absolute poverty after housing costs than in 2009-10, including 400,000 fewer children, with 1 million fewer workless households than in 2010.

Support exists on an ongoing basis and, as I say, there has never been a larger sum spent on those who are most vulnerable. The cost of living support continues into 2024, and I commend the Government's approach to these issues.

10.52 am

Chris Stephens: I think the Minister said I had 20 minutes to sum up, but you might have something to say about that, Dame Maria. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Arfon (Hywel Williams)—as I was reminded by him, he has a sophisticated electorate, given its electoral history—for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe). I also thank the Front Bench spokesmen.

I thank the Minister for his kind words in referring to me as his good friend—that will probably get me deselected during the summer when I seek to secure selection again. I also thank him for mentioning the great Frank Field. Frank was at an event in Parliament this week, alongside Feeding Britain and Good Food Scotland, and he told me that he agrees with me on universal credit deductions. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

[Chris Stephens]

In reply to the Minister, it starts with a five-week wait, and the Government will really have to deal with this situation whereby we are handing out loans. They are not advances; they are loans. I ask the Government to look at how quickly they can pay a benefit as soon as someone hits the eligibility criteria.

As the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) says, the real issue is the scale and the number of deductions now taking place. Like others, I ask the Minister to look at what happens when there is a departmental error. The Department really needs to look at the information that has been provided on the online journal and have that discussion. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is a good friend—that will not get him deselected—rightly said that the Minister said he would look at the communication. That also needs to be about the information given to claimants, and I ask him to look at that and come back to us. Affordability assessments should be standard practice.

The Minister did not address the crucial point: since the Government have eased the deductions and made their changes, there has been a cost of living crisis. That is why we are asking him and the Government to look again at easing the rate of deductions, which we think will help the situation.

Every single Member has spoken about food poverty and has given examples of how deductions are causing it. I am on a crusade—a mission—to end food poverty across these islands, which is why I have introduced a private Member's Bill to that end. One way to end food poverty is to address the universal credit deduction situation. I hope that the Minister will do that during the summer, because if he does not, we will be coming back and having another debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of Universal Credit deductions.

HPV Vaccinations

10.55 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): As all parties are present, we will move seamlessly on to our next debate.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HPV vaccinations.

I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I am also delighted to see the Minister. The subject of the debate is vaccination against the human papillomavirus. Unusually, both the Minister and I have seen HPV-related cancers, the destruction that the surgery to get rid of them does in providing a so-called cure, and how that often leaves patients. To be a little more positive, we have markedly moved our healthcare towards prevention. An increasingly vital arm of our preventive attack on various diseases must be vaccination. A vaccination strategy must focus not only on protection, but on elimination. For some diseases, we have been able to move towards elimination of the causative agent. That is the drive for me in this debate.

Vaccination has been around for a long time, ever since Dr Edward Jenner used the pus from a cowpox sore to inoculate an eight-year-old boy against smallpox in 1787—the first of thousands of people he and others inoculated and saved from smallpox that year. Millions upon millions have been inoculated since. I have no doubt that in this day and age, Dr Edward Jenner would have been up before the General Medical Council and struck off for recklessly endangering life, spreading disease and not following the guidance of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—I do not cross swords with it very often, but I have done so in the distant past. Since 1787, the development of vaccines has saved multiple millions of lives and stopped even more millions from various serious illnesses. The brilliant development and use of covid vaccines was a spectacular example of how far and how quickly we can progress.

I remember the mass inoculation programme against the polio epidemic from when I was a very small child. We saw polio spread through our community. If I remember correctly, the vaccination was a series of three injections in the upper arm using a syringe with a needle that was, in my view as a child, like a hollow 4-inch nail sharpened at the working end. It was plunged into my arm, reused after sterilisation and sharpened on a leather strop. It really hurt. Of course, the polio vaccine is now just a sugar cube carrying the vaccine, and kids love it. It has effectively wiped out polio in this country and most others. As we are all aware, there have been huge advances in the development, delivery and programming of vaccines, particularly for small children, who have been given huge protection against a variety of diseases. Over decades, vaccinators have had the chance to rid the world of some of these nasty diseases. Polio has been virtually eradicated. Apart from a few pockets in the world, yellow fever—a horrendous disease—has gone. Smallpox has gone. Measles went, but it has come back, because the vaccinations slipped.

I turn to HP viruses. They are a large family of viruses, at least two of which are downright dangerous to humans because they are causative agents of very many human cancers. They cause cervical, uterine and penile cancers and—in my professional area, which the

Minister is aware of from her point of view—head and neck cancers. I point out my professional interest as a very part-time dentist. Head and neck cancers can be very hard to detect early and are frequently very destructive to treat. Surgery is frequently required. Such surgery commonly impairs normal living, such as eating, smiling and talking, and often physical appearance.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate; he is right to have done so. I know that the Minister will respond in a very positive fashion, as she always does. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government and the Minister must perhaps be clearer on why one dose is now needed, when parents in my constituency with a medical background tell me that one dose will not seal the vaccination? They are asking why covid boosters were essential, but this standard form of vaccination does not seem to be.

Sir Paul Beresford: As ever with the hon. Member's interventions—which are frequent, as we have noticed, and press releases must result from them—he raises an interesting point. I will touch on it as I move on.

As I said, head and neck cancers can be hard to detect early. They are destructive to treat. However, we have had a vaccine for some time. For many years, there has been an initially very successful UK campaign to vaccinate teenage girls, targeting protection against cervical cancer. As the Minister will be aware, various colleagues and I, along with various groups, ran a campaign to make the vaccine available for teenage boys as well. The vaccine has been given to young teenage boys and girls and is not in the package received by infants. To be successful, we can and must drive the virus out. To do that, we must obtain herd immunity, with an overwhelming majority of teenagers inoculated—90% is the minimum target—but that is not happening. In 2021-22, only 9.8% of year 8 boys in this country were fully vaccinated. The figure for girls is better, but it is still only 67.3%.

With experience from the covid vaccine, we now have a real opportunity to rid the country of this deadly virus through an effective, concerted campaign, as we did with covid. The scientists have helped and, as has been mentioned, the HPV vaccination initially required two spaced injections, which have now been reduced to one. They use modern, fine, sharp needles, unlike the needles I was used to, meaning an essentially painless application.

There are some hurdles. This is being given to young teenagers, preferably both boys and girls, but an isolated vaccination is unfortunately not part of the package of early year vaccinations. Because early HPV vaccinations were promoted as preventing cervical cancer, some groups wrongly saw them as promoting promiscuity. That could not be further from the truth. For that reason, in our next campaign we should tend to slant the promotion more to the prevention of death and disfiguration from head and neck cancers, as well as cervical and penile cancer.

The NHS developed IT systems on a personal, individual level over the covid campaign. Someone on the campaign list would get constant reminders to get the covid boosters; those reminders kept coming until they had got the boosters. The same could be applied to HPV, especially as teenagers' lives are generally dominated by their phones. A vigorous campaign in schools would help, and pushing in GP practices so that parents got involved.

As someone born in New Zealand, it pains me to say that the Australians are driving for an HPV-free nation, and I have heard that the New Zealanders are following suit. The Aussies appear to be winning against the virus. They are on the edge of being below four cervical cancer cases per 100,000 annually. If the Australians can do it, we can darn well do it.

The consequences of removing this virus are enormous: saving lives, saving thousands from disfiguring and often debilitating surgery and, most importantly, saving vast sums from our precious health budget. Minister, let's get on with it.

11.5 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for bringing this important issue to the Chamber today. I know that he has done a great deal of campaigning on this, particularly vaccination for boys, and that he has clinical experience. We have discussed this, as we have both seen at first hand the horrific effects of head, neck and oral cancers on individuals and the difficult treatments they have to undergo, including surgery and radiotherapy. People are often not aware that HPV vaccination relates to head and neck cancers as well as cervical cancer.

HPV causes about 99% of all cervical cancers, but thanks to our world-leading vaccination programme that protects girls and boys, we have seen an 87% reduction in cervical cancers in vaccinated women compared with previous generations. Our ambition is to work to eliminate cervical cancer, and the HPV vaccination programme is a key part of that, but we are also looking at the data on the impact on rates of head and neck cancers as well as other cancers. Vaccination is a game changer in preventing some cancers caused by HPV.

The UK was one of the first countries in the world to introduce an HPV vaccination programme, back in 2008. Since then, millions of vaccines have been delivered, stopping the transmission of HPV, protecting individuals and saving lives. The programme has been evolving and we have made a number of significant changes, including introducing more effective vaccines, reducing the number of injections required and making the programme universal; in 2019, it was offered to boys as well as girls. Those changes have further strengthened what was already a very successful programme, and it is a key priority for the Government to increase uptake rates of the vaccine to at least pre-pandemic levels. That is a good place to get to, but of course we want to go further if we can.

Although we are not back to pre-pandemic levels yet, we are seeing encouraging recovery among older school-age children, as those who missed their vaccination during the pandemic are being caught up with. The vaccine is mainly delivered by school-based vaccination teams, and this delivery model, in combination with alternative vaccination sites for those who are not in mainstream education, has been very successful in getting our uptake rates pretty high.

Pre-pandemic levels of vaccination were consistently high across the board. To try to get back to those levels, anyone who missed their immunisation for whatever reason will remain eligible until their 25th birthday. They can catch up via their schools, alternative sites

[*Maria Caulfield*]

such as community centres, and GP practices, so there is a range of routes through which a young person who missed their vaccination can still access it until they are 25.

There is a separate HPV programme for gay and bisexual men, who are also at risk from HPV. The JCVI advises that they are at an increased risk of the virus and its effects on particular cancers. That is why there is a separate programme available through specialist sexual health services and HIV clinics, and the vaccine can be accessed until a man's 46th birthday. There are two separate programmes, with multiple ways in which people can get the vaccination, and we encourage them to do so.

We have raised the eligibility age over the course of the programme and offered the vaccine to boys as well as girls. Using recent evidence, we are able to compare pre-covid vaccination rates of girls, but we are not able to with boys, because they have only been offered the vaccine since 2019. We are looking at the data, which will take years to develop, on the effect of vaccinating boys on preventing cervical cancer in future partners and on other types of cancer caused by HPV.

We are now evolving how many doses we give. When the programme started, people were offered three doses. That has since been brought down to two doses, and from September this year, a single dose will be sufficient to vaccinate fully against HPV. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked how we can be sure that a single dose will be effective. The JCVI looked at the evidence and recommends a single dose. We know from vaccination rates that young people often come for one dose, but may not return for the second. If we are happy that a single dose is effective, that will get our vaccination rates up. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley highlighted the example of Australia, where a single-dose vaccine is used, with good success rates. The JCVI, the World Health Organisation and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies all recommend moving to a single dose, because the clinical evidence is that it is just as effective as two doses.

Moving to a single dose will allow our vaccination teams to focus on catching up with those who have not turned up for any vaccines. That is our key priority: reaching out to those groups that have not come forward, because of the implications of trying to prevent cancer in an individual and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley said, trying to capture the herd immunity effect. There may be some people who cannot have the vaccine for some reason. Getting as many people vaccinated as possible means we are reducing the risk of cancer when they are older.

I can reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that these changes are based on scientific review and advice from independent experts and the JCVI. They all aim to strengthen the programme further and ensure that more people have access to effective vaccines to prevent HPV infection and future cancers.

Jim Shannon: First, I welcome the Minister's response, which is very positive. I mentioned people in my constituency who are medically qualified in their particular sector. They may not have all the evidence that the

Minister referred to. Would the Minister please email me to let me know when that information will be available? Thank you.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely, we can send the hon. Gentleman the information provided by the JCVI on its recommendations. I think the hon. Gentleman also asked why it is a one-off and not a regular dose. The evidence and studies show that, when someone is vaccinated against HPV, the protection lasts for at least 12 years. It could well be longer but, because the programme is not that old, we have only that level of data. There is certainly at least 12 years of protection from that initial vaccination. We will send him that information; we quite rightly want people to be able to ask questions and be reassured by the evidence we are able to provide.

HPV vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways to protect people from both the infection and related cancers. We are keen to ensure that vaccination levels are as high as possible. Pre-pandemic, the programme reached 80% coverage for two doses. Those were good levels of protection that we would like to get back to, and then go higher. Covid-19 disrupted the roll-out, because young people were not able to go to school, and the vaccination teams were not able to roll out those programmes. Despite catch-up work and teams working extremely hard, we are seeing a decrease in uptake in vaccination. That is of concern because of the future implications.

We are committed to recovering the HPV programme back to pre-pandemic levels. We have seen some recovery when we have done catch-up work. To put it in context, HPV vaccine coverage decreased by 7% in year 8 girls, and 8.7% in year 8 boys. That is quite a significant drop. We have figures only for girls pre-pandemic, but these rates are about 18% lower than pre-pandemic coverage. That shows that my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is quite right to raise this issue, and that there is work to do. I am happy to commit to meeting with my counterpart in the Department for Education, the Minister for Schools, to see how much further we can go to support schools and make the vaccination roll-out more effective.

I will also meet with the screening team to see how we can drive up those rates further and whether we need better communication, for both young people and parents, about what a difference vaccination can make to a young person's life. To a young person at school, cervical cancer or head and neck cancer seem a long way off, but vaccination is so important for the future, not just for them but for future partners. I commit to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley that we will do more to get those rates back up, because it is in the interests of young people.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the debate. I encourage him to keep holding our feet to the fire on this issue, because it is important that it does not drop off the radar. He was quite right to raise the issue of the covid vaccination. We have been extremely successful as a country, particularly in the initial roll-outs, in vaccinating the whole country at 12-weekly intervals and then with ongoing booster programmes for vulnerable people in the community. We do well with our flu vaccine roll-outs as well. We need to put this programme on a par with other vaccination programmes and I am keen to make progress.

I commit to working with my DFE counterparts and raising the profile of how important the HPV vaccination programme is. I commend my hon. Friend for all his work in this area, particularly his clinical work. He has picked up head and neck cancers at an early stage, and people will have benefited from his clinical expertise. The ideal is for them not to develop that cancer in the first place, and that is where we all want to get to. We are committed to increasing the uptake of the vaccination across all eligible groups, and I will keep the House updated on our progress.

Question put and agreed to.

11.16 am

Sitting suspended.

Planning and Solar Farms

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered planning and solar farms.

Today I would like to shed light on an issue that has the potential to have a significant adverse effect on the constituents I represent in Sleaford and North Hykeham. I am concerned about the industrialisation of our countryside through large-scale solar farms. Solar power does have its merits in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the transition to a sustainable future. However, while acknowledging the merits of solar farms, it is also essential that I address the concerns that have quite rightly been raised by my constituents. Some of the solar farms proposed in my constituency would dramatically alter the landscape for the worse, shattering the character of what is not only beautiful countryside but highly productive arable land.

Rural constituencies such as mine have been plagued by applications for large solar farms. As I am sure is the case for many of my hon. Friends, my inbox is often filled with passionate pleas from constituents whose homes, and sometimes their entire villages, would be surrounded by a sea of solar panels. Not only will the landscapes they love and cherish be destroyed, but in many cases, it seems, people lack any effective means to stop such plans. It is a core tenet of our democracy that we listen to the voices of our communities and address their concerns. Transparency and an inclusive consultation process are key to fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring that those affected are heard and their concerns are addressed. Sadly, the consultation process for some solar farms has fallen short of expectations and failed to engage adequately with the affected communities.

The Government have produced plans to reach net zero and create sustainable and reliable energy production—for example, yesterday my hon. Friend the Minister announced plans to expand British nuclear. It is estimated by the Government that we will need to need use 0.5% of land to meet the solar panel target, but it is also estimated that 600,000 acres of south-facing industrial roof space is currently unused, and I do not believe that the Government anticipated all the panels being in Lincolnshire, or would wish for such an outcome.

There are essentially three ways to gain permission to build solar panels. The first is through permitted development rights. Planning permission is not usually needed for up to 50 kW on a domestic roof, or for up to 1 MW on a commercial roof. Between February and April this year, the Government consulted on expanding the permitted development rights for commercial installations—for example, on the roof of a warehouse. The consultation proposed removing the current threshold of 1 MW, as well as expanding rights for solar canopies on non-domestic car parks. That would liberate smaller developments that do not destroy the character of the countryside. The Government have not yet responded to the consultation, but the “Power Up Britain” document said that they would amend the relevant regulations by the end of the year, and I would appreciate an update from the Minister on when he intends to do so.

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The second mechanism is for mid-scale farms that do not have permitted development rights but fall below 50 MW. These are applied for using local planning authorities—essentially, elected local councils. The planning guidance says that local planning authorities should consider the site, size, colour and design of solar panels, their visual impact, the effects of glint and glare, the need for renewable energy not to automatically override environmental protections and, pertinently, the cumulative impact of solar panels on local amenities and landscapes.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the point about local planning authorities having the power to look at and consider individual planning applications for solar farms under a certain size, does she agree that there is potentially an effective way forward here, which is for local authorities to introduce their own planning policy frameworks for solar farms to allow them to have local discretion to look at certain local circumstances that may exist in the national guidance?

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right, but as I will come to later, where such frameworks are produced, they are being circumnavigated using the nationally significant infrastructure project process to avoid local community engagement.

The NSIP process is final way that planning can be attained for large-scale solar farms. According to part 3 of the Planning Act 2008, solar farms with a generating capacity above 50 MW are considered NSIPs. These are not decided locally; they are decided by the Secretary of State. NSIP applications, if successful, can contain an element of compulsory purchase orders, and from speaking to constituents, I am aware that some landowners feel intimidated by this fact. When they are being produced by a plethora of people prospecting and asking them to rent their land, they worry that if they do not comply, they will lose their land to compulsory purchase orders. The Government must address this.

Dr Poulter: There is a problem in Suffolk with solar farms being proposed, but very few of them have used that final mechanism that my hon. Friend has outlined. In a lot of cases I can think of in my constituency in mid-Suffolk, it has been down to the discretion of the local planning authority to examine on their merits. The lack of a local framework against which the planning authority judges these applications means that the developer is empowered and local communities are disempowered, and unfortunately a number of applications have gone through. Will she join me in pushing this issue with the Minister?

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right that if these applications are of the size decided by local authorities, a local plan in place can enable a local authority to make decisions based on what it wants locally, rather than what it is told to do. My hon. Friend is right that a local plan can be very helpful when dealing with a smaller application.

I was informed yesterday that there are 12 NSIP applications currently in process in Lincolnshire for large solar farms, including Beacon Fen, Springwell, Heckington Fen and Fosse Green Energy, which all appear in my constituency. I am also reliably informed that there are a further two NSIP solar applications in the pipeline for North Kesteven. However, it is notable that as of yesterday there is only one small-scale application to our local council. The Government need to reflect on why they have created a planning system for solar panels that drives applications off the NSIP scale, as we have so many NSIPs in Lincolnshire and so few small applications.

As we have just heard, through NSIPs, local people have decision-making power taken away from them rather than given to them. The upgrade of substations on the electrical network, such as the ones in Navenby, should be a positive enhancement to local infrastructure, but in practice it has acted as a magnet for speculators seeking to cash in. Where substations have been upgraded, we get a cluster of large solar farm applications near to them, as it is cheaper for the companies that want to build them. As a result, instead of a large number of small, low-impact solar farms, we get a small number of gigantic industrial farms, which utterly ruin the landscape, in some cases choking entire villages of potential future expansion and turning what has traditionally been a food-producing haven into a vast glimmering desert.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. On her point about food-producing land, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is just finishing a food security inquiry, and one of the key areas we looked at was land use. Solar has a big part to play in our energy mix, but we must be careful of the unintended consequences of taking prime food-producing land and the greenbelt out and replacing it with these installations. It is similar to the trees debate: we must have the right trees in the right places. We should have the right solar panels in the right places. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are right places to put them, including the many roofs across the country, and not least those on agricultural buildings?

Dr Johnson: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. In some respects, he has paraphrased my speech into a few sentences very eloquently, so I thank him. I ask the Minister to ensure that when the Government improve infrastructure they do not destroy the countryside in the process. The scale of these applications is quite difficult to imagine from a map alone, though I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has brought a map with him today. Each covers around 2,000 or more acres—that is just over 3 square miles. Some of these NSIP applications are larger than that, sometimes substantially.

I would also like to raise the threat of glint and glare from light reflecting off solar panels. In Lincolnshire this is especially significant due to the presence of the RAF. The Red Arrows operate from RAF Waddington, which sits on the edge of my constituency. The limestone cliff top means that the Fosse Way site that is being proposed will be an especially visible eyesore from across the constituency. Many of my constituents choose to live in a rural setting because of the superb views, which solar farms threaten to spoil entirely. The impact

will also extend to house prices. Many of my constituents fear that houses with unburdened views will sell for much more, leaving residents individually out of pocket as well.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves to her next incisive and powerful point, I wonder whether she might recognise, given her expertise in this field, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) said, that arable land available to grow the food that we need to be secure is at its lowest level since 1945 and is being lost at around 100,000 acres a year; we lost over 750,000 acres in the 10 years to 2019. We cannot have it both ways: either we have food security from the production of domestically produced foodstuffs or we give up land for solar and onshore wind.

Dr Johnson: As ever, my right hon. Friend is right and has read my mind—I was going to move on to talk about food production.

I am particularly concerned about the use of good agricultural land because farming is a cornerstone of my constituency. It does not just form the backbone of the economy in my constituency, but it has evolved to underpin the area's very culture. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have revealed the fragility of the global food market, so it is more important than ever that we make strides towards becoming agriculturally self-sufficient.

I am informed by the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership that Lincolnshire alone produces 30% of the UK's vegetables and 18% of its poultry, and is responsible for 12% of the country's total food production—all from a county covering less than 3% of the UK's land mass. Lincolnshire, without a doubt, has some of the UK's best and most versatile farmland, yet it seems to be particularly targeted by large solar farms.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) is not able to take part in this debate today, but she told me that she has similar issues in her constituency, and is particularly aggrieved by the loss of good agricultural land. I am aware of the concerns of Members of the House of Lords, too, including Lord Taylor of Holbeach, who told me of his concerns about the use of good-quality agricultural land local to him for solar farms.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is quite right. The national planning policy framework has a presumption against the use of good quality agricultural land, but that is not the problem—3a land is exempt from solar. The problem is slightly less good quality land, 3b in particular. In the old days the Government said solar was banned from 3b, but they have now changed their mind and are allowing 3b to be used. It is slightly less than good land that we are looking at.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend is right. However, what I have seen across local applications is that in some cases the application does contain land that is of a higher grade, but two things are happening. One is that the companies tell me they are going to re-analyse the land to check that it really is of that grade. After all, it might be of a much lower grade if they re-test it. The fact that they are marking their own homework concerns me as well. Secondly, speculators have explained to me that

they are told that if their application contains mostly lower grade land, and they have demonstrated that there is no other land locally that they can use or is available to them, or that it is in a corner or surrounded by panels, they can use the higher grade land, too. So it is not just land below grade 3a that is at threat.

The Heckington solar farm in North Kesteven promises to power 100,000 homes, but there are only 45,000 homes in the entire area of North Kesteven. It is unfair to expect that area, which already punches well above its weight in food production, to also provide much more than its fair share of electricity. After all, the National Farmers Union estimates that the total land use for solar farms at present is no more than 20,000 hectares. If the 12 proposed farms in Lincolnshire all went ahead, they would cover 9,109 hectares, increasing the land used in the whole country by almost 50%.

The impression is given by some—this comes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray)—that class 3b land is not particularly good for farming, but that is not true because 3b land can support a wide variety of crops. In Lincolnshire such land is often flat, relatively easy to cultivate and accessible by roads. As we face continual food inflation and a growing global population—by over 40 million so far this year—that land is needed more than ever. Now is not the time to be increasing our carbon footprint by importing yet more food.

An argument I have heard in favour of large solar farms is that they are occasionally used for grazing sheep or beekeeping, but I am concerned that those are mere token gestures that do not compensate for the damage done to the wider environment. Transitory animals such as deer have their routes blocked; that would not be such a problem if a solar farm covered only one field, but one proposed site in my patch covers 1,400 hectares or 5.4 square miles. Birds and bats that mistake glass for water can be killed when they land on the hot panels. Worst of all, the presence of solar panels limits the potential for biodiversity due to the persistent shadow cast and the set channels created by rain water run-off without proper dispersal.

I am not against solar power in principle, but I am desperately concerned that the character of our beautiful countryside could be completely altered by continual rows of glass panels, sometimes stretching for miles and miles. I am also concerned for my constituents, who did not seem to have been given an adequate say in projects that ultimately affect them the most. There is a great deal that we can do to transition to green energy, but surely there is a better alternative to industrialising our countryside.

In the UK, 600,000 acres of south-facing industrial roof space is currently unused. Prioritising industrial, residential and brownfield land for solar farms is a step in the right direction. The large Bentley factory in Crewe, its roofs coated in solar panels, is a brilliant example. It produces an average of 75% of Bentley's daytime electricity demands—equivalent to demand from more than 2,300 homes—a year, all without using as much as a square metre of productive and beautiful agricultural land.

It is perhaps fitting that the proposal near Aubourn and Thorpe on the Hill looks like someone standing and throwing a shot putt, since it will drive a wrecking ball through the area if Ministers do not stop these applications going ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Order. I do not intend to impose a formal time limit, but Members can see how many of you are standing.

2.46 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for securing this important debate.

It is really good that the issue of solar farms and planning has been raised. It is obvious to us all that we have to shift away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy; nobody would demur from that. As well as the environmental benefit of saving the planet, renewable energy also has the advantage of cutting people's bills, and again nobody would argue against that.

The hon. Lady said that it can sometimes feel like all the solar panels in the country are in her Lincolnshire constituency, but I assure her that that is not correct: we have stacks of them in my part of Devon. The small parish of Hawkchurch, a village in my constituency that borders Dorset and Somerset, is already home to more than 100 acres of fsolar arms.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Although I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is advocating passionately for his constituency, I must point out that more than 50% of land nationally with proposed solar plants is in Lincolnshire, Leicester and Rutland, so we are disproportionately at threat.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that point. We have heard that nationally there are 600,000 acres of roof space on which solar panels can be put. That is an excellent point to make. Certainly, for some of my constituents, it can feel like the solar panels are concentrated in some small areas.

When approval is sought for renewable energy projects—not just solar but onshore wind—they can hit a roadblock and get stuck in limbo. That is why this process can drag on and become a real scourge on our communities, as the developers and the local people battle it out.

Anyone buying a new Ordnance Survey map today will see something they would not have found 20 years ago: many new solar farms. I am not a big fan of the term “solar farm”, because to me a farm is for producing food, not electricity. Solar and wind are two of the quickest and cheapest forms of sustainable energy. If we are to reach net zero, we need a joined-up plan for connecting our existing power grid to renewable sources of energy. Solar accounts for just 5% of total electricity output, compared with about 27% for wind.

Between them, the solar schemes awaiting construction would generate 15,000 MW per day, which is enough to power 1.9 million homes. An enormous number of solar schemes are in the planning stage but have not yet been approved, and some of them could affect people in my part of the world. One enormous solar farm between Talaton and Whimple, near my constituency, would power 12,000 homes.

As people increasingly transition from heating their homes with oil to heating them with electricity, we need to think about not only power generation but insulation.

In 2012, the Government were insulating 2.3 million homes per year, whereas now they insulate fewer than 100,000 homes per year. Let us think about not only how we can generate more but how we can conserve electricity.

Two of the main challenges in respect of advancing plans for solar are, first, how we plug into the national grid and, secondly, how we address the concerns of local communities. I hear the point about how prized agricultural land can appear to be lost under solar panels. The effect on local communities relates not only to the site—people sometimes get a little bound up with what solar panels look like—but to the sustained level of heavy goods vehicle traffic, because a lot of traffic goes back and forth to maintain the panels. We have to properly address local communities' concerns to ensure that we do not hold up all solar panels and all solar renewable energy in this country.

James Gray: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's extremely interesting speech. Will he clarify whether the Liberal Democrats in general are, and he in particular is, in favour of solar panels on agricultural land or opposed to them?

Richard Foord: The Liberal Democrats in general are, and I in particular am, very much in favour of renewable energy, and I am happy to put that on the record. On solar in particular, some of the proposals for solar farms, as they are called, are too large; we need to distribute and disperse such renewable energy projects so that they do not take up vast tracts of land, as they do in my constituency.

Sir John Hayes: I was going to ask the same question as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray). To clarify further, is the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) saying that he is against large solar developments on prime land? Or is he saying that he wants many more of them and for them to be spread, meaning he would presumably like many more applications, in many more places, for smaller solar farms that eat up agricultural land?

Richard Foord: I am certainly in favour of more and more distributed solar energy generation. I am not in favour of some of the enormous solar complexes, including in my part of Devon, where an enormous amount is foisted on sometimes very small communities.

James Gray: I am sorry to keep pressing the point, because I am using up the hon. Gentleman's time. Am I right in thinking that he is talking about a great many more solar farms, albeit smaller ones? If so, will he send a message to Devon County Council that he would welcome a large number of smaller—up to 200 acres, perhaps—solar farms in his constituency, rather than the bigger ones that the county proposed? Is that what he is saying?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Member for again seeking clarification. I will not be writing to Devon County Council, because that is not the local authority charged with planning, but certainly the local authorities in my patch that are charged with planning know that, in general terms, I am in favour of renewable energy generation, but that I am not in favour of the concentration of solar farms that we are seeing in particular parts of my patch.

My final point is that we need to think about the lifespan of these projects in the planning process. We are seeing enormous technological development. Solar photovoltaics and battery technology have moved on staggeringly in recent decades. We must not handcuff ourselves to technology that becomes out of date very quickly; instead, we must ensure that when these things are built at a small scale, they use the latest technology and are built in such a way that, if new technology comes along, we can retrofit to ensure that our methods are the most efficient means of producing renewable electricity possible.

In summary, if we are going to invest in schemes such as solar farms, their lifespans must not be too long and we need sustainable renewable energy solutions that work with farmers and local communities so that we can take people with us.

2.55 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Everyone is in favour of renewable energy and there is no harm in having some solar farms; the problem is the sheer scale in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire. Ten thousand acres of applications ring the small town of Gainsborough, and are marked on the map in the red and black. This is ludicrous overdevelopment. To distribute, say, 1,000 acres—that is the offer—in a large rural district such as West Lindsey, covering perhaps up to 600 square miles, would be reasonable, but 10,000 acres ringing one town is just ridiculous overdevelopment.

The point I want to make is that when it comes to a public inquiry—and there should be a public inquiry—the applications must be taken as one, because developers are trying to have their cake and eat it. On the one hand, they say that these solar farms are nationally significant infrastructure projects. They say that simply because they want to bypass local opinion—that is the only reason. They want to bypass the whole planning process. They say that they are nationally significant infrastructure projects and therefore must be considered by Whitehall rather than by the local authority. That is their point of view, although when Tony Blair brought in the new planning system, it was designed for nuclear power stations, not for one little company making numerous applications and subverting the local planning process.

On the other hand—this is where the devil comes into all this—the developers are dividing the projects into separate applications. One of my constituents noticed that some developers submit multiple applications, but under the same project management team. All three of the developers in our part of England use the same law firm. When the Department considers such applications, it must consolidate them into one and look at them as a whole. I do not think any fair public inquiry would allow development on 10,000 acres ringing one town, as long as the applications were consolidated into one. But they are trying to pick us off one by one.

We all know that if the applications were approved, thousands of acres of good farmland would be lost. This is at a time when food distribution networks worldwide have been turned upside down by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Even this week, since the latest attack on the Crimean bridge, Russia has said that it is suspending the agreement to allow grain to be exported through the Black sea. Our own national planning policy framework

presumes against the approval of applications that would build on highly graded agricultural land; that is because Britain's food security is of the utmost importance.

I am sure that when the Minister responds to the debate he will say that we do not want to build solar panels on good agricultural land. We all know that the protection applies to land grades 1, 2 and 3a, but we must extend the exemption to 3b as well. Talk to any farmer in Lincolnshire—my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) is married to a farmer, so she knows this issue more than anyone else—and they will say that the quality of land is all much the same for wheat, grain and barley. Any farmer will say that. Solar companies are trying to conduct so-called analysis of the land to prove that it is 3b when no one in the past has cared whether it is 3a or 3b. The whole thing is a con and a cheat.

It is worrying that there is some evidence that some of these companies have Chinese backing. All this stuff is made in China. What are we playing at? Opposition to the projects is both broad and deep. I have had objections from the parish councils of Brampton, Brattleby, Broxholme, Burton, Cammeringham, Fillingham, Glentworth, Ingham, Kexby, Knaith, Marton and Gate Burton, Saxilby with Ingleby, Scampton, Springthorpe, Stow, Sturton by Stow, Upton and Willingham.

Consider the visual impact. Look at the cliff that runs all the way down the centre of Lincolnshire. If all the applications are granted, anyone looking from the cliff will see a sea of black. Instead of seeing unique farmland stretching away to the Trent, perhaps all the way to the Pennines, there will be a sea of black. The developers have offered almost nothing in community gain. We have heard all about the threat to good usable farmland. Building solar farms on that land undermines farming as a profession and the agricultural sector as a whole. Farming is a challenging, all-consuming and difficult calling in life. It is incredibly rewarding for those involved in it, and absolutely necessary for the lifeblood of the country.

As we have heard, Lincolnshire is the breadbasket of England, and we would like it to stay that way. Covering 10,000 acres around one town is not the way to do that. The land covered by the applications I have talked about could feed two cities the size of Hull for a year. The panels would stand 4.7 metres tall. I have known tenant farmers, whose families have been farming 200 or 300 acres for 200 years, who will be thrown off their land. They have absolutely no rights: the landowners can come in and throw them off the land they have been farming for generations.

Who gets all the benefits? I have nothing against large landowners. Unfortunately, I am not one myself; I would love to be a large landowner. We have many large landowners in Lincolnshire. To be fair to them, they are good people. They are already quite well off, but they are going to get fantastic rewards. The rewards that landowners get are staggering.

Dr Johnson: The situation may vary for different landowners. I have talked to those in my constituency—that does not include my husband because, although he is a farmer, he is not planning a solar farm, or at least not to my knowledge—and the amount offered is more than they would get for farming the land. It takes out the risk of things such as bad weather. Equally, the difference

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after tax is not so great. In fact, the money is going to the speculating companies—the prospectors who approach landowners to rent the land from them.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am worried about where those companies come from. This has all grown up very suddenly and they have huge financial resources. I suspect that they are not very interested in Lincolnshire; they are based in London. They are a group of entrepreneurs who are going to make shedloads of money and then sell the planning application on. They do not care a damn about us.

Sir John Hayes: When I became the Energy Minister, I assumed that the renewable industry would be full of people like Richard Briers of the Good family. Remember the Goods in “The Good Life”? They were people interested in keeping goats in their garden and doing a lot of composting. In fact, they were the kind of people who drove flashy sportscars and had been selling double glazing the week before. It is clear that this is not about the environment and renewable energy; it is about getting rich quick.

Sir Edward Leigh: In that brief period of the Government of my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), tried to change the definition to include 3b land. A huge mountain of well-funded lobbying money was put in immediately to frustrate the whole process. Make no mistake: this is not about the countryside and it is not about producing green energy in the right controlled way. It is about money. Some people are going to get very rich indeed.

Solar power has a vital part to play, but solar panels belong in moderate amounts—perhaps—on poor agricultural land, atop buildings and on brownfield sites, not on good farmland. Put them on top of large logistics centres at the side of motorways. Sit them on top of factories and industrial buildings. Put them on schools and houses, by all means, but good land needs to be kept in agricultural use.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for securing the debate and the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. In Northern Ireland, there are examples of solar farms being integrated into small farms where sheep are able to graze. There are a couple of examples of that in my constituency. Solar farms have been agreed to in places where there is industrial land with which it has not been possible to do anything. That land might have been corroded by lead mines or something like that. Those are the best places for solar farms. Productive land should be kept for farming, as the Ulster Farmers’ Union wants.

Sir Edward Leigh: Industry always responds to subsidies. I cannot understand why the Government do not create a new subsidy regime whereby if someone builds a massive warehouse, it is in their benefit to put a solar panel on top of it. That is something the Government could do. Let us keep solar panels off good agricultural land, and let us have them in proportion. I hope the Minister will respond positively to this important debate.

3.5 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I might come across as taking a slightly different view, but that is absolutely not why I am here. I represent a beautiful part of the world. There is not a massive amount of housing going on in my part of the world, and there is not a huge population. There is a huge amount of countryside. There is lots of farmland, and it is very productive land. Natural England—God bless it—has just taken a huge amount of farmland out of production for a site of special scientific interest. We must recognise that the land squeeze is not just about renewable energy.

I come at the issue from a different angle, in that the reform of policy allows us, as we have just heard, to get solar in the right place, deliver the right thing for our communities and address the cost of energy and the pressure on energy security. To give some context, the size of the prize, as we heard in the Chris Skidmore “Mission Zero” report on the upside opportunity of net zero, is likely to be over £1 trillion by the 2030s. That is a generational economic growth opportunity in relation to renewable energy. The downside risk, stemming from current issues in the UK planning grid and the wider investment climate, is potentially £62 billion of missed investment in the same period. That is not £62 billion-worth of solar farms all over our beautiful green and pleasant countryside. It is about having that £62 billion of investment in the right place. I will touch on that later.

The risk is crystallising in part due to the negative global headwinds that are adversely affecting the UK, such as post-covid inflation and the war in Ukraine, but also because of proposed policy decisions that have been deeply unpopular with investors—for example, the electricity generator levy and the continued issues with planning. Although the EGL was a negative indicator to the markets, more important issues pertaining to planning are holding up the connection of solar projects to the UK grid, slowing our transition to net zero and harming our ability to secure national energy security.

The situation is impacting a crucial partner in solar generation that often goes forgotten. We have referred to them today: the farmers and landowners. I have heard the comments about posh Land Rovers and very wealthy landowners; that is not the case in my neck of the woods. Farmers there are not extraordinarily rich and have not made a huge amount of money by using their land for things other than producing food. They are able to put renewable energy infrastructure, solar farms, and other stuff such as mobile connectivity, on their land in the right place where the land is not productive. That has actually helped farms to survive. We all know that if farms are not viable, they are broken up and sold off. Then we do get the very rich, Chelsea-tractor drivers coming into beautiful parts of the countryside and not looking after it. Maybe they have hobby farms or estates that do not protect the countryside.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend talks about small-scale connections; one of the things that is driving against small-scale connections is their price. The price is determined by the electric companies, which are driving people towards the massive scale, because that is the only way to make the connection commercially viable.

Derek Thomas: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I wanted to come to that, which is why I was hesitant about appearing to take a view different from the rest of

the room. That is the thing: it is not just the suppliers that drive out the smaller-scale solar installations but the planning process. I am told that the cost of going down the NSIP route to get permission could be £10 million. If someone is going to spend that kind of money on a solar farm—I agree that the term is dreadful—I can understand why they go for a huge solar installation. The cost of that route makes the installations so concentrated and on such a scale. It would never be delivered in Cornwall.

Currently, a site is limited to, I think, 50 MW under what I would describe as the traditional route of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which is much healthier for local communities to engage in—it is easier for them to have their say and for the right solution to be reached. I therefore suggest that consideration be given to reforming that traditional route to allow slightly bigger sites to be used without having to go down the NSIP route. I say that because land-use planning is key to everything. A lot of work is happening in the Lords and in the Government, with lots of conversations about how we plan land use for housing, transport, growing food, producing energy and caring for the natural environment, but that work must accelerate. It is the best possible tool to deliver the energy and food that we need and to enhance the natural environment, while doing it in a way that works for communities and in everyone's interest.

James Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the more of these things that can be decided at the local level, the better it will be. First, we are talking about sites of up to 200 acres, which is quite large, particularly in places such as Cornwall. Secondly, the fact is that if Government policy has a presumption in favour of solar, and if counties like Cornwall or Wiltshire have targets that they must achieve, local authorities will have to have a presumption to allow solar farms, because they will know that if they turn them down and get an inspector, the inspector will allow them. Therefore, having the local authority decide this is not necessarily a solution.

Derek Thomas: I hear that. We were and perhaps still are hopeful that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will address some of the opportunities relating to the inspector. The call for proper reform and understanding of where solar fits into the whole of land use planning is key. I absolutely agree that we need a proper plan for how land is used and what kind of land is available for what kind of purpose.

The elephant in the room is grid capacity. When we consider planning and solar installations, surely it is better to look at where there is good grid capacity and where land can be made available, and to prioritise those areas. We are all committed to moving away from fossil fuels, and we all recognise that we must have energy security and reduce the cost of energy. We can do that through renewable energy. We have shown that in Cornwall; for a long time, we were the leading county for onshore renewable energy. That position has been stolen from us, partly because of grid capacity. The clever move is to understand not only what land use is about and how we identify what should be on that land, but where the capacity is, including grid capacity and the quality of land.

Dr Johnson: May I press my hon. Friend on grid capacity? One thing that is driving the problem in my constituency is the issue that we had with grid capacity. The National Grid upgraded a substation and, therefore, for several miles around it, everything is open to applications for solar panels. That is what is driving those massive applications that destroy the countryside.

Derek Thomas: I hear that, and I do not have an answer—thankfully, I am not the Minister.

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend might become the Minister.

Derek Thomas: I hope not. I am arguing that there is a real danger—as happened with onshore wind, and I do not object to onshore wind in the right place—that we create a situation where these things cannot happen at all. We would then hinder the right kind of development and movement in the right direction. In Cornwall, we have the opportunity provided by the Celtic sea, with a huge amount of offshore wind, which is a much better solution. I still think, however, that grid capacity, land use and reform of planning that understands and recognises everything that has been said can stop the gold rush for something that does not deliver anything for food or our countryside, so we can enjoy our green and pleasant land as we should. We must not cut off our nose to spite our face when it comes to delivering energy as close to home as possible to meet our constituents' needs. That is what I am getting at, and local community networks are an important part of this debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I do not intend to impose a formal time limit, but a countdown clock of seven minutes will be displayed informally, to be helpful to Members.

3.14 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for securing this important debate. It is no coincidence, as I said earlier, that many of us speaking in this Chamber today represent Rutland, Leicestershire or Lincolnshire, which have historically been known as the breadbasket of England. They have fed our nation for centuries, yet we are seeing a concentration of solar developments in those areas, with more than 50% of all land nationally proposed for solar plants being in Lincolnshire and bordering counties. Colleagues might wish to adopt the term “solar plants”, because that is what they are. I worry that it does not bode well for our national food security when the heartlands of our agriculture are being assaulted.

At my last count, there were 77 solar plants currently proposed in Lincolnshire and bordering counties, totalling over 38,000 acres of land in just our corner of this great country. In Rutland and Melton alone, we have solar plants proposed or in place in Exton, Ryhall, Essendine, Ragdale, Barkestone, Plungar, Ketton, Ranksborough, Pilton, Muston, Uppingham and Belmesthorpe, let alone in nearby Stamford villages such as Carlby, Braceborough and Casewick. It is unacceptable that we are seeing this assault on our local planning infrastructure.

[Alicia Kearns]

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is very clear in its guidance that grade 3a and above best and most versatile farmland should not be used for energy projects. Solar Energy UK says that solar plants

“generally utilise previously developed land, such as brownfield sites, and land of lower agricultural quality”,

but that is simply not true. Here are a few examples by geographical location. In Bassetlaw, 100% of all solar plants are on BMV land. In Scruton, it is 97%; in Drax, 94%; in Shropshire, 97%; in Camblesforth, 94%; and in Old Malton, 60%. That cannot be right. In my constituency of Rutland and Melton, there is the proposal for the 2,000-acre Mallard Pass solar plant, which is made up of just 6% grade 1 land, 47% grade 2a land and 47% grade 3b land. If it goes ahead, we will lose 2,000 acres of productive farmland. If we are serious about food security, we cannot allow that to happen, because if it does, by 2050 only 9.2% of land classified as BMV will still be under cultivation for food purposes.

Everyone needs to stand by the protection of our farmland. To make that a reality, I am calling on DEFRA to make its guidance against energy projects on BMV land legally binding. I will table a clause to the Energy Bill to protect BMV land from excessive solar development, and I hope that all Members here today will sign it, to make clear that we need to put this into law.

I want to touch briefly—in contrast with the comments made by many colleagues—on solar developers essentially making a mockery of our planning process by putting in proposals for plants producing 49.9 MW to avoid the scrutiny of being over 50 MW as a nationally significant infrastructure project. From my research, I have discovered that one developer, Econergy, which has two applications for solar plants in the UK—one is in Rutland—is claiming to the planning authorities that those plants will produce just 49.9 MW. However, in internal presentations that are apparently only for shareholders but have been put on the company’s website, those developments are listed as generating 80 MW and 53 MW. Essentially, these applications are going into the local planning system under the pretext that the plants will produce 49.9 MW, when they are not and have no intention of doing so. This suggests foul play.

If solar developers are playing the system to avoid scrutiny, they must be punished by the Planning Inspectorate, just as any person would be if they broke planning laws. I have given those documents to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ask for an urgent investigation, because due process must be followed.

I also call on the Government to act on forced Uyghur labour in solar supply chains. The US and the EU have both taken concrete actions to protect their markets from goods that are produced by Uyghur slaves, yet we have done nothing. Consequently, we are now a dumping ground for goods made with Uyghur slave labour, making a mockery of our modern slavery laws and the vote in this House to declare the persecution of the Uyghurs a genocide. From June to November 2022, over 1,000 shipments of solar panels from China were

seized by the United States due to their links with Uyghur forced labour. Not one shipment has been seized in the UK.

Canadian Solar, the developer behind the proposed Mallard Pass solar plant in Rutland, is one of the worst offenders. Not only have its suppliers been sanctioned by the US Government, but it has had shipments seized, and it is now being done for tariff dodging because it put its products through Thailand, hoping that the US authorities would not notice that they were originally made in China. Canadian Solar was named in the Sheffield Hallam University report as guilty of being complicit in genocide, and even its shareholders tried to deselect its board over links to forced labour. It then called my office and said, “What would Alicia like, to drop her opposition to our solar plant? We’d love to know what she would like in return for this.” No, I will not be bought off and I hope that no one on my Lib Dem-led council is meeting Canadian Solar and having similar conversations.

Why is Canadian Solar allowed to apply to build nationally significant infrastructure in our country, and why are the Government not taking action? Something is not right here, and if the Government will not act, I ask hon. Members to back me and the other clause I will table to the Energy Bill to insulate our market from panels tainted by Uyghur blood and other forms of forced labour.

Solar will be an important part of our push for net zero. That is what we in Rutland want, but we will not have it at any price, and communities in Rutland and the Stamford villages will not accept blood-tainted products. To ensure that solar’s contribution is truly a positive one, I call on the Government to make guidance against building energy projects on BMV land legally binding. I ask them to urgently investigate solar developments misrepresenting their applications as generating only 49.9MW and to punish any offenders, and to follow the US and EU in finally blocking solar imports made with Uyghur forced labour as part of genocide, because to fail to act would be immoral.

3.20 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Nokes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing it. Like her, I take a profound interest—as she and certainly my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) will know—in all matters that concern the great county of Lincolnshire. They are right to say that Lincolnshire is disproportionately affected by this matter. Similarly, Lincolnshire is disproportionately the area that grows much of the food that is consumed across our country and which fills shop shelves and pantries in homes, so it is right that we take a profound interest in the use of its land to grow the crops we need to assure our country’s energy security.

I will speak about three things in this brief but telling contribution: energy, the environment and agriculture. When I was the Energy Minister, I discovered that it is critical for any country’s energy policy to have an energy mix—some baseload energy of the kind provided with nuclear power and some flexible energy that can respond

to changing patterns of demand, because demand for energy is unpredictable. Of course, it is true that we heat and light our homes more in winter, but we can get sudden surges of demand, for instance, in a particularly cold snap, so we need flexible energy provision of the kind provided, for example, by gas.

Renewables are an important part of that mix. They do not have the flexibility of fossil fuels but are important in delivering our ambitions on carbon emissions. Renewables are not a good per se; they need to be in the right places and deliver the right volume of energy.

On those terms, when I was the Energy Minister and later in Downing Street and in the Cabinet Office, I was partly responsible for the moratorium on onshore wind. That had the effect—I would not want to suggest that I knew this at the time; I was not prophetic—of driving wind power offshore and catalysing the extraordinary success of our offshore wind industry. When the developers could not build onshore, they looked to how they could maximise offshore production and developed specialisms in doing so, which became world beating. Offshore wind is infinitely preferable to onshore wind for many reasons: first, because of the volume, size and number of turbines and the amount of energy that can be produced; and, secondly, because there is a single point of transmission back to the grid, rather than multiple points.

That brings me to solar, because solar is much the same: it is important but it needs to be in the right place. For the most part, solar should be on buildings. It is extraordinary that we drive around our country and see a proliferation of every kind of large building, particularly warehouses, without a solar panel anywhere near them, yet, simultaneously, we have these applications for large-scale solar farms on prime agricultural land. By prime, I mean grades 1, 2, 3a and 3b. Even grade 4 land is actually not entirely unproductive, but certainly in Lincolnshire, where there is a great deal of grade 1, 2 and 3 land, it is preposterous that on that very land, which could be making more of the food that our country needs, we put these huge solar developments.

I say to the Minister, who is sensitive to these subjects—I met him recently to discuss them, and I know that he is an extremely good and diligent member of this Government—that we need to refocus our efforts on developing on-building solar. Successive Governments have been inadequate in that respect.

What about the environment? The environment and an interest in the climate are related but not synonymous. Of course, the climate affects the environment, but the environment is more than just the climate. The environment is a matter of ergonomics, but it is also a matter of aesthetics. We either want to preserve what my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) called our green and pleasant land, and believe in our landscape and its use, or we do not. I do, frankly; I want our countryside to continue to be productive and beautiful. Why should we not make a case for beauty? I have been doing so in relation to buildings for years, so let me now do so about our landscape and countryside.

Do we really want to continue to industrialise the countryside? People say to me, “These solar developments will not last long.” How long, and why would another application simply not be put in at the end of the life of the solar development? As for onshore wind, it is not

the turbine but the concrete that anchors it that will last forever. Solar panels on buildings are therefore essential to protect our environment.

The third thing I want to talk about is agriculture. Colleagues across the House understand, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said, that a combination of the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine has refocused attention on how we can be more secure, both in energy and in food production. That is a delight to those of us, like my right hon. Friend and I, who have wanted to protect our economy for years. We have started to see the liberal obsession with free trade unravel, and that is a very good thing. In essence, that means that whereas the proportion of food produced in this country has declined over our lifetimes—we used to make more of the food that we consume here in Britain—we now need to move in the opposite direction. That will not happen if we use up all the land for these other things.

In the 30 seconds I have left, let me say this: this is an argument about energy, but it is actually an argument about much more than that. I hope that the Minister will be characterised, as he looks back on his legacy, as being the man who for the first time took seriously our concern for the environment, our need for an appropriate energy mix and our belief in British food for British consumers.

3.28 pm

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I have been a passionate environmentalist for most of my adult life and most of my time here in Parliament. I went to the Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro as a special adviser in 1992, and since then have been involved in almost every aspect of environmental discussion in this place.

For that reason, I am passionate about the necessity to achieve net zero by 2050. We must do it; there is no question about it. I spent a lot of time travelling in both the Arctic and the Antarctic, and I have seen the effects of global warming. There is no question about it: we must do this thing, and renewable energy is of course the way we must do it. We should not come away from our commitment to the use of renewable energy to achieve net zero. I am also absolutely convinced that solar supplies a very large part of that. It is by far the cheapest, most effective and most efficient way of producing renewable energy, so I am a passionate supporter of solar energy, too. That is how I should perhaps preface my remarks.

However, I have a number of concerns, and the first is about solar energy itself. The planning permissions that have been granted are for 40 years. The technology is developing at breakneck speed, and I do not believe that the solar farms across Wiltshire—incidentally, Wiltshire is the second largest solar county in Britain—will still be there in 40 years’ time. They will be removed, and those sites will then be brownfield sites and will be replaced by something equally obnoxious. It is extremely unlikely that they will go back to being productive farmland.

That is perhaps compounded by the fact that much of this activity involves, as some of my hon. Friends have said, complex financial shenanigans. Wall Street and Chinese financial companies are investing in this business, because they know it is enormously profitable. They could

[James Gray]

not care less about renewables. They could not care less about agriculture. They could not care less about Britain. They do care about making a substantial buck out of it. We have to look into the way in which these things are funded; we have to look into these companies. Who pays for these things and who is getting the profits from that? It is an important point.

Alicia Kearns: On exactly that point, Canadian Solar, the company that I mentioned earlier—I am sure that the Foreign Office Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), will report back, now that he is here—needs to be sanctioned urgently. It is not Canadian. In fact, it is a Chinese company—Chinese run and based in China—pretending to be Canadian. I wonder why it would not choose a Chinese name for the business. Can my hon. Friend help me?

James Gray: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend; she is of course quite right.

We are concerned about the technology; it will not last. We are concerned about the 40-year planning permission that has been granted. We are concerned about who stands behind this. I am also very concerned, in a technical sense, about battery storage units. These solar farms are no use at all, because the use of energy fluctuates during the day and therefore there have to be very substantial—and hideously ugly—battery support units to make them work. These things are ugly, huge and dangerous—many of them burst into flames spontaneously. A very large question exists with regard to their technology. We must be very careful indeed about the way in which we use this stuff, for that reason alone.

Secondly, my hon. Friends have made a very important point about food security. Post Ukraine, we are deeply worried about who will feed us in Britain and who will feed the world. It strikes me as morally quite wrong to be covering good agricultural land—3b is good agricultural land—with vanity mirrors being paid for by overseas investors. That seems to me to be morally unacceptable; morally, it simply cannot be sustained.

The food production versus energy security argument is a potent one, and of course the very simple answer to the energy security question comes, as my hon. Friends have said, from putting solar farms or solar panels off agricultural land. I am proud that in my constituency I have RAF Lyneham, which has the largest solar farm in Europe. It is huge—absolutely enormous—but cannot be seen by anybody. It is on former military land. The same applies to Wroughton, just outside my constituency, where, again, one of the largest solar farms in Europe is on entirely unproductive land. That is absolutely fine, but why are we having a spate of applications right across North Wiltshire for 200-acre or 300-acre sites on grade 3b land that has been used for years for the production of wheat and of grass? Indeed, in the west country, those crops are very important with regard to dairy. It has been used for donkey's years to do that, but all of a sudden, because it is 3b and these companies are going round proving it is 3b, somehow there is a presumption in favour of them getting the application.

That brings me to my final point.

Dr Caroline Johnson *rose*—

James Gray: I am rather short of time. My hon. Friend will have time to reply in a moment.

That brings me to my final point, which is on the planning system. Wiltshire, as I said, is the second largest county in England, and we have hundreds of these applications right now. We have found that the Government have laid down targets for the county and therefore the planning officers very correctly say to the planning committee, “If you turn this down, as you may well want to turn it down, it will without question go to appeal. The inspector will without question allow it. And the barristers’ fees for the public inquiry will be down to the county.” Therefore, having a target for renewables on the county means that there is a huge presumption in favour of the local authority allowing this. That must be turned round.

I would like to see two things in the national planning policy framework when it comes forward later this year. First, I would like to see a return to the days when there was a presumption against using 3b agricultural land. That was the case. When my right hon. Friend George Eustice, whose constituency I cannot remember—

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Order. We do not name colleagues.

James Gray: If I may say so, Ms Nokes, that is precisely why I said that I could not remember his constituency—I was hoping that I would be assisted. [Interruption.] He is my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice).

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Or “the former Secretary of State” would suffice.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend appeared in front of the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I serve. He made it plain that, in his view, 3b land was included in the presumption against and it would be in the NPPF when it came out. He then had to write to me to correct that; officials made him correct that particular point.

We need to see, first, a reference to 3a and 3b. Secondly, we need to find some new way of applying the planning law so that there is no longer this presumption in favour of the developer. We must find a way of presuming against the developer and presuming in favour of preserving our green and pleasant land—presuming in favour of food security rather than energy security—and a way of putting these solar installations not on agricultural land but on large-scale industrial land and on previously used military land of the kind that I have described. We are in the process of concreting over our countryside for these things, covering it in totally unproductive mirrors in a way that will never be reversed. We will not go back to that agricultural land. We risk saying to our future generations, “We did this to your countryside; blame us for it.”

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): That brings us to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman.

3.35 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Nokes and to respond to what has been a genuinely interesting and thought-provoking debate. I congratulate the hon.

Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing the debate and thank all hon. Members who have participated this afternoon.

Last year was the UK's warmest on record and one of the sixth warmest ever recorded globally. The record-breaking temperatures we experienced last summer, including our first ever 40-degree day, caused an unprecedented number of heat-related deaths, wildfire incidents and disruption to infrastructure. Yet the occasionally severe weather we experienced last year is only a foretaste of what is to come, unless our country plays its full part in decisively slowing the rate of global heating to prevent it reaching catastrophic levels. On that, I think the room is ostensibly agreed.

The science, as we all know, is unequivocal. Bold action is required and it is required now. However, when it comes to the UK's net zero emissions target, the Government have consistently been long on aspiration but short on tangible progress. The UK's nationally determined contribution requires emissions reductions of 68% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels and the Government's sixth carbon budget requires them to be slashed by 78% by 2035. Yet in their June 2023 progress report, the Climate Change Committee states plainly that its confidence in the achievement of both targets "has markedly declined from last year."

Put simply, the overall pace of climate delivery under the Government remains woefully inadequate.

If our country is to meet its interim targets, reduce its dependence on fossil fuels and lower energy bills for consumers, the Government need to do far better, including when it comes to the domestic deployment of established low-cost technologies such as solar. Having over recent years subjected solar to a series of erratic policy changes and reductions in support, including slashing rates for the feed-in tariff scheme in 2015, the British energy security strategy published in April of last year finally provided a welcome measure of certainty, committing the Government to a fivefold increase in solar deployment by 2035 and taking levels from the current 14 GW of capacity, the bulk of which is ground-mounted, to 70 GW.

The Government have also been clear as to the scale of solar deployment likely to be necessary to meet the UK's wider net zero targets, with a technical annex to the "Power Up Britain" policy paper published in March suggesting that approximately 90 GW of solar will ultimately be necessary. Yet last year saw just 0.7 GW of new solar deployed, in a rate of installation that falls well short of what is required to meet the Government's target. As the Climate Change Committee has stated in its 2023 progress report,

"The deployment of solar capacity is significantly off track to meet the Government's target of 70 GW by 2035."

To get on track for that target, the committee makes clear that the Government need to facilitate the delivery of

"An average annual deployment rate of 3.4 GW".

This House can debate what the precise split should be between large and smaller-scale projects, what types of land should be prioritised for solar deployment and how we best maximise the efficiency of land that is utilised. However, the only fundamental question is precisely how we markedly drive up solar deployment rates, not whether we need to. Moreover, every hon. Member who is engaging with the debate today in good

faith needs to at least have an answer as to how the extra 3.6 GW of annual solar capacity implied in the Government's target should be accomplished.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Surely he recognises that by far the best way of doing so is to put solar on buildings. Every public building, warehouse, agricultural building, office and industrial estate could have and should have solar. The advantage of that would be to bring energy production and consumption into closer union and reduce transmission and distribution costs that make up about 15% of every energy bill.

Matthew Pennycook: The right hon. Gentleman has a lot of expertise in this area, and I agree with him wholeheartedly. He pre-empted a point that I will come to. We think the Government should be far more ambitious and creative about rooftop solar, which we think can meet the bulk of our solar needs.

As the House is aware, the Labour party has committed to delivering a zero emission power system by 2030—five years ahead of the Government's target date—and we assess that honouring that commitment will require us to triple the deployment of solar by the end of this decade to up to 50 GW of capacity. We are under no illusions: we know that is a stretching target, but it is essential to achieving zero carbon power by the end of the decade, and a Labour Government will do what is necessary to meet it.

Our plans are premised on a significant uplift in solar photovoltaic deployment on rooftops, which analysis suggests could provide the bulk of the 50 GW of capacity that we want to be installed by 2030. I think hon. Members are broadly in complete agreement on that point. As I said, we want the Government to be far more ambitious and creative in how they do that.

Dr Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is setting out what he thinks a Labour Government would do were they to get the chance. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) talked about the new clause she will table to the Energy Bill to say that grade 3a and 3b land should not be used for solar panels. Will the Labour party support it?

Matthew Pennycook: That is a good question. I listened with great interest to the suggestion from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). There should be greater protections for best and most versatile land graded 1 to 3a, but we disagree with Government Members when it comes to category 3b land. We think there is sufficient flexibility in the system, and that we need 3b land in certain circumstances. We certainly would not exempt 3b land in its entirety, as a couple of hon. Members suggested.

Although we want the majority of solar to be deployed on rooftops, there is no question but that we will need to take steps to enable the deployment of far more ground-mounted solar than is presently being installed, and that will include a number of large sites. That will require reform of our planning system. We believe that the planning system as a whole needs to be overhauled and aligned fully with our net zero emissions target.

Sir Edward Leigh: What is the difference in wheat production between 3a and 3b? Will the hon. Gentleman enlighten me, please?

Matthew Pennycook: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to stray outside my departmental responsibilities, which I will not do. I am afraid that we are in complete agreement with his Government, who say that there needs to be far more solar deployment on category 3 land. He may want to take it up with the Minister outside the debate.

We believe that the system needs a renewed focus on integrated spatial and infrastructure planning to ensure we are developing and using land strategically, and ensuring that large sites of more than 50 MW are appropriately distributed across the country. I listened with great interest to the comments of the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) about a land use framework. We certainly support that direction.

We believe the planning system needs proactive and strategic energy deployment to be integrated fully into local and neighbourhood plan development, and renewable development should feature prominently in the development plan's soundness test. We believe the system needs to speed up the process for securing planning consent for renewable generation of all kinds for projects over and under 50 MW capacity.

That is not to say that we do not understand and appreciate the concerns that have been expressed in the debate. As I have made clear, there is no question but that we need a more strategic and planned approach to ground-mounted solar deployment across the country. We need to do more to drive up rates of rooftop solar installation and prioritise solar deployment on previously developed or lower-value land. We need to take steps to further maximise the efficiency of sites used for renewable deployment, and co-locate infrastructure wherever possible to mitigate its impact on communities. We need environmental protections to remain in place, and we need communities to continue to have a say about where large-scale projects are best located.

Ensuring we have a sensible approach to large-scale ground-mounted solar deployment does not mean that there is an option to refuse it wholesale.

Alicia Kearns: I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned human rights. He has dashed my hopes of the Labour party's support for my new clause to the Energy Bill—although I will come back to him for a flip on that in a few weeks' time—but what about the amendment that recognises that we should not be importing Uyghur-produced slave labour solar panels?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I hope she will forgive me if I do not outline a Front-Bench position on a particular amendment that is outside my departmental responsibility—

Alicia Kearns: No, please do! You speak on behalf of your party.

Matthew Pennycook: I will certainly feed the point back to my colleagues. [*Interruption.*] I am answering the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton. In general terms, we are very concerned about and share the concerns about the supply chains for solar and the use of slave labour. I have listened to the hon. Lady speak very

eloquently on the subject many times, and I think we generally agree with the approach, but I cannot speak to the particular amendment she mentioned.

As I said, having a sensible approach to solar deployment does not mean that it can be an option to refuse it wholesale. It is deeply problematic that rates of solar farm planning permission refusal have risen significantly over recent years. We are committed to ensuring that communities have a say on where large-scale solar deployment should take place in their areas and want to do more in particular to boost community participation and engagement upstream at the plan-making stage, as well as ensure that communities directly benefit from local renewable installation. However, we feel strongly that the Government must address delays in the planning process and other regulatory processes that currently present a barrier to low-carbon infrastructure installation at scale.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I am sure the shadow Minister is coming to an end.

Matthew Pennycook: I am coming to an end. To conclude, large-scale solar is safe, reliable, versatile and of overwhelming environmental benefit. It is one of the cheapest renewable generation technologies that exist and can effectively complement other, more variable sources. In the global race for clean energy, it is a particularly easy technology to deploy at scale. We need a planning system that properly engages communities in its roll-out and mitigates its local impacts, but also one that enables its deployment to take place at the rate and scale we need to rapidly reduce our emissions and reap the full advantages of the green transition. That is what a Labour Government intend to deliver if we get the chance to serve.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes, and to respond to this incredibly important debate. It is incredibly important. I represent a vast 1,900 square-mile rural constituency, so I understand the pressures that are being felt in many of the constituencies represented here today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for securing this debate. Let me say in advance that if I am unable to answer any of her questions today, I will get back to her at a later stage and will ensure that Ministers in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do so as well. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for North Wiltshire (James Gray), for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for taking part. I also thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for taking part. It is especially good to see one of my predecessors, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). It is always nerve-racking when a predecessor comes into the room, but I thank him for his kind words and assure him that he has left some big shoes to fill in the Department.

I assure everybody here that sustainability remains at the heart of the Government's ambition for development. That includes the protection of the environment and local communities. Energy security, food security and protecting our environment are some of the key challenges we face in the UK. Meeting these goals is urgent and of critical importance to the country. We believe they can be achieved together for the United Kingdom. We believe that solar energy will continue to play a key role in helping to secure greater energy independence while building a more sustainable and greener future for generations to come.

However, the Government recognise that solar farms, as with any new infrastructure, will have local impacts. It is therefore essential that we have a robust planning system that not only helps to deliver energy security but protects the environment and local communities and supports wider Government ambitions, such as food security. As several hon. Members have pointed out, and has been pointed out to me in the past, we are not able to create new prime agricultural land.

The dramatic rise in global energy prices following the covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has emphasised the urgency of the need to build a strong, home-grown renewable sector. Solar energy is key to achieving this. Solar farms are one of the most established renewable energy technologies in the UK and the cheapest form of electricity generation. We have seen an increase in the number and size of developments coming forward and expect this trend to continue. In the net zero strategy, the Government committed to installing up to 70 GW of solar capacity by 2035. That represents a fivefold increase in our current capacity, and we need to maximise the deployment of all types of solar to achieve this ambitious target.

It is important to stress that this does not mean seizing large swathes of the countryside and turning them into industrial solar farms and storage units. Yes, ground-mounted solar will be needed, but smaller-scale commercial and domestic rooftop projects will be just as essential, if not more so. The Government believe that solar and farming can be complementary, supporting each other financially, environmentally and through shared use of land. Therefore, we seek solar deployment across the UK, looking for development mainly on brownfield, industrial and low and medium-grade agricultural land, and we encourage solar technology that delivers environmental benefits, with consideration for ongoing food production or environmental improvement.

I will come on to planning for solar farm developments, but I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). As we could not know from his contribution, I looked up the Liberal Democrat policy on planning for solar farms. Some people listening in Somerton and Frome might be interested to learn that the Liberal Democrats' plan is to remove restrictions on new solar and wind to accelerate the deployment of renewable power across the country. They want to remove some community input into the planning process for new solar deployment, which is certainly not the position of His Majesty's Government.

Planning applications for solar developments below 50 MW capacity are determined by local planning authorities—in the case of the hon. Gentleman, it would be the Liberal Democrat-run authority in Devon—through

the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, and in accordance with the national planning policy framework and the relevant planning policy guidance.

Dr Poulter: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for highlighting the role of local authorities in determining some of the lower-output solar farms. East Suffolk Council is run by a Green-Liberal Democrat coalition, which has already given the green light to developers and controversial developments in Framlingham. What reassurance can he give my constituents that the Government will make sure that controversial applications for solar farms are not green-lighted by local authorities?

Andrew Bowie: I will come on to the role that the Government play in the planning process. It is really important that local authorities—be they Liberal Democrat, Green, Conservative or Labour-run—take into consideration and listen to communities when they have expressed deep concerns about the deployment of solar farms or, indeed, other energy infrastructure projects that may be planned for those constituencies. I urge those listening to the debate to hear that message, and I urge Members present to ensure that party colleagues of theirs who run rural local authorities also hear it loud and clear.

Planning applications for solar farms with over 50 MW capacity are decided by the Secretary of State through the nationally significant infrastructure project regime, in accordance with national policy statements on energy. There are currently no operational projects of that size in England. However, there are 23 projects currently in the planning system, with the latest—the Longfield solar farm near Chelmsford—gaining consent from the Secretary of State just last month, ahead of the statutory decision deadline.

Matthew Pennycook: The problem of clustering has been raised several times. The Government recognise that as a problem, and we certainly think it needs to be looked into. Is the Minister able to give us a sense of why the Government did not include in their NSIP reform action plan, published earlier this year? It was silent on the issue, despite the Government recognising it. Why is that?

Andrew Bowie: I will endeavour to get an answer to the hon. Member's question from the relevant Government Department, and I will ensure that it gets to him as speedily as possible after the conclusion of the debate.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend the Minister has just made the point that 23 planning applications are currently in the NSIP process. As far as I understand it, not a single proposal has been turned down yet by the Government. Does that mean that, no matter what, NSIP projects will be given the green light to go ahead, even if the Planning Inspectorate blacks out MPs' responses and all sorts of other things? Are the projects genuinely being looked at on a case-by-case basis, or will we just green-light any NSIP project to get more green energy?

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely not. There is no automatic green-light system, and I am assured that every proposal is looked at on a case-by-case basis and on its merits, taking into account the opinions and concerns of the local communities it will affect.

[Andrew Bowie]

The NPPF makes it clear that local planning authorities should have a positive strategy for producing energy from renewable and low-carbon sources, such as solar farms. It sets out that where a significant development of agricultural land is shown to be necessary, areas of poorer quality should be used in preference to those of higher quality. If it is proposed to use any land that falls under Natural England's BMV classification—best and most versatile agricultural land—that needs to be justified during consideration of the planning application. As defined in the NPPF, “best and most versatile agricultural land” constitutes land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the agricultural land classification planning decisions, and decisions should continue to be made based on that definition. However, I have heard the concerns raised by hon. Members, and I will ensure that DLUHC Ministers are made aware of them.

Sir John Hayes: I know time is brief, but can we take it that there is a presumption against development on prime agricultural land—certainly grades 1, 2 and 3a? I take the point about 3b, but let us just deal with the first three. Is there a presumption against the kind of development that takes valuable land out of food production?

Andrew Bowie: My right hon. Friend will have heard my earlier contributions. We are determined to ensure that land is protected for food security reasons and that this green and pleasant land that we are all so proud to represent continues to be just that. However, I understand the concerns of right hon. and hon. Members, so I will ensure that DLUHC Ministers hear them loud and clear.

Before I conclude, I will briefly turn to the issue of slave labour and China. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton knows my personal position on the issue, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will have heard loud and clear her representations here today. We are supporting the UK solar industry's main trade association, Solar Energy UK, in leading the response from business to include securing the solar panel industry's commitment to a robust supply chain traceability protocol, supporting a global co-ordinated response from the solar industry—the Solar Stewardship Initiative—and communicating relevant UK and international human rights frameworks. I will meet my hon. Friend in due course to discuss her proposed new clause to the Energy Bill.

I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for attending today and to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham for securing this important debate. I will of course ensure that DLUHC and DEFRA Ministers are made aware of the issues and serious matters raised this afternoon. We are committed to reforming policy so that it continues to complement wider Government ambitions: food security and preserving

agricultural land, reforming the infrastructure planning system that focuses on improving community engagement, and introducing a new framework of environmental assessment through DLUHC's Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. I once more thank everybody for their contributions this afternoon.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I call Caroline Johnson to wind up.

3.56 pm

Dr Johnson: Thank you, Ms Nokes. I will be brief as time is short. It has been a very interesting debate. I think there is broad consensus that solar panels are not a great idea and should not be on agricultural land.

I want to address points made by other hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) talked about the massive scale of the speculation and the 10,000 acres surrounding Gainsborough. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) talked about the absolutely huge scale of the very good, in his view, solar plant at RAF Lyneham. That huge thing is reported on the internet as being 250 acres. The scale of the applications we are talking about in Lincolnshire are each over 2,000 acres, sometimes much more than that, so they really are enormous.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) made good points about the potential for innovation and how wind farm innovation has driven a much better solution. In fact, restrictions on food-producing land lead to innovation on buildings and the types of panels that can be used on top of commercial centres.

The Minister talked about protecting best and most versatile agricultural land. We also need to consider the concept of planning justification, which is based on what else is locally available. In Lincolnshire, the land is good land. We have to travel a long way to find land that is not good land, so justifying something on the basis of what is available locally is not helpful. I would like him to look at that.

I think we all agree that the use of brownfield sites is better. I will support the proposed new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on the use of best and most versatile agricultural land.

Finally, the Government need much more joined-up land use planning. They want to build more houses and create more energy, and they want more land to be set aside for the environment and more land for growing food. They cannot have all of them. In this case, the Minister cannot have his cake and eat it. In fact, without the best and most versatile agricultural land producing eggs, flour, sugar and other ingredients, he will not be able to have his cake at all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered planning and solar farms.

Hyperemesis Gravidarum Awareness

4 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered awareness of hyperemesis gravidarum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. The Minister has been very encouraging of this debate, and I thank her for meeting me recently to discuss hyperemesis gravidarum—more commonly referred to as HG—and how we can increase awareness of this cruel condition, reduce stigma around it and improve treatment and care for pregnant women.

I became familiar with the condition because of tragedy. One of my constituents, Jessica Cronshaw, was 28 weeks pregnant with her baby Elsie when she passed away after suffering with HG and being left unable to eat, drink or complete daily tasks. It is a truly horrific story, and before turning to what we need to do to ensure tragedies like that are prevented in the future, I want to thank Jess's family and her partner Eddie, who are in attendance today, as well as Dr Caitlin Dean and Charlotte Howden from Pregnancy Sickness Support for all the help that they have provided.

I did not know Jess on a personal level. She was the year below me in school back at home. So rather than me talking about Jess, I wanted to use my privileged position of a Member of Parliament to recount the words of Jess's family about her life and her struggle with HG.

"Our Jessica was a strong and determined 26-year-old woman, whose bright blue eyes lit up any room. Her infectious grin and smile partnered with her clumsy sense of humour was enough to leave people in floods of laughter. Jess's capacity for love and embracing any challenge, no matter how big or small, was admired by us all.

Jess was a dedicated local primary school teacher in Accrington. Her passion for her children shone through in all of her preparation, planning and delivery. She would often spend many hours outside her working day organising and creating school projects to give her pupils the best possible experience. Jess took such pride in her career and her work ethic was unmatched.

Jess also had a passion for her fitness. She without fail would walk up our local hill every morning at 5am come rain or shine. Jess benefited enormously from her exercise routines and this was the reason she was so dedicated to it. She eventually set her own business up as an online coach providing nutrition and exercise plans for many people. Jess inspired and helped so many people feel the benefits she was all so familiar with.

She cherished quality time making memories with her family and friends, and you would often find her hiking up mountains with her Dad, brothers and partner Eddie or enjoying quality time with her Mum and Gran. She was a beloved friend to many, providing endless stories of her adventures which always resulted with everyone crying with laughter.

Jess as a young woman found true happiness in her life. She was content, she was strong and was a fierce, confident, driven woman. She found true love in her partner Eddie and both were overjoyed with the news they were expecting their first baby in May 2022.

Unfortunately, Jess quickly learnt that her pregnancy was going to be far from the smooth pregnancy a lot of other expectant mother's experience. Jess went from her outgoing and independent self, exercising every day without fail, working full time for her children at school and maintaining her coaching business that ran alongside this, to being completely bed bound from 6 weeks pregnant. Jess could not stop vomiting and when vomiting eased, she continued to feel nauseous. All her usual comforts, whether it was a cup of tea, enjoying a TV series or exercising became far from her reality throughout the duration of her pregnancy.

Jess was admitted to A&E at 6 weeks pregnant due to being completely debilitated with her symptoms of hyperemesis gravidarum. She was unable to eat, unable to keep fluids down and was absolutely floored being left unable to complete basic tasks independently. Jess received the diagnosis a week later and was admitted on one occasion for an IV drip for hydration. Jess's symptoms, despite being tried on 4 or 5 different medications, continued up until she was 28 weeks pregnant.

These symptoms of HG are often unbearable and incomprehensible for women, not only the physical trauma their bodies endure but also their emotional and psychological health is hugely impacted. There is an impact to the family and friends around sufferers who often feel helpless. Jess at one point said she felt like she was dying due to how severe her symptoms were. If the care around sufferers of HG isn't good enough, the outcomes can be catastrophic.

For Jess and her beautiful daughter Elsie and for all of Jessica's family and friends her battle with HG resulted in the most devastating outcome. We are left with a hole in our lives and hearts that can never and will never be filled. We lost our Jess and Elsie tragically when she was 28 weeks pregnant, the severe HG symptoms became unbearable for her. On the 14th November Jess could go on no longer, her and Elsie survived for 5 days on life support and Elsie was christened with the family around them both, before Elsie's life support was turned off on the 18th and Jess's on the 19th.

Jess and Elsie's passing was preventable, Jess wanted her baby girl, and she had her full life ahead of her. If it was not for this incapacitating condition or if there was adequate training, awareness, knowledge, care, and support from professionals who come into contact with any HG sufferer then we as a family would've had the chance to see our beautiful Jess become a mother and flourish. We as a family hope and pray that no family must ever see the suffering we saw Jess experience throughout her pregnancy, a time that should have been the happiest time of her life.

Every day we all have to wake up with 'what if...what could we have done more' and we end our days with the same thoughts. This is our reality now. Jess, even when bed bound, found the strength to lift her head up from the pillow and use her platform on social media to raise essential awareness of HG. Jess made the courageous start of her legacy and now as her family, friends and local community it is time for us to ensure essential change starts now to the care every HG sufferer receives when they need it the most."

I am sure that you will agree with me, Ms Nokes, that this is incredibly moving. It is a real-life example of why we need to enact change. Even in their darkest moments, the family were incredibly grateful for the care provided by the nurses at the Royal Blackburn Teaching Hospital on the critical care ward, including nurse Danielle Turner, who changed all her shifts to be with the family in Jess's final moments. They were also grateful to the staff at the neonatal intensive care unit at Burnley General Teaching Hospital, who brought Elsie to Blackburn Hospital so that she could be christened among family and friends.

For those not well versed in this condition, HG occurs only during pregnancy, and was—and, to a large extent, still is—stigmatised. If women suffering from the condition cannot be rehydrated, they could die of starvation or dehydration. HG is still a severe and potentially life-threatening condition that can have profound effects on the sufferer's health and wellbeing. Clinical manifestations of HG can include loss of 5% or more of pre-pregnancy weight. While there are more modern treatments, such as IV fluids, HG can be seen as a mental health problem; people might deem the sufferer to be making it up, or think that it is all in their head. That misses the point. Mental health struggles may be a symptom of HG, but they are not the cause. A lack of awareness, and stigma towards those seeking support, is sadly all too common. There can be a dismissive attitude to women's suffering

[Sara Britcliffe]

during a first pregnancy, and notions in some quarters that sufferers simply were not prepared for the trials and tribulations of morning sickness.

The term “morning sickness” is harmful; pregnancy sickness, the correct terminology that we should move to, does not occur only in the morning. That is an unhelpful perception that impacts on women’s suffering. If we are to have meaningful change, we need to look at the support required from the outset by those suffering from HG. Many women with HG who have not suffered from it before will understandably be vulnerable, and will struggle to come to terms with their condition and what it means. They should have access to better perinatal mental health support, so they have someone to talk to who understands HG. In addition, many suffering from HG need proper nutritional advice. An inability to keep down food and water means that both mother and child can be at risk of malnutrition. Proper nutritional advice is sparse for the women suffering from HG. I have heard reports of women going all day on a single biscuit, or half a can of flat Diet Coke. That is not a sustainable situation.

Several of Jess’s interactions with medical professionals were over the phone, and not in person. This, again, is not uncommon, and reflects missed opportunities for those professionals to see for themselves how HG is impacting a woman going about her day-to-day life. Face-to-face appointments should take place as home visits; for women suffering with HG, driving any distance, let alone to a hospital, can seriously exacerbate their health condition.

Given these three issues—the lack of proper mental health support, proper nutritional advice and face-to-face time with medical professionals—I am sure the Minister will agree that the fact that there is no compulsory training on HG for midwives surely needs to change. An appointment with a midwife tends to come in week nine of pregnancy or later, so many women suffering from HG will see their GPs first, who do not receive basic diagnostic training. That compounds the issue. Around 1% of the pregnant population suffers with HG. That alone is thousands of women at any one time, but the figure does not account for those women who remain undiagnosed because midwives simply are not aware of HG and how it can present in pregnant women, or because GPs do not have the relevant diagnostic training. I am aware that midwives have compulsory training on dementia, which prompts the question: how often do midwives treat people with dementia? I suspect they do so very infrequently—much less frequently than they treat people with HG, which occurs only during pregnancy.

Moving on from diagnosis and early intervention, many women require medical treatment and drugs to help ease their symptoms, but the system is complicated and inconsistent; the responsibility is often left to the woman, and there is an attitude of “on her head be it” after prescription. In any other situation, if a person was vomiting continuously, there would be extensive medical testing, but with HG the usual response sadly seems to be, “It’s just bad morning sickness”, even though HG is the most common reason for hospitalisation in early pregnancy. Furthermore, the rate of therapeutic

termination of a pregnancy because of HG is estimated to be 10% in the UK, and that accounts for further morbidity and admissions.

We have licensed drugs to help ease symptoms of HG, such as Xonvea. However, it is not accessible to many women, and its availability is something of a postcode lottery. Several hospitals have banned the use of the drug Ondansetron in the first trimester of a pregnancy due to historical stigma, and without hard medical evidence. Ondansetron can prevent malnutrition in early pregnancy, which can be harmful to not only the woman, but the foetus.

We need a much more evidence-led focus on medications to treat HG—one that neither denies women access to valuable treatment nor, when medication is prescribed, makes women feel that they are taking a risk with their baby’s wellbeing, and taking their baby’s life into their own hands. Research from the US and the UK has found that women with pregnancy sickness tend to have much higher levels of the appetite protein growth/differentiation factor 15, or GDF15; their placentas make incredible levels of it during pregnancy. Researchers believe that that may be a genetic cause of HG. I know that there are significant challenges associated with testing new medications on pregnant women. However, if the issue is approached carefully, new GDF15-based drugs could improve treatment options for HG and definitively prove that GDF15 causes the condition. I am told that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is keen to do more work on in-pregnancy trials to improve treatment for pregnant women, and that is something that the UK should consider.

On a societal level, we need to look at this through the prism of women’s health. Young mothers are often stigmatised for struggling with HG, due to outdated notions that they are simply being soft. In addition, women whose first language is not English will struggle to advocate for themselves. It is hard enough for a woman who does speak fluent English to do so when suffering with HG; navigating the complex system is incredibly difficult for those who do not. Although there are protections in law for women with pregnancy-related conditions, there may be issues with maternity pay for those with HG. Women suffering from HG may face acute symptoms both in the qualifying week for maternity pay and before. That means that calculations for maternity pay can be based on statutory sick pay, rather than their actual salary. That is an added stress that no woman needs when going through such a traumatic experience.

I will conclude by again mentioning Jess and Elsie. Their story is sadly typical of that of many women who suffer from HG, who may face a lack of mental health support and nutritional advice; seemingly no knowledge of the condition among midwives; and a reluctance to prescribe medication. Jess and Elsie died because, put simply, there is still not enough awareness of the condition in the medical community. There is a lack of formalised support at diagnosis, and treatment with medication is often not based on science, but on stigma. I hope that Jess and Elsie’s story will be a starting point for change. We need to advocate for a more harmonised approach to HG across the country, which incorporates training, support for women and medication. We need that to prevent more tragedies, and to get better outcomes for

pregnant women across the United Kingdom. I hope that with the Minister's help, we can prevent anybody from feeling as helpless as Jess did, and can ensure that her memory lives on by getting the right support for women in the future.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this issue to the attention of the House.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) for a very moving speech. I express my condolences to Jess's family and to Eddie, her partner, and let us also remember baby Elsie. My hon. Friend could not have expressed any better the impact on a whole family, a community and an individual, and I agree with every word she said. We met recently to discuss Jess's case, and I am happy to continue to work with my hon. Friend on this issue.

Unfortunately, there are many women like Jess going through this. They are probably watching or listening to the debate, and will take comfort from the fact that they are not on their own, and that there are many others who feel like this. Every pregnant woman who is living or has lived with hyperemesis gravidarum or a difficult pregnancy—particularly those like Jess, who had such an active life before becoming pregnant—will recognise that isolation and loneliness. It is an all-encompassing feeling of not being physically well, which takes a toll on mental health as well.

To echo my hon. Friend's words, hyperemesis gravidarum is a severe form of nausea and vomiting. She is right that we need to move away from the term "morning sickness" and to instead use the term "pregnancy sickness", and we should also be aware that HG is very different from pregnancy sickness. Any woman who has experienced nausea or vomiting during the early stages of pregnancy knows how debilitating that is. However, when that continues week after week, and they see other pregnant mothers glowing and thriving in pregnancy, and sharing photos on Instagram and social media, it adds to the difficulty, and the feeling of isolation because they are not dealing with pregnancy in the same way as many others.

Hyperemesis gravidarum can affect between one and three in every 100 pregnancies, so it is not a small number. Thousands of women are affected. It can affect an individual's mood and their ability to work. Many mums are keen to work for as long as they can, because they want to take as much maternity leave as possible after they have given birth. The effect of not being able to work, and the effect of HG on home life, particularly if mums have other children for whom they care, cannot be overestimated.

Although most women can be treated at home or as an out-patient, some need to be admitted to hospital. As my hon. Friend said, if they are not able to eat or keep fluids down, it is vital that medical care is there when they need it. Too many women are left feeling isolated and unsupported. There is stigma and a taboo; there is little understanding that this condition is very different from morning sickness, and that it affects women's mental health, as well as their physical ability to cope with their pregnancy.

I absolutely agree that more needs to be done to address this issue. The National Institute for Health and Care Research is awarding funds for research on the causes of the condition, the way it can be managed and the nutritional impact on pregnancy. The women's health ambassador, Professor Dame Lesley Regan, who is an obstetrician, is keen to look at hyperemesis gravidarum, because in her clinical practice she has seen its effect on women. She will host a webinar on hyperemesis gravidarum on 27 September in her role as chair of Wellbeing of Women, which is a leading women's health charity. That public webinar, which is free for people to sign up to and attend, will explore the experience of patients with this condition and provide options for treatment, support and self-care. I encourage anyone who has been affected by it or has an interest in it to sign up. The details will be published on the Wellbeing of Women website. If the women's health ambassador is championing improvements in this area, that is the start of the conversation. It will start Jess's legacy, in terms of raising awareness for other women.

Mental health support is often not accessible. This is not the only case of women not being listened to when it comes to women's health. Ahead of the women's health strategy, we issued a call for evidence, to which we received more than 100,000 responses. Whether it was on endometriosis, the menopause or fertility issues, the overwhelming response was that women are often not listened to when they ask for help, either because healthcare professionals were not aware of the conditions that women were raising, or because the attitude of healthcare professionals, whether to pregnancy, the menopause or puberty, was, "This is part of a woman's cycle, and you just have to get on with it." We want to end that stigma.

There are so many interventions that can help women throughout their life course, regardless of their condition or the life change that they are going through. Through the women's health strategy, we want to change that attitude, so that when women ask for help, they have a positive experience and feel supported.

We are looking at perinatal mental health. Tragically, the most common cause of death in new mums is suicide; that is absolutely extraordinary. It is tragic to hear that Jess died by suicide because she felt so isolated and helpless in dealing with her condition. We will hopefully publish the suicide prevention strategy very soon, and new mums—indeed, mums in general—will be a priority group in it. We recognise that there is not support for mums during and after pregnancy. We want to address the fact that suicide is the leading cause of death.

We are doing that already. Mental health services around England are expanding to include new mental health hubs for new, expectant or bereaved mums. We are opening up 33 of them, which will provide psychological therapy, maternity services and reproductive healthcare for women with mental health needs following trauma or loss, or directly related to their experience of pregnancy or birth. Those will be available in England from March 2024. I know that is no consolation to Jess's family, but we are absolutely addressing that as quickly as we can.

We also recognise the importance of supporting women's health in the workplace. My hon. Friend is quite right that there are laws in place to protect women when it

[*Maria Caulfield*]

comes to maternity leave and discrimination around pregnancy. I am happy to work with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), on raising awareness of this condition, because employers are not aware that it is very different from early-stage morning sickness or pregnancy sickness, and that female employees will need help, support and understanding. They should not be afraid that the situation will eat into their maternity leave or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn said, statutory sick pay. I am happy to have discussions with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. We have been working closely on the menopause in the workplace, so I am happy to take that up.

Hyperemesis gravidarum is not included in the women's health strategy, which looks at the priority areas of women's health, although pregnancy is. I would like to address that, because I have heard clearly from my hon. Friend, through what she said about Jess's tragic experience and the outcome for her family, how difficult this issue is. I take on board that many healthcare professionals, particularly those whom a woman will see before she sees a midwife, will not have had training or support in understanding the extent of this condition. As my hon. Friend said, even midwives do not get specific training on HG.

I suggest that, following the webinar in September that the women's health ambassador is leading, we organise a roundtable with her to discuss the findings, and see how we can take some of this forward. Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, we have money for research, which could be on managing the condition; psychologically supporting women who are struggling with its devastating and debilitating effects; or the use of drugs such as Ondansetron. We need an evidence base, so that we can support primary care teams and midwives in giving medication safely to pregnant women. There could be research on hydration and nutrition support for those not able to keep down food and fluids; on the training and education of medical staff and midwives; on removing the stigma and taboo; or on raising awareness among healthcare professionals, the public and pregnant women. They may not realise that HG is a condition for which they should be able to get help and support, and that it is not just them being unable to cope with morning sickness. Some women do feel that, when they actually have a condition that makes their experience different from what many women go through.

The offer is on the table; I can meet my hon. Friend to see if we can draw some findings from Jess's terrible experience, so that we can eliminate the chance of that happening to other women. In the minutes that I have left, I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend, and say to Jess's family that I am so sorry to hear of their experience. I am happy to support Jess's legacy, so that we change the experience for pregnant women who suffer with hyperemesis gravidarum, and never again hear such a tragic story.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Camp Hill Line Railway Stations, Birmingham

4.30 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Camp Hill line railway stations in Birmingham.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I am here today because the completion of the Camp Hill railway line in Birmingham, which would have connected Birmingham's Kings Heath and Stirchley stations, has been delayed to the end of 2024. That is what we have been told.

On 27 June, the West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, announced the delay in his typically understated and unwarrantedly optimistic fashion. In a response to me, he said he was disappointed to see the letter I had written to him on Twitter before he had received it. Yet, none of the councillors in the wards affected—Kerry Jenkins, Izzy Knowles, Lisa Trickett or David Barker—or the Members of Parliament involved, myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), were informed by him before his decision was given to the media.

The delay has come as a huge blow to my constituents, who have little access to direct rail links to Birmingham city centre. Residents of Moseley and Kings Heath, who have been without a rail link for decades, are devastated by the news. They will now have to continue to rely on increasingly congested roads for their travel to and from Birmingham city centre. I am here today to press the issue and to ask some vital questions, which have been put to me by my constituents, regarding the delay. I will also situate the delay within the wider context of the abject failure by this Conservative Government and by Conservative Mayor Andy Street to deliver on transport for the people of Birmingham and the west midlands.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he, like me, remember the Mayor launching his re-election campaign in February 2020 in a blaze of publicity? He promised eight new metro lines, 380 new stops and 21 new railway stations, but since then things have ground to a halt: University station, which was meant to open in time for the Commonwealth games last year, still has not opened; the Camp Hill line has gone dead; and the Pineapple Road station in my constituency is a big hole in the ground. Does my hon. Friend think that the Mayor is better at making promises than at delivering and that he is spending too much time trying to shoehorn Warwickshire into the West Midlands Combined Authority at a cost of £60 million to each of the other councils in order to gerrymander the next election?

Tahir Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I, too, remember the promises made by Mayor Andy Street in the run-up to the last election, and he has less than 12 months to come up with some new excuses. We also have to remember that, in all his campaigning, he tried to distance himself from the Conservative party, so I wonder whether he will run on the Conservative ticket or as an independent. More importantly, the issue raised by my hon. Friend—bringing Warwickshire into the

combined authority—is simply about giving the Mayor an edge for electoral purposes. Even those elected to represent Warwickshire do not want that. I think he knows that he is in a bit of trouble.

Let me move on to the Camp Hill delay. Many residents have expressed doubt about the finality of this announcement. Is this delay the final delay, or is it simply one of many to be announced further down the line? It is interesting how this has been put back from the end of the year to the end of next year. The Mayor knows full well that there will be a mayoral election in May, and there might be a general election. This is no coincidence, as he knows he might be out of office, along with the Conservatives. They will then say that this is a problem for the Labour party, when they have delayed matters. That is not going to work. Can assurances be given to my constituents that the Camp Hill line will face no further delays, or should they expect further disappointment in the future?

Secondly, there is concern regarding the finances of the project. While the bulk of the finances come from the West Midlands Combined Authority, £20 million comes directly from the Department for Transport, which is a considerable stake. I would therefore like to ask the Department whether an assessment has been made of the costs the delay will incur for the project. Will further funding to make up for the additional cost be provided by the Department, or will that responsibility be passed on to the people of Birmingham and the west midlands? That question is vital. The West Midlands Combined Authority is in dire financial straits. The medium-term financial plan represents a significant challenge to the authority, as a deficit of £29 million is forecast for the 2024-25 financial year, rising to £50 million in the 2027-28 financial year.

Furthermore, the £1.2 billion of priority schemes from the West Midlands Combined Authority investment programme remain unfunded. That raises significant doubts about the completion of vital programmes, such as the Camp Hill line. Will the Government guarantee that any extra funding for the Camp Hill line will be provided and that that will be done in a way that does not jeopardise other projects in the city or the region?

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Is he aware that the delays to the transport plans do not simply affect the stations at the centre of this debate? In Mr Street's manifesto, he promised that work would begin on the east Birmingham tramline, connecting Digbeth through the poorest communities in the country out to Solihull, ensuring that the land between the two new high-speed stations was connected with a tram? Yet there is absolutely no sign of that work taking place either. There is no sign of the Arden Cross hospital that was promised and, as my hon. Friend rightly says, there appears to be a £1.2 billion hole in the investment programme. Are people in the west midlands right to conclude that this is a mayor who, frankly, promises but never delivers?

Tahir Ali: My right hon. Friend makes the important point that the people of Birmingham and the west midlands have realised that Andy Street, the Mayor of the west midlands, is only good at promising, without any delivery taking place. Money for the east Birmingham

tramline connecting Birmingham airport through to the city centre was actually promised by George Osborne. How many Chancellors have we had since then? How many of them have actually delivered? They are good at promising, but never at delivering.

Has the Department for Transport considered the health and environmental impacts of a year-long delay to this project? Birmingham City Council's most recent report on air quality in the city found that pollution levels still exceed mean objectives for nitrogen oxide levels, caused primarily by increased road traffic. Furthermore, Birmingham, Hall Green has the second highest number of traffic casualties in Birmingham, with 304 casualties reported in 2021. The congested roads in my constituency are no longer safe for residents or pedestrians, yet people will have few alternatives until at least the end of 2024 because of the delay.

Finally, are the people of Birmingham, Hall Green and the west midlands more generally still expected to put their trust in Mayor Andy Street to deliver on his transport plans for the region? That is a pertinent question, because Andy's record is, quite frankly, appalling when it comes to delivering on transport objectives for the region. His penchant for delays is matched by the Government's inability to complete High Speed 2 within a reasonable timeframe, with costs spiralling, helped upwards by rising interest rates. Seemingly inspired by this failure, Andy Street has taken to delaying innumerable transport projects, which has increased costs.

Let me examine the Mayor's record a little more closely. First, we have the West Midlands Metro tramline. The Birmingham Eastside extension—

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Order. I gently remind the hon. Member that this is a debate on the Camp Hill line railway stations in Birmingham, not Transport for the West Midlands. He might like to make sure that his remarks are restricted to that.

Tahir Ali: Thank you, Ms Nokes. I was making the point that this is not an isolated case; there is a pattern of behaviour that is of great concern. You will appreciate that the projects I am mentioning are of great importance not only to my constituents but to the residents of Birmingham and the west midlands because this is about getting—

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): Order. I am sure they are, but the subject of the debate is the Camp Hill line railway stations.

Tahir Ali: The tram link, which connects the stations of Stirchley, Kings Heath and Moseley to the city centre and then links to the tramline going to the rest of the west midlands, has had major disruptions, even in the Black Country, Dudley and Brierley Hill. Have commuters been let down? Absolutely, because at the last election they put their trust in Andy Street to deliver on his promises. Despite his prior assurances, the Mayor announced a 12% increase in bus fares—way above inflation—but what exactly are people getting for the money? For that reason, I ask whether the residents of Birmingham and the west midlands, but particularly those in Birmingham, Hall Green, can now trust Mayor Andy Street to deliver on the Camp Hill line and the Government to bail him out before the next mayoral election.

4.43 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Ms Nokes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) has secured a very important debate, because we in Birmingham now have the clean air zone, which affects a lot of constituents on the train lines across the city. A lot of my constituents have relatives in the Camp Hill and Hall Green areas, and they find it difficult to meet the additional expense to go through the clean air zone, so they want to use the train lines across the city to get to those places. Unfortunately, we were not successful in that.

We have one train station in my constituency, which was built because of the Commonwealth games. We wanted Hamstead Hall and other stations to be updated so that more people could use public transport, and particularly trains, but we had a different idea from our Mayor, who wanted to create a bus service connecting Walsall and Birmingham through my constituency. It was supposed to happen, but it did not. After taking money from the HS2 connectivity fund, it still did not go ahead, because there was not enough preparation to do it. Through the consultation period, which lasted almost two years, my constituents were very distressed because their inputs to the consultation were not seen as appropriate, and the right answers were not given. I remember attending a huge number of the meetings myself.

In Birmingham, we have fantastic infrastructure, particularly our train lines, but that is no good to my constituents if it is not connected. That is the direct responsibility of Mayor Andy Street. I hope that, rather than looking at new white elephants, he will look at the existing structure that we have so that our constituents do not have to suffer greater amounts of nitrogen oxide gases polluting our city and community.

We want to ensure that we have good, clean transport across the city, which is why I support my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne).

4.46 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for bringing forward this important debate. I know that the project, like many promised by this Government, has been a long time in the making. In fact, my hon. Friend was instrumental in campaigning and lobbying for it even prior to his time in this place.

It is beyond clear that the delivery of this project will be transformational for the local area and provide residents with a vital and sustainable transport connection. That will bring residents closer to the transport hubs in Birmingham, reducing journey times into Birmingham to eight to 14 minutes for those living near the stations of Pineapple Road, Kings Heath and Moseley village. Sadly, the Government's hallmark of continued delays and broken promises in their transport plans seems to have permeated to Conservative West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street.

As Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), have touched on, it has been over 80 years since the Camp Hill line was used by anything other than freight and through services. That is a clear wasted opportunity. When it is harnessed, the line will connect local residents with easier ways to travel to work, education and leisure, all while reducing emissions by increasing passenger usage of a less polluting form of transport.

Some 3.7 billion vehicle miles were travelled on roads in Birmingham in 2019. It is unsurprising that the West Midlands Combined Authority claims that this project alone will reduce traffic congestion in the area by up to 25%. Rail connections into cities and across areas in the midlands are vital in our battle against the climate crisis, but have sadly been long neglected.

As we have seen recently, even when plans are committed to, they have been riddled with delays and mismanaged, with ballooning budgets. Just a few months ago, for example, the Government announced that the delivery of HS2 into Birmingham, which would have benefited the constituencies of all Members from the area, will be delayed by another two years, holding back further the transformational impact of the project. Further delays on rail infrastructure in the region, which were noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), are disappointing. Inflationary pressures have been cited as one of the causes. Our stubbornly high inflation in comparison to other European nations is alarming, and it is having a devastating impact on households and our future infrastructure.

We know that delays cost money, as we have seen with London Euston's HS2 terminal. It is completely understandable that the Members present and the residents they represent want answers. I hope the Minister is able to alleviate their concerns, following his recent conversations with the West Midlands Mayor and other stakeholders. What is the exact cost impact of these delays, and will the project remain within budget? We must ensure that the detail of the delays is made clear and that the process of reducing them is fully transparent for all right hon. and hon. Members' constituents, so what can the Minister share with us today? We must also ensure that this is the only delay to the project and that mitigations are in place. As the project will be enhanced by the completion of other local projects, how will the recently announced exploration of the feasibility of a new station in Balsall Heath impact on the Camp Hill line plans? If it is granted, will it delay the final delivery of the line further?

In the light of recent announcements, I would like some reassurances on the accessibility and ticketing functions at this station. Will there be a ticket office at these stations, or will it be limited to staff on the platform? We are all aware of the sham consultation that is taking place on ticket office closures, which I hope the Government will discontinue and on which there is legal action pending. While it is clear that this project has wide-ranging support, we must ensure that more is done to keep it on track. This is a crucial decade to build the future of transport and tackle the climate crisis. Sluggish progress will simply not cut it.

4.51 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the hon. Member

for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) on securing this debate about the construction of three new stations on the Camp Hill line in Birmingham, namely Moseley, Pineapple Road at Stirchley, and Kings Heath. At least, that was the title of the debate; anyone who had wandered in might have thought it was on the election next year or a Labour pile-on on the current Conservative Mayor, but I will do my best, as I always should, to stick to the subject in hand.

I trust that we are at least in firm agreement that the successful delivery of these three stations will provide a welcome boost to the hon. Member's constituents in Birmingham, Hall Green and beyond. Passenger services on the Camp Hill line were withdrawn in 1941, but since then demand for public transport in the area has grown substantially. Investment in rail infrastructure can have transformative impacts on local communities. Reopening the Camp Hill line stations will bring 75,000 people within 1 km of a new railway station and unlock untapped potential in the region.

The business case for the stations, which I received in 2020, presents a compelling array of benefits that align with the Government's wider objectives for the country. They include supporting the local economy, expanding labour markets, reducing carbon emissions, reducing congestion on roads, helping to tackle regional inequalities, and levelling up the country. The Department therefore approved the release in June 2021 of the fixed £59 million contribution of rail network enhancement pipeline funding to the West Midlands Combined Authority for the delivery of five new stations in Birmingham, three of which are on the Camp Hill line, together with two more on the Walsall to Wolverhampton line.

Steve McCabe: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: I will make some progress first. The West Midlands Combined Authority and Birmingham City Council have also contributed funding toward the Camp Hill line stations, which I regard as a positive example of the joint working and strong local consensus formed around this scheme. All of this means that I am hugely excited to see how the new Camp Hill line stations can improve the lives of the people around them. However, West Midlands Rail Executive—the organisation delivering the new stations for the West Midlands Combined Authority—has reported that unprecedented microeconomic challenges, coupled with the emergence of unexpected issues across all three work sites, have delayed the expected completion of the stations to late 2024.

The pandemic, inflation, resource shortages and supply chain disruption have all posed substantial challenges for the construction industry. Meanwhile, on one work site a protected species was discovered that can only be moved at a certain time of the year, and most of the work on the site had to be delayed until the animals were safely relocated. Elsewhere, a historic well, which was not registered on any public records, was discovered, meaning works had to be paused while the public realm was redesigned accordingly. Furthermore, a locally listed historic wall situated close to a worksite was in an unstable condition and had to be carefully deconstructed in a way that means it can be restored later.

While I share the disappointment at the delay to the stations, I accept that construction must not be rushed at the expense of local heritage and biodiversity in local

communities, so I support and commend West Midlands Rail Executive's best efforts to ensure that construction is undertaken in a way that is sensitive to the built and natural environment in which it takes place. My officials are working closely with the West Midlands Combined Authority and West Midlands Rail Executive to track progress and seek opportunities to accelerate delivery where possible. I understand that there are scheduling efficiency opportunities being explored that might see one or two of the stations open earlier in 2024. I give way to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), who wanted to intervene.

Steve McCabe: The Minister is too generous. I wanted to refer to a point he raised earlier. He rightly said that the Department had given a £59 million grant to the transport authority. Can he confirm that additional funding was anticipated through a round 2 levelling-up bid, but it was not authorised, and that that is one of the reasons for the current delay? I understand about the protected species and the historic wall, but what is the explanation for the delay at Stirchley, where there does not seem to have been any answer as yet?

Huw Merriman: I encouraged the hon. Member to rise to his feet to interrupt me, so I hope I am being generous in that regard. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is responsible for the levelling-up fund and I do not have information about unsuccessful bids, but I will write to him about that. I will also write to him regarding the other station impact. We tend to find a knock-on from one to another: I recently visited the Northumberland line where there was a similar matter of a protected species—great crested newts in that case—and that had a little knock-on effect as well. I will write to the hon. Gentleman on both those points.

On costs, the hon. Gentleman is right; the contribution I mentioned earlier from the Department is £59 million. There is no doubt that inflation, as I find across my portfolio, presents a challenge in ensuring projects are delivered on budget. The Office for Budget Responsibility recently reported that construction inflation is running at around 15%, so that is a big challenge for us. That is why the Department is afforded flexibility on how the £59 million of RNEP funding is distributed between the five new stations.

Tahir Ali: Can the Minister confirm that, with the 15% construction inflation on top, the £59 million increases by another £9 million? The project is not on time, but is it on budget and will further funding be required? If so, where will that increase in funding come from?

Huw Merriman: Obviously, this is a contribution made by the Department. As mentioned, my portfolio, which also includes HS2, is experiencing great challenge. There is a limited amount the Department is able to offer, but it has offered that amount as well, and we look to our partners to raise the financing that may be required to deliver the project.

Although I have focused on the three Camp Hill line stations, I have also touched on the two other stations in the five-station project. It would be remiss of me not to mention also the host of other exciting rail infrastructure

[*Huw Merriman*]

enhancements that will imminently be delivered in and around Birmingham by Mayor Andy Street. I hope this affords me an opportunity to rebut a little what struck me as “What has the Mayor ever done for us?”, like Monty Python’s “Life of Brian” and “What have the Romans done for us?” Allow me to list them: a new station at Perry Barr, which was delivered on time for the Commonwealth games; Edgbaston tram extension opened for the games; extensions being built in the Black Country and Birmingham Eastside; sprint bus routes opened for the games, clearly reducing the journey times; the lowest bus fares in the country outside London, and fares still below those in 2017, when the Mayor was elected; 90% of the pre-covid bus network is protected, well above many city regions; on target for a 100% Euro 6 bus fleet by the end of the year; West Midlands Trains are the most improved under Mayor Street’s collaboration; and—something that the Labour party may struggle with—seven times more transport capital now being invested per year than before Andy Street was the Mayor. Actually, that is why we trust Andy Street to deliver.

One thing that is really interesting, Ms Noakes, is that there is a lot of criticism of the delivery of this line, but if my recollection serves me well, the Labour party was in power between 1997 and 2010, and the three stations—this line—were not delivered. The line has been closed for more than 70 years. When it is delivered, it will be under the Conservative Government and the Conservative Mayor, Andy Street, who are both being criticised.

I would not wish to stray off the brief, so I hope that the Department’s substantial investments in rail infrastructure throughout Birmingham provide assurances to constituents represented here today that they will soon be able to enjoy the benefits of new and improved

services, both on the Camp Hill line and beyond. I would also reaffirm my confidence in Mayor Street, who in my view is the best of Mayors.

5.1 pm

Tahir Ali: I, too, would like to go along with the Minister and set out the record of Mayor Andy Street. Indeed, he has achieved a lot. If we look at the long waits for transport, with 28% of people waiting at least 20 minutes for delayed transport—and often much longer—that is under the watch of Mayor Andy Street. It is clear that those delays are due only to the mismanagement and incompetence of the Mayor—and perhaps the team that he leads, but it is always with the leader that the buck stops. Commuting times in the West Midlands are now the highest in the country, at an average of 46 minutes, comparable to London’s—a city with a population of 9 million compared with Birmingham’s 1.1 million.

Those are the achievements of Andy Street. If the Minister is going to be proud of that, especially with the wider projects that he mentioned—especially in the Black Country, with the delay to the Brierley Hill project—then that is something that he can be pleased with, but it is nothing that the residents of Birmingham Hall Green, Birmingham or the West Midlands can be proud of. Transport in Birmingham Hall Green, Birmingham and the West Midlands is worsening due to the lack of investment, a lack of competent leadership and a lack of consideration for the needs of people in the region.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Camp Hill line railway stations in Birmingham.

5.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 19 July 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Departmental Update

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): I am pleased to provide the House with the following updates from the Department for Business and Trade today.

Tata Group gigafactory investment

I am delighted that Tata Group, the owner of JLR, has today announced that it has chosen the UK as the site of its first gigafactory outside of India, creating thousands of jobs. This is one of the largest ever investments in the UK's automotive sector and has been secured following in-depth engagement across Government and Tata over the last two years.

The multi-billion pound investment represents an historic moment for the UK's growing electric vehicles industry and the new gigafactory will supply all JLR's future battery electric models, including the Range Rover, Defender, Discovery and Jaguar brands, with the potential to also supply other car manufacturers.

The new gigafactory will create up to 4,000 highly skilled direct jobs and thousands of further jobs in the wider supply chain for battery materials and critical raw minerals, helping to grow the economy and moving the UK forward in the race to net zero.

The Government have engaged closely with Tata to demonstrate our commitment and support for this investment. The decision to build in the UK is a testament to this strong relationship and the new gigafactory secures a great future for our automotive sector, while supporting Tata's ambitions to be a leader in zero emission vehicles.

The new gigafactory will be one of the largest in Europe and will be crucial to boosting the UK's battery manufacturing capacity needed to support the electric vehicle industry in the long term. Initial production of 40GWh will mean it will provide almost half of the battery production that the Faraday Institution estimates the UK will need by 2030.

The location of the facility will be confirmed by Tata following the finalisation of due diligence, with battery production expected to start in 2026. When built, it will become one of the largest buildings in the UK at the size of almost 65 football pitches.

The automotive industry is a vital part of the UK economy, and it is integral to delivering on levelling up, net zero and helping to drive economic growth. The Government are committed to making the UK one of the best places in the world for automotive investment, evidenced by the automotive transformation fund, the British industry supercharger scheme and our strong programme of support for research and development.

We are working alongside industry to unlock private investment in our EV supply chain and have long-standing and comprehensive programmes of support for the automotive sector including the automotive transformation fund, the Advanced Propulsion Centre and the Faraday battery challenge. The automotive transformation fund

was instrumental in securing this investment and supports the development of a high-value end-to-end electrified automotive supply chain and is enabling a UK-made transition to net zero.

The strength of the UK's automotive R&D is also evidenced by the welcome decision by Tata that it will also create two R&D innovation hubs, one in India and one in the UK. Supported by leading academia, these hubs will focus on next-generation battery cell technologies.

The UK has a proud automotive heritage. Today's investment is a major vote of confidence in its bright future too. I look forward to continuing to work closely with the automotive sector to ensure that we take the necessary steps to put the UK at the forefront in the transition to zero emission vehicles.

Statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator

I am today publishing and laying before Parliament the report on the third statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator (the GCA).

The GCA was established by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013 (the Act). Its role is to monitor and enforce the Groceries Supply Code of Practice (the code), which the UK's designated large grocery retailers must comply with when dealing with their direct suppliers.

Section 15 of the Act requires the Government to review periodically the performance of the GCA. The first review covered the period from the creation of the GCA, in June 2013, to 31 March 2016 and the second review covered the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019.

The statutory review is not a review of the code or of the remit of the GCA. The code is a competition measure owned by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) as the UK's independent competition authority.

The third review (the review) considered the effectiveness of the GCA in enforcing the code over the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2022. A public consultation was held from 19 July to 11 October 2022 to meet the requirements of the Act for the Secretary of State to consult those with an interest in the code. Responses to the consultation and evidence from the GCA annual supplier survey and annual reports enabled the Secretary of State to make an assessment of the performance of the GCA against the measures set out in the Act. These measures were explained in the terms of reference which are included in the report on the review and in the consultation document which was placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament on 19 July 2022.

The review has found the GCA to be a highly effective regulator that made good use of its powers to take a balanced and collaborative approach that usually resolved issues before the need for an arbitration or investigation and was valued throughout the sector.

The review also found no evidence to support the need to change the permitted maximum financial penalty the adjudicator can impose following an investigation into non-compliance. It also concluded that the information which the GCA may consider when deciding whether to launch a formal investigation into non-compliance should not be restricted.

The Government took the decision not to transfer the GCA functions to the CMA or another public body but that we should explore with the GCA and the CMA ways to work together to realise efficiencies around

staffing and expertise. The review also concluded that there is not any evidence to suggest that the GCA should be abolished.

The report on the third statutory review of the GCA has today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS978]

DEFENCE

LGBT Veterans Independent Review

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

In January 2022, as part of the veterans' strategy action plan, the Ministry of Defence and Office for Veterans' Affairs jointly commissioned an independent review to better understand the experiences, impacts and implications of the policy prohibiting homosexuality in HM armed forces between 1967 and 2000.

Led by the right hon. Lord Etherton KC, and supported by Cabinet Office and MOD officials, the independent review team received 1,128 testimonies. The Government were presented with the report in late May, and today, after taking time to agree an initial cross-Government response, we are pleased to be publishing the report today. I am placing a copy in the Library of the House.

The report contains shocking and emotive testimonies of experiences during the ban. It makes 49 recommendations for the Government, covering issues such as enhanced NHS care requirements for LGBT veterans and a financial award. The recommendations primarily concern the Ministry of Defence, but also affect the Home Office, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury.

As the report highlights, those that suffered hurt as a result of this ban are keen for a light to be shone on their previously unheard experiences. We hope that today's subsequent parliamentary activity will be the start of them receiving long overdue acknowledgement.

A summary of the key themes of the report can be found below.

Personal testimonies found between pages 52 to 140.

Key themes of the report

Institutional homophobia—The report suggests that defence policies at the time institutionalised homophobia due to the invasive powers available to commanding officers and Serious Investigation Branch officers when investigating suspected homosexuality. The suggestion of homophobia at all levels is supported by the testimonies from LGBT veterans and others that served at the time of the ban.

Lack of justification for the ban—The report questions the factuality of blackmail and “maintenance of operational effectiveness and efficiency” being used as justifications for the ban by defence in legal challenges in the 1990s.

Abusive SIB investigation and dismissal procedures—Intrusive practices reportedly used by the Serious Investigation Branch include public arrests and accommodation searches; searches of civilian addresses, essentially “outing” personnel to their families; long, aggressive interviews with water and bathroom breaks being denied; the use of homophobic and degrading language; covert surveillance on and off base; and pressuring personnel to report others for investigation. A number of disturbing medical interventions were reportedly used immediately prior to dismissal, including

invasive internal investigations of both men and women; personnel being shown lewd images of men and women and having their reaction “measured”; and attempts to “cure” homosexuality through electroconvulsive therapy, chemical castration or strong sedatives.

The toxic culture created by the ban—Bullying in the form of psychological and physical abuse is reported to have been common through all ranks. Sexual assaults and blackmail were also common, with threats to report personnel to Serious Investigation Branch for being homosexual. Blackmail was used to pressure personnel into sexual acts, or in order to silence victims of sexual assault. Some that signed up at young ages did not know their sexuality or gender identity on joining and would only understand it after years of service. The homophobia they experienced while reaching this realisation embedded a feeling of shame and self-hatred that would stay with them for many years. Many testimonies report voluntarily leaving service early due to the stress of having to hide their true identities while surrounded by homophobia, or being pressured to leave early in order to avoid an intrusive investigation and dishonourable discharge.

The absence of pastoral care—Alongside being unable to discuss thoughts around sexuality or gender identity with commanding officers and fellow personnel due to the risk of investigation, chaplains and medical officers were instructed by policy not to follow the usual confidentiality rules when discussing homosexuality.

Impact on military career and future prospects—Testimonies report that being suspected of homosexuality was used to deny promotion or training opportunities, with non-LGBT veterans stating they had witnessed this. Many veterans report being demoted immediately prior to dismissal, with officers having commissions removed and destroyed, an adjustment that veterans were (possibly incorrectly) informed would reduce their pension. Many were denied medals or had medals physically removed from them solely based on their sexuality.

Those perceived to be LGB—Transgender veterans detail how their gender identity was not recognised, but instead they were considered to be LGB and in denial/confused and then subjected to the same poor treatment as their LGB counterparts. Non-LGBT personnel were investigated and discharged purely for having been in a social circle with someone that had already been dismissed for homosexuality.

Long-lasting impacts—Common impacts linked to the homophobic culture during the ban, the invasive nature of the investigations and the sudden and dishonourable nature of discharges are a lifetime of shame and lack of self-esteem; issues with mental health including PTSD for many; issues with employment, finances and homelessness; difficulty forming long-term relationships due to shame and trust issues; loss of family relationships; and alcohol and/or drug dependency. Additionally, due to the lack of transition support on leaving service, veterans were left feeling abandoned, isolated and without hope. The stress caused by the ban means that we have lost many LGBT veterans to suicide already, with many others having contemplated and attempted it.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-07-19/HCWS977>.

[HCWS977]

EDUCATION

PE and School Sport

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Today the Government are publishing an update to the school sport and activity action plan to set out the next steps on a range of policies relating to increasing the amount of PE, sport and physical activity in schools and securing equal access to sporting opportunities for girls.

The school sport and activity action plan is a cross-government policy statement from the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The action plan update has been developed alongside DCMS's new sport strategy which will set the long-term strategy for sport in the UK and outline plans to achieve a step change in activity levels, particularly in children and young people. The action plan supports that aim by helping more children to have increased opportunities to play sport and take physical exercise during their time in school.

On 8 March 2023, the Government announced continued funding to support schools to provide high quality PE and sport to pupils and action to ensure girls and boys have equal access to sport in school. The action plan update builds on this announcement with further detail for school leaders and teachers on how Government will support them to improve the quality of PE and school sport, including:

Working with sector organisations to publish new non-statutory guidance by the end of 2023, with a particular focus on supporting schools to deliver two hours of PE a week and ensuring equal access to sport for boys and girls.

Publishing updated guidance for primary schools on the PE and sport premium in summer 2023, including the new digital reporting tool, which will be piloted in 2024 and become mandatory in 2025.

Refreshing the School Games kitemark to be made available to schools in autumn 2023 with new equality criteria included for girls' access to sport. Schools' successes will be recognised each year through national school sport week.

[HCWS975]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environmental Improvement Plan: Annual Progress Report

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): In January 2023, we published the "Environmental Improvement Plan", our five-year delivery plan to restore nature and improve the environmental quality of the air, our waters and our land. Since then, we have been hard at work making progress in delivering the ambitious goals set out in the plan.

We have:

Thriving plants and wildlife

Launched the £25 million species survival fund to drive action to halt the decline of species, tackle habitat loss and create nature-rich landscapes;

Made £14 million available for local authorities and community groups to invest in new tree planting projects, including in urban areas;

Awarded £40 million to over 80 conservation projects across the globe that boost biodiversity and support communities, from snow leopards to pangolins;

Opening a multimillion-pound grant scheme for projects to tackle biodiversity loss in the UK overseas territories through Darwin Plus;

Designated the first three highly protected marine areas in English waters;

Opened the second round of Landscape Recovery, which will support up to 25 projects led by farmers and land managers to create new habitats for wildlife;

Opened consultations for the first six fisheries management plans, which set out the proposed policies and measures to secure long-term sustainability of UK fish stocks;

Protected vital food for seabirds and marine mammals by deciding not to allow UK sand eel fishing for the third consecutive year, totalling 5,773 tonnes, and consulting on a wider ban across English waters;

Initiated a global roadmap, together with the French Government, for harnessing biodiversity credits, announcing an advisory panel of world-leading experts who will lead an open and inclusive international process to drive forward nature financing;

Published the green finance strategy and nature markets framework, setting out how the Government will support the growth of high-integrity nature markets to help meet our target to raise at least £500 million in private finance to support nature's recovery every year by 2027 in England, rising to more than £1 billion per year by 2030;

Clean air

Banned the sale of traditional house coal and restricted the sale of wet wood;

Set out actions for local authorities to improve air quality and meet our ambitious PM2.5 targets through the "Air quality strategy: framework for local authority delivery";

Clean and plentiful water

Published the comprehensive "Plan for Water" to deliver a healthy water environment and ensure a plentiful supply of water for the future;

Accelerated over £2.2 billion for infrastructure to tackle storm overflows, strengthen drought resilience, increase water supply and protect natural ecosystems;

Introduced laws to scrap the cap on variable monetary penalties and speed up enforcement methods to hold water companies and others who pollute the environment to account;

Increased funding for round one of the slurry infrastructure grant, from £13.2 million to £33.9 million, following strong interest in the scheme since its launch in December;

Written to wet wipe producers to ask them to set out how they will address concerns about so-called "flushable" wipes that cause blockages and water pollution;

Committed to consult to end the sale of wet wipes containing plastic;

Committed to putting our target to tackle storm overflows on a legal footing through the Environment Act 2021;

Designated four new bathing waters, bringing the total across the country to 424, the highest number ever;

Hosted local farmers, councillors, environmental groups, MPs and the Welsh Government at a summit to discuss actions to improve the state of the River Wye;

Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides

Accepted recommendations to protect people and the environment from the potential impacts of PFAS chemicals;

Made £3 million of investment available to develop more sustainable fertilisers at the

Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate summit in Washington DC;

Maximise our resources, minimise our waste

Confirmed our ban on single-use plastics such as plates, trays, bowls and cutlery from October;

Agreed a far-reaching statement with 52 other countries supporting the development of an ambitious, international, legally binding treaty to tackle plastic pollution, and using resources from nature sustainably;

Opened up the improved countryside stewardship scheme to reward farmers and land managers for actions to protect and improve the environment;

Accelerated the roll-out of the sustainable farming incentive by bringing forward actions this summer to manage hedgerows, plant nectar-rich wildflowers and manage crop pests without the use of insecticides;

Sought views on how we improve hedgerow protections as part of the agricultural transition, building on the 50,000 miles of hedgerows already supported by farming scheme investment;

Hosted the first ever Nature for Finance event in No. 10 Downing Street, bringing together farmers, land managers and investors to identify new investment opportunities to drive forward nature recovery;

Published the first six fisheries management plans to deliver sustainable fisheries for current and future generations;

Mitigating and adapting to climate change

Set out our ambition to reduce DEFRA sector emissions in the “Net Zero Growth Plan”;

Planted 3,627 hectares—approximately 4 million trees—in the 2022-23 planting season, which is a 40% increase on last year;

Funding over 7,000 hectares of peatland for restoration under the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme;

Taking forward action on all recommendations of the lowland agricultural peat task force, with over £7.5 million of new funding for innovative water management pilots and £5 million to support wetter farming projects;

Published the third national adaptation programme, setting out our comprehensive plan to adapt to the risks and opportunities of climate change over the next five years;

Funding six landscape-scale nature restoration projects to trial carbon capture and climate change mitigation;

Launched a £40 million grant programme to help put nature at the forefront of the fight against climate change and poverty, as part of a new global centre on biodiversity for climate;

Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards

Better protected over 26,000 properties in 2022-23;

Funding £26 million from the £100 million frequently flooded allowance to better protect more than 2,300 households and businesses;

Enhancing biosecurity

Updated our invasive non-native species strategy to tackle the existing and growing threat posed to species and the wider economy;

Published the “Plant biosecurity strategy for Great Britain”, positioning the UK as a global leader in plant health;

Published the draft “The Border Target Operating Model” to deliver a suite of new digital improvements and digital systems which will strengthen our biosecurity at the border and improve efficiencies across border processes;

Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

Published England’s first ever national marine and coastal wildlife code;

Opened a further 21 miles of the King Charles III England coast path, creating 208 miles of continuous national coastal trail in north Yorkshire, and over 850 miles in total;

The 25-year Environment Plan annual progress report

I have also today published the fifth and final annual progress report against the 25-year Environment Plan that was published in 2018. This is our second statutory report under the Environment Act 2021;

The publication of this year’s report reasserts the Government’s commitment to delivering the goals of the 25-year Environment Plan and progress we have made to deliver the Environment Act since this achieved Royal Assent in November 2021. We are now firmly in the delivery phase of meeting both existing targets and the additional goals set out in this year’s Environmental Improvement Plan.

The annual progress report is available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS974]

HOME DEPARTMENT**Immigration Rule Changes**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I am today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Imposition of a visa regime on Dominica, Honduras, Namibia, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu

We are today imposing a visa requirement on all visitors from Dominica, Honduras, Namibia, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu. Nationals of these countries will also be required to obtain a direct airside transit visa if they intend to transit via the UK having booked travel to another country.

Careful consideration of Dominica’s and Vanuatu’s operation of a citizenship by investment scheme has shown clear and evident abuse of the scheme, including the granting of citizenship to individuals known to pose a risk to the UK. From Honduras and Namibia there has been a sustained and significant increase in the number of UK asylum applications being made by these nationals, who have abused the provision to visit the UK for a limited period as non-visa nationals in order to claim asylum. As such, Namibians and Hondurans rank first among non-visa nationals for asylum claims. These high numbers are unsustainable, contributing significantly to operational pressures which have resulted in frontline resource being diverted from other operational priorities. Lastly, there has been a sustained increase in the number of Timorese nationals arriving at the UK border as non-genuine visitors, often with the intention to fraudulently claim EU settlement scheme status as dependants or to work illegally in the UK.

Arrangements are in place so that the nationals of these countries can apply for visas. We are also publicising the changes so travellers are aware and can plan accordingly. There will be a four-week, visa-free transition period for those who hold confirmed bookings to the UK made on or before 1500 BST 19 July 2023 where arrival in the UK is no later than 16 August 2023. We have arrangements in hand to provide visas for diplomats from these countries currently working at the embassy in London.

The decision to impose these visa requirements has been taken solely for migration and border security reasons and is not a sign of poor relations with these countries. Any decision to change a visa regime is not

taken lightly and we keep our border and immigration system under regular review to ensure it continues to work in the UK national interest.

The changes to the immigration rules will come into force at 3 pm today.

[HCWS979]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

National Space Strategy in Action

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Chloe Smith): Since the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology was created, we have been clear on its mission to make the UK a science and technology superpower and grow the economy.

Today we are taking further decisive steps towards that objective, by publishing the Government's "National Space Strategy in Action".

Since the publication of "National Space Strategy" in September 2021, jointly with the MOD, we have made significant progress to deliver our ambition to build one of the most innovative and attractive space economies in the world. We have announced more than £10 billion of funding for space activities stretching across a decade, including more than £1.75 billion to our key delivery agency the UK Space Agency (UKSA) in this spending review period.

We have appointed a new CEO, Paul Bate, and chair, Lord Willetts, to UKSA; matured UK Space Command and published the first defence space strategy; convened the National Space Council to provide ministerial co-ordination and leadership; and the creation of DSIT has brought together space policy and spectrum and space communications regulatory policy into one Department. We are demonstrating that regulatory leadership in creating an industry-led space sustainability standard; a framework of standards for measuring and managing debris, improving satellite repair and retrieval

and benchmarking genuinely sustainable supply chains with strong support from the space sector in the UK and internationally.

We have delivered on the licensing and first launch from the UK's first spaceport; we remain committed to becoming the leading provider of commercial small satellite launches in Europe by 2030, with a horizontal spaceport now established in Newquay, and more launches planned from Scotland at SaxaVord and Sutherland spaceports. And we have made a major investment of £1.84 billion into the European Space Agency in November 2022, securing three new British astronauts alongside major commercial opportunities for UK SMEs in hugely important international collaborations.

The global space race for commercial investment is only speeding up. Our nearest competitor nations are significantly increasing their investment in space activities and, despite the long-term nature of space exploration, the speed at which the new commercial space economy is evolving requires much more agile and innovative responses from Government, if we are to avoid falling behind, from small satellite design, manufacturing and launch, to space traffic management, satellite communications, earth observation and the lunar economy.

This publication sets out just the first part of our response to that challenge and the concrete steps needed to deliver on the national space strategy ambition in the short term.

It defines the next steps we will take in delivering the national space strategy, moving from the "ignition" phase into the "thrust" phase. It sets out some concrete policy steps we are taking now and sets the direction for the work of Government over the next 18 months—giving space sector businesses and innovators a clarity and confidence of where Government are intervening, and where we will intervene in the future. And it sets out the key metrics we will use to track our progress.

I will be placing copies of this publication in the Libraries of both Houses, and it will also be made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS976]

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**not later than
Wednesday 26 July 2023**

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