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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 13 December 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Kinship Care

1. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): If she will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Government's kinship care policies on carers and children with protected characteristics. [900624]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): We comply with the public sector equality duty in considering how our policy decisions impact on individuals with protected characteristics, and we have complied with that obligation in drafting and developing the kinship strategy.

Munira Wilson: The annual survey of the Kinship charity showed that the majority of kinship carers are women, typically grandmothers, many of whom are affected by the gender pay gap and a rising retirement age, yet they are often forced to give up or reduce work to take on kinship care responsibilities. What progress has the Minister made with the Department for Business and Trade in finally securing paid leave for kinship carers so that they are not forced out of the labour force?

David Johnston: As the hon. Lady knows, we are committed to publishing the first ever strategy for kinship carers before the end of the year. She will not have long to wait.

Disabled People: Inequality

2. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle inequality for disabled people. [900625]

9. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle inequality for disabled people. [900632]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): In July 2021, the Government set out our long-term vision in the national disability strategy. Over the summer, we consulted on the disability action plan, which will set out the immediate action that the Government are taking in 2024. Together with other relevant reforms being taken forward by my Cabinet colleagues, those measures seek to tackle inequality and improve the daily lives of disabled people.

Cat Smith: The neuro drop-in centre in Lancaster provides a unique support network for those affected by neurological conditions, but my constituent, who travels there by bus from Bowerham to Torrisholme, is a wheelchair user, and if there is already a wheelchair user on the bus, he cannot board. Does the Minister think that that is fair?

Mims Davies: That does not sound terribly fair at all. I am very interested in what the hon. Lady shares with the House. Of course, we have a Transport Minister answering questions today, so I am very happy for us to look at that issue for her. If she writes to me, I will see that the matter is looked at.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Sense has found that, because of the Tory cost of living crisis, a large proportion of disabled people will not be seeing family, buying presents or even celebrating Christmas this year, yet the Government are ploughing ahead with changes that will ramp up sanctions and that could remove NHS prescriptions and access to legal aid for disabled people. Why, at every single opportunity, do the Government hit people with disabilities the hardest?

Mims Davies: I apologise, Mr Speaker, because the Transport Minister I mentioned is not coming today—they might be on the bus. I will pick up the issue raised by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) in further responses.

The hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) will know that we are making cost of living payments once again to support people in need. In fact, that support totals over £104 billion. If she is concerned for her constituents—and rightly so—she should definitely direct them to Help for Households, the benefits calculator on gov.uk, and the help to claim process. There is also the household support fund, which is about £1 billion this year. I hope she is satisfied that we are absolutely supporting the most vulnerable.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): The disability pay gap has risen under the Conservatives from 11.7% in 2014 to 13.8% in 2021. Labour will act to close the gap and to support disabled people by introducing disability pay gap reporting for large employers. That is good for disabled people, good for business and good for our economy, so why will the Government not follow suit?

Mims Davies: We are absolutely committed to supporting disabled people. Frankly, we are very proud of our record: we have supported more than 1 million disabled people into work, hitting the target five years early, and we are rewiring our benefits system to give a renewed focus on what people can do rather than what they cannot, so that there are opportunities for people to improve their lives and get the pay that they want through their employment.

Ashley Dalton: Disabled people are also being hit hard by the Conservative cost of living crisis that my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) referred to. On average, the extra cost of disability is equivalent to 63% of household income before housing costs. I would ask the Minister what discussions she has had with the Minister for disabled people about this important issue, but there is no Minister for disabled people. Will she tell the House when one will be appointed?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point. As she has rightly said, we should all aim to reduce the disability employment gap, and that remains our goal. To answer her question, I am the lead on those matters for Equalities oral questions. I am disappointed that I am not enough for her today, but I do lead on those matters for the Department. All Department for Work and Pensions Ministers take responsibility across our portfolios for removing barriers to progress, and updates to ministerial appointments will be made under the usual process.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I reassure my hon. Friend that she is more than enough for me. There was a really worrying article in *The Times* a few days ago that talked about the invisibility of disabled people when making employment applications. We know that disabled people are less likely to be in work and to take up opportunities for entrepreneurship. Perhaps my hon. Friend could highlight the important work she is doing as the Minister for social mobility to make sure that across Government, there is a real drive to help disabled people get the best opportunities to work.

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members for their interest in this area. As the Minister responsible for social mobility, I am taking direct leadership on access to employment, particularly in respect of applications and recruitment that suit disabled people to get into work, because if we do not get them into work, they cannot progress. That is why we have billions of pounds in our back to work plan, and why we are supporting vulnerable people by uprating benefits by 6.7% in April equally.

Disability Action Plan

3. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of the disability action plan. [900626]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The disability action plan's accessible 12-week consultation closed on 6 October. Since then, officials have been carefully considering all the consultation responses and working closely with other Government Departments. We have led discussions with the cross-Government ministerial disability champions before we publish the final disability action plan.

Mr Hollobone: Some 14 million people live with a disability. They are statistically less likely to have a job or any qualifications or to own their own home, and sadly, their children are twice as likely to become victims of crime. Will the Minister ensure that the disability action plan addresses all those issues?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his typical care in this area. I assure him and the House that significant work is taking place across Government in those areas where disabled people have told us that their outcomes must be a priority, whether that is in education, employment or care. We are focused on that, and the disability action plan will complement that work. We

are using the insight from the 12-week consultation to deliver improvements in all the areas that matter most to disabled people, in order to improve their daily lives.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Some 1.4 million people in the UK are living with a brain injury. Will the Minister make sure that the final version of the plan lays out precisely what the Government intend to do in relation to people who have had a brain injury? The good news is that with really good neurorehabilitation, people can be given back not just their life, but a real quality of life. We owe that to them, don't we?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. My father lived with a brain injury for over 25 years, and my annual Christmas card this year comes from Headway Sussex through its art therapy work, so I assure him that at the DWP, I think about the impacts of brain injury on a daily basis.

Gender-based Violence: Hamas

4. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** If she will have discussions with the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs on the Government's response to reports of gender-based violence by Hamas since 7 October 2023. [900627]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): It is crucial that the international community recognises the atrocities committed by Hamas, and that Hamas are held to account for their barbarism. That is why we are engaging with partners, including the UN, to ensure that perpetrators are held to account for their depravity.

The UK remains a global leader in eradicating sex-based violence. Our preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative has £60 million in funding to combat conflict-related sexual violence and ensure that survivors access redress and support. On 28 November, we announced a further £33 million to support grassroots women's rights organisations tackling sex-based violence.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Hostages who have been released have reported Hamas atrocities, such as being subjected to physical and sexual violence in captivity. The Israeli health service also reports that hostages have been drugged to make them look happy on videos. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning Hamas for doing that and in demanding that the International Committee of the Red Cross has access to every single one of the hostages immediately?

Kemi Badenoch: I share my hon. Friend's horror. It is extremely distressing to hear all those reports, and I do unequivocally condemn the sexual violence that is being reported. We continue to engage regularly with partners, including the UN. I will pick up the points that he raised directly with the Foreign Office to see whether we can do what he asks. It does sound like something that needs the involvement of the Red Cross, but we will make sure that we co-ordinate across Government for a dedicated response on this issue.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the UK use its seat on the UN Human Rights Council to raise the use of gender-based violence

on 7 October, and to secure a clear condemnation from its members of the rape, murder and torture perpetrated against women by Hamas on 7 October?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Yes, we will. We have raised the reports of sexual violence attacks on 7 October with UN Women and with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. I will make sure that we continue to do this and to impress upon international organisations that the whole world needs to respond to this.

Artificial Intelligence Biases: Protected Characteristics

5. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential for biases in artificial intelligence technologies in relation to people with protected characteristics. [900628]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Saqib Bhatti): We are having cross-governmental discussions about AI, and we are very clear that AI systems should not undermine people's rights or discriminate unfairly. This was a key topic of discussion at the AI safety summit, and it remains a priority for the Government. Fairness is a core principle of our AI regulatory framework, and UK regulators are already taking action to address AI-related bias and discrimination.

Patrick Grady: In that case, is the Minister aware of the findings of the Institute for the Future of Work that the use of artificial intelligence

“presents risks to equality, potentially embedding bias and discrimination”,

and that auditing AI tools used in recruitment

“are often inadequate in ensuring compliance with UK Equality Law, good governance and best practice”?

What steps are being taken across the whole of Government to ensure that appropriate assessments are made of the equalities impact of the use of AI in the workplace?

Saqib Bhatti: That is exactly why we had the AI safety summit, at which more than 28 countries plus the EU signed up to the Bletchley declaration. In March, we published the AI regulation White Paper, which set out our first steps towards establishing a regulatory framework for AI. I repeat that AI systems should not undermine people's rights or discriminate unfairly, and that is one of the core principles set out in the White Paper.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The risk of perpetuating inequality and the problems that arise from solely automated decision making are well accepted both in recruitment and, as we heard earlier, in the challenges for disabled people in accessing employment, but also in other contexts such as immigration and welfare benefits. However, the UK Government's Data Protection and Digital Information Bill is liberalising the use of artificial intelligence in decision making and reducing the rights of people to appeal those decisions. Does the Minister understand that it is increasingly important to make sure that we mitigate risks such as encoded bias? What is the specific plan to do that?

Saqib Bhatti: I do not recognise the hon. Member's assessment, but let me say this: context matters. The risks of bias will vary depending on the specific way in which AI is used. That is why we are letting the regulators describe and illustrate what fairness means within their sectors, because they will be able to apply greater context to their discussions. The risk of discrimination should be assessed in context, and guidance should be issued that is specific to the sector. That is why we are preparing and publishing guidance to support the regulators. We will then encourage and support them to develop joint guidance. We will be working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Information Commissioner's Office and the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate.

Socioeconomic Equality

6. **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure socioeconomic equality. [900629]

14. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure socioeconomic equality. [900638]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government are committed to boosting economic growth across the UK and ensuring opportunity is spread as widely as possible. Education is the most significant lever to create opportunity and reduce inequality, and I am pleased that Conservative reforms have seen children in schools in England excel in the 2022 PISA—programme for international student assessment—scores. England significantly outperformed the average, rising from 27th for mathematics in 2009 to 11th this year, and from 25th for reading in 2009 to 13th this year.

Paul Howell: When it comes to economic equality, physical mobility is critical. As the Minister may know, I am joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group for “left behind” neighbourhoods, and our recent report talked about how limited public transport connectivity frustrates access to education and employment. I have constituents in places such as Trimdon and Fishburn who cannot get to the 10,000 jobs in Aycliffe, which is only 10 miles away. Does the Minister agree it is imperative that when funding for local transport is determined, the opportunity to enhance social mobility is seen as critical?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend, who raises an important point about how connectivity creates access and generates social mobility. The Department for Transport is working to put the needs of current and potential users at the heart of the operation of the transport system, and Network North, our new £36 billion plan, will improve our country's transport. Perhaps my hon. Friend will write to me about the specific issues, because some of those duties will fall to his local council and I want to know what it is doing with the money we are giving it to improve access.

Ian Levy: This Conservative Government have done more for the people of Blyth Valley than any other Government—[*Laughter.*] And they have brought much needed investment in employment opportunities for my constituents—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, I cannot hear the question. Obviously there must have been something funny, but I didn't hear it.

Ian Levy: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This Conservative Government have done more for the people of Blyth Valley than any other Government and have brought much needed investment in employment opportunities for my constituents, following decades of Labour neglect. Will my right hon. Friend please assure me that continuing to close the gap between the north and the south remains the Government's highest priority?

Kemi Badenoch: I am delighted to assure my hon. Friend of that. He is an effective advocate for his constituency, and he knows that this Government have been investing in Blyth Valley. We have given an £18 million boost to regenerate housing, £1.5 million for new high-tech training equipment, £200,000 for extended CCTV provision, and a further £20 million for our long-term plan for towns. Our investment in Blyth shows that only the Conservatives can deliver there, and levelling up and closing the gap is a priority for this Government.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Some 42% of children in Newcastle upon Tyne Central are growing up in poverty, 17% of households are in fuel poverty, and a fifth of adults are estimated to be in problematic debt. Does the Minister agree that a Government who cannot deliver economic prosperity for working people in the north-east are a Government who cannot deliver on socioeconomic equality?

Kemi Badenoch: This Government are delivering. Of course we recognise that there are people who are in need, and that is why we are doing everything, across all Departments, to deliver for them. For example, our supporting families programme has funded local areas to help almost 600,000 families with multiple and complex needs to make significant positive changes to their lives. The programme is working, and evaluation found that the proportion of children on the programme going into care reduced by a third and the number of adults receiving custodial sentences decreased by a quarter. There is so much we can say—I know we are running out of time, Mr Speaker, so perhaps the hon. Lady would like me to write to her.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): One thing that can militate against socioeconomic equality, particularly for the elderly and most vulnerable, is access to care staff. The rate of remuneration is 61p per mile, going down to 25p per mile after the first 3,500 miles, and those figures have not been revised upwards since 2011. It means that wonderful people in my constituency are very often losing money travelling about, and that does not do much for recruitment either. Will the Minister agree to talk to the Treasury and the Scottish Government about doing something about that?

Kemi Badenoch: I am sure that colleagues in the appropriate Department will have heard the hon. Gentleman's question and will be able to provide a more detailed response.

Topical Questions

T1. [900639] **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): In my last topical statement, I spoke about the unacceptable rise in antisemitism and hostility towards the Jewish community since 7 October, and I am updating the House on what further action I can take to promote social cohesion. The Equality Act 2010 is a shield against discrimination, and the public sector equality duty is part of that shield. It is particularly important that all public authorities take the duty seriously. To ensure that they understand how to comply with the duty, I will be publishing updated guidance shortly. I will then write to leaders of public authorities that have a key role in promoting social cohesion, to show how they can foster good relations, promote equality of opportunity and eliminate unlawful discrimination.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the Minister for that answer. As the Women's Budget Group has rightly pointed out, women are more reliant on benefits, due to care-giving roles, and they have been disproportionately impacted by regressive social security changes since 2010. What consideration has the Minister given to the abolition of the poverty-inducing benefit cap and the hated two-child limit, to prevent further poverty and destitution among women and children, and will she raise that matter with her Cabinet colleagues?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will know that we disagree with the propositions that he has set out, and we have said so time and again at this Dispatch Box. We believe that the two-child policy is important. We know that there is a cost of living crisis caused by rising energy costs and the war in Ukraine, which was caused by Russia. The Government are doing everything we can to limit the impact on households.

T2. [900640] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): A Museum of London report has bizarrely concluded that black people were more likely to die from medieval plague. Will the Minister for Women and Equalities ensure that such sensationalist research findings and woke archaeology have no impact at all on current health and pandemic policy?

Kemi Badenoch: I do agree. I am not even sure whether we can call it just sensationalist or woke. The research apparently was based on phrenology, which is a completely discredited type of science. I agree with my hon. Friend that this type of research is damaging to trust, to social cohesion and even to trust in health services. I have written to the director of the Museum of London to express my concern.

Mr Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesperson.

Abena Opong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): In 2020, women's life expectancy in the poorest parts of the UK was almost 19 years shorter than those in the most affluent. Thirteen years ago, Labour introduced a socioeconomic duty in the Equality Act 2010 to make the NHS and other public bodies tackle this gap. Why have Ministers failed to implement it?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady is right that the socioeconomic duty she references is not commenced in England. It is in Scotland, however, and the figures are worse there, which shows that the duty is not the solution to the problems she raises.

T8. [900646] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): My North Devon constituency is in the lower quartile for social mobility. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to improve social mobility outcomes for remote, rural and coastal communities?

The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew): I agree with my hon. Friend that the circumstances of a person's birth or where they live should not be a barrier to social mobility. That is why we have established things such as the Social Mobility Pledge consortium with businesses, and 120 have signed up. There are 12 community renewal fund projects serving her constituency and the wider area, and £1.2 million from the shared prosperity fund to achieve those aims.

T3. [900641] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): The Etherton review was published five months ago, and we are due to have a statement later today. May I seek assurances from the Minister that the Department will work with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that its recommendations are published at pace?

Stuart Andrew: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It was a very important review, and I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made an apology at the Dispatch Box. There will be a statement later, and I suggest that she asks the Defence Minister a question at that point.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Every year, 800 women pass through immigration detention, including centres such as Yarl's Wood in my constituency. Many of those women have been trafficked or are victims of sexual abuse. I am working with a group, Women for Refugee Women, to provide a snapshot of the backgrounds of these women. Will the Minister agree to meet us to analyse the results of their findings?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend. Women who have survived trafficking or sexual abuse are detained only when the evidence of vulnerability in their individual case is outweighed by immigration removal considerations. Victims of torture have their case considered by a single specialist team, autonomous of general caseworkers, and victims of modern slavery undergo a needs assessment to identify recovery needs.

T4. [900642] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Gender bias plays a key role in the misdiagnosis and under-diagnosis of conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism in women and girls. What action are the Government taking to ensure that every girl with special educational needs receives support from their school or college, as she is entitled to by law?

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): We are working with more than 42 integrated care boards across the country to improve the timelines for diagnosis of autism and ADHD. Some ICBs are doing particularly well, but others need a lot more help and support.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many people with impaired mobility conditions depend on their cars for the freedom to live the lives they want to lead. Will the Government therefore crack down on Labour's anti-car policies in local government, such as the expansion of the ultra low emission zone and low-traffic networks and the building over of station car parks?

Maria Caulfield: This Government are clear in our condemnation of Labour's attack on motorists, whether it is in London or Wales. That is why, in the summer, the Prime Minister ordered a review of low-traffic neighbourhoods, which are making some parts of London inaccessible for disabled people, whether they are using public transport or cars.

T5. [900643] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): Keep Prisons Single Sex has disclosed that police forces are still failing to adequately record the sex of offenders at birth and sometimes record self-identification. This can have a considerable effect on criminal justice data. Will the Minister take any steps to ensure that the correct data is given, so that appropriate analysis can be given and we do not have skewed information?

Kemi Badenoch: That is something that my Department is working on. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to ensure that data is accurate, that people understand what is being recorded and that this does not have an impact on how public services are delivered. If he has any further information that he would like to share, I would very much like to see if there are specific constituency circumstances we can look into.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900682] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 December.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker, as this is the last Prime Minister's questions before recess, I know that the whole House will want to join me in wishing you and all the House staff a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. I know that Members will also want to join me in sending our warmest wishes to our armed forces based at home and stationed overseas, our emergency services and all those who will be working over Christmas too. Finally, I know that everyone will want to join me in wishing Mark Drakeford all the best as he moves on from his many, many years of devoted public service.

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.

Mike Kane: May I concur with the Prime Minister's comments about our armed forces, Christmas and Mark Drakeford?

My constituent Fred Bates is 74, he has liver cancer and he is a victim of the contaminated blood products scandal. The Prime Minister had a chance to do right by Fred last week, but he failed to do so and lost the vote in this House. After half a century, Fred wishes to know when he and fellow survivors will be compensated and get justice.

The Prime Minister: This was an appalling tragedy, and my thoughts remain with all those concerned. I absolutely understand the strength of feeling on this. It was this Government who set up the inquiry, which I participated in, and we fully understand the need for action. The Government, crucially, have already accepted the moral case for compensation and acknowledged that justice needs to be delivered for the victims. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will update the House on our next steps on the infected blood inquiry shortly.

Q2. [900683] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): The tax cuts in the autumn statement were extremely welcome, but in order to go further and get the tax burden as low as possible, accurate and robust economic modelling is required. The Office for Budget Responsibility has been habitually wrong, and we had the spectacle last week of the head of the OBR saying that his latest forecast might be £30 billion out. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister commit to finding a better system of financial modelling, so that we can get taxes lower?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, the OBR has brought greater transparency and independence to the forecasting on which Government policy is based, but he is right. It is required to produce an assessment of the accuracy of its fiscal and economic forecasts at least once a year but, crucially, as he acknowledged, thanks to our management of the economy and the fact that we have halved inflation and controlled borrowing, we have now delivered the largest tax cuts in a generation, and they will benefit families up and down the country from January.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Yesterday we heard of the tragic death of a young man on the Bibby Stockholm. I know that the whole House will want to send our deepest condolences to his family and friends. We must never let this happen again.

I would also like to mark the retirement of my colleague and friend Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales. Mark committed his life to public service and lives his values every day. Quietly and patiently, Mark has been a titan of Labour and Welsh politics. We thank him for his service and wish him well.

Christmas is a time of peace on earth and good will to all—has anyone told the Tory party?

The Prime Minister: Well, Christmas is also a time for families, and under the Conservatives we do have a record number of them. At the beginning of the year, I set out some priorities that this Government would deliver for the British people, and over the course of the year we have inflation halved, the economy growing, debt falling, action on the longest waiters, the boats down by a third and, crucially, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), tax cuts coming to help working families in the new year.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister can spin it all he likes, but the whole country can see that, yet again, the Tory party is in meltdown and everyone else is paying the price. He has kicked the can down the road, but in

the last week his MPs have said of him that he is “not capable enough”, he is “inexperienced”, he is “arrogant”, and he is “a really bad politician”—[*Interruption.*] Government Members are shouting, but this is what they said. Come on: who was it who said he is “a really bad politician”? Hands up. [*Interruption.*] They are shouting. Well, what about “inexperienced”—who was that? Or—there have to be some hands for this—“he’s got to go”? [*Interruption.*] They are shy.

Apparently, the Prime Minister is holding a Christmas party next week—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is Christmas—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—but you might not want the Christmas present that I could give you.

Keir Starmer: Apparently, the Prime Minister is holding a Christmas party next week. How is the invite list looking?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for all the comments, but he should hear what they have to say about him. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Do you want to be the first one? It is Christmas, and I am going to hear this. My constituents are going to have a Christmas like everyone else, and they want to know whether their Christmas is going to be affected, so I want less of it from all sides.

Keir Starmer: Government Members have obviously found the donkey for their nativity—the search for three wise men might take a little longer. While they fight among themselves, there is a country out here that is not being governed, where more than 100,000 people are paying hundreds more a month on their mortgages. Energy bills are going back up in January. The economy is shrinking again. NHS waiting lists are at an all-time high. Does the Prime Minister not think that the Government would be better off fixing the messes they have already made, rather than scrambling to create new ones?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about governing, but he spent his first two questions talking about political tittle-tattle. What a joke. Let us get on to the substance. He mentioned those things. What is the news we have just heard in the last week? What is the most important thing? The most important thing is education, because that is how we spread opportunity in our country. What have we learned? Where are the schools performing best in the United Kingdom? It is in England. Thanks to the reforms of this Conservative Government, they are rising up the league tables, giving our kids the start they need. Where are they plummeting? It is in Labour-run Wales.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister talks about children. Nearly 140,000 children are going to be homeless this Christmas—more than ever before. That is a shocking state of affairs, and it should shame the Government. Instead of more social housing, house building is set to collapse. Instead of banning no-fault evictions, thousands of families are at risk of homelessness. Rather than indulging his Back Benchers swanning around in their

factions and their “star chambers” pretending to be members of the mafia, when will he get a grip and focus on the country?

The Prime Minister: Let us just look at the facts. Rough sleeping in this country is down by 35% since its peak, thanks to the efforts of this Government. There are hundreds of thousands fewer children in poverty today, thanks to this Government. And when it comes to home building, again what did we do? We have had the data just this last week: in the last year an almost record number of new homes were delivered, more than in any year under the last Labour Government.

Keir Starmer: One hundred and forty thousand children homeless this Christmas and the Prime Minister is utterly tone deaf. The rise in homelessness shows how these Tory crises merge and grow and damage the country; families like the Bradys in Wiltshire, both parents working full time with two young children forced out of their home of 15 years by a no-fault eviction, now living in their van. Or 11-year-old Liam Walker, homeless this Christmas. He wrote a letter to Santa saying, “Please can I have a forever home? I don’t want any new toys, I just want all my old toys out of storage. I just want us to be happy again.” If there is anything that could shame this Government into putting the country first, then it is surely this little boy.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman really cared about building homes—*[Interruption.]* No, if he really cared about building homes—when there was an opportunity in this House to back our plans to reform defective EU laws to unlock 100,000 new homes, what did he do? He went in front of the cameras and said one thing, and then he came in here and blocked it—typical shameless opportunism.

Keir Starmer: Is that really the Prime Minister’s Christmas message to Liam? Cocooned in his party management breakfast, he just cannot see the—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Cleverly, please. It is Christmas. I want a little bit of silence, and I am going to get it one way or another. That applies to each side.

Keir Starmer: Cocooned in his party management breakfast, the Prime Minister just cannot see the country in front of him and what they have done.

I will finish by thanking hard-working families across Britain who kept our country going. It has been an impossibly difficult year for so many. I want to pay special tribute to our key workers, particularly those in emergency services and those serving abroad in our forces who, even at this time of year, are doing the vital work of protecting their country. I wish everyone, including Members on the Conservative Benches, a very happy and peaceful new year. Will the Prime Minister join me?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon and learned Gentleman missed that I paid tribute to our emergency workers at the beginning of the session. But let us see, because I think it is important. He talked about working families. Of course I want to make sure that we support working families, and that is what we are actually delivering. All he has to offer them is borrowing £28 billion a year. All that will do is push up their mortgage rates

and push up their taxes. Meanwhile, what have we done? We have delivered tax cuts for millions of working families, boosted the national living wage, recruited 50,000 more nurses and 20,000 more police officers, improved our schools, cut the cost of net zero for working families, cut the boat crossings by a third and halved inflation. That is the difference: we are getting on and delivering for working Britain.

Q7. [900689] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): As the world struggles to agree the future of the 1.5° commitment, in Wimbledon we are keen to do our bit. To help my campaign to make electric vehicle charging access more widespread, can I ask my right hon. Friend for two early Christmas presents? Will he speak to our right hon. Friend the Chancellor to ask him to look again at the unfair differential rates of VAT on public and private charging points? Will he ask our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at the byelaws that stop local councils making on-street parking and charging more accessible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that the Chancellor has already authorised more than £2 billion of investment to support our transition to zero-emission vehicles, and that we are well on track to reach our target of 300,000 charge points by 2030. I can also tell him that we will consult on amending the national planning policy framework to ensure that it prioritises the roll-out of charge points, on top the funding of almost £400 million to support local authorities to spread them out so that all our families have access to them when they need it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister please share his Christmas message for children being bombed in Gaza this winter?

The Prime Minister: Nobody wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer than necessary. We urgently need more humanitarian pauses to get all the hostages out, and to get life-saving aid into Gaza to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people. We have been consistent in supporting a sustainable ceasefire, which means that Hamas must stop launching rockets into Israel and release all the hostages.

Stephen Flynn: If the current actions of the Israeli Government continue, it is estimated that almost 1,400 more children will die between now and Christmas day. In the United Nations last night, our friends and allies in France, Ireland, Canada, Spain and Australia joined 148 other nations to vote with courage, care and compassion for a ceasefire. The UK shamefully abstained. How can the Prime Minister possibly explain why 153 nations are wrong, yet Westminster is right?

The Prime Minister: As I have said consistently, we are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the fighting in Gaza on the civilian population. Too many people have lost their lives already. That is something that we have stressed, and something that I stressed personally to Prime Minister Netanyahu just last week. What we are doing practically is to get more aid into

Gaza, and the Foreign Secretary is appointing a UK humanitarian co-ordinator. In my conversations last week with Prime Minister Netanyahu, I pressed him on opening up the Kerem Shalom crossing so that more aid can flow in, and we are actively exploring the opportunity for maritime corridors, something on which the UK is well placed to lead. I can give the hon. Gentleman my assurance that we will work night and day to get more aid to those who desperately need it.

Q9. [900691] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): We expect our young folk to remain in education or training until they are 18, but many lack transport to get there. Along with the amazing headteacher of Alston Moor Federation, Gill Jackson, I secured funding from the council to get her students to college, and pressed the council for a half-a-million-pound bursary scheme to extend youth travel more widely. But we should not have to do this. To secure equality of opportunity and true levelling up, will the Prime Minister look to mandate and support councils to provide post-16 transport, so that all our young people in towns, cities and rural areas can reach their next stage in life?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and the headteacher of Alston Moor Federation, Gill Jackson, have done a fantastic job in securing more funding. I wish her well for what I believe is her upcoming retirement.

As my hon. Friend knows, our school travel policy ensures that no child is prevented from accessing education by a lack of transport. Not only do we have home-to-school travel policies, but the 16 to 19 bursary fund can be used to support young people with transport costs, and, more generally, we are taking action to keep bus fares capped at £2. However, I will happily ensure that my hon. Friend secures a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss his proposals further.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware of Unionist concerns about the need to remove the Irish sea border created by the protocol, which disrupts the UK's internal market. Will he bring forward legislation to amend the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, and both guarantee and future-proof Northern Ireland's unfettered access to the UK's internal market in all scenarios?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. I recognise the need to do more in this area, and I can confirm to him that the Government do stand ready to legislate to protect Northern Ireland's integral place in the United Kingdom and the UK internal market, alongside an agreement to restore the Executive. We can do this apace, and I know that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues are working hard to achieve that. Our NHS, our police officers and the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland need devolved government urgently, and I think it is incumbent on all of us to work to work day and night to help to achieve that.

Q10. [900692] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Mr Speaker, 121 MPs from across the House signed my open letter to supermarkets, asking to have a "Buy British" button online. I am pleased to announced that last week Morrisons was the first supermarket to implement a "Buy British" tab. This gives consumers the choice to have home-grown produce and also

supports our farmers. Will the Prime Minister join my calls to other supermarkets to have the courage to make the change and follow suit?

The Prime Minister: This Government will always back our farmers, and I welcome the work of my hon. Friend and the National Farmers Union on this issue. We absolutely support calls for industry-led action on this topic, and I welcome the news of the "Buy British" button at Morrisons. We will continue to encourage all retailers to do all they can to showcase the incredible food produced right here in the United Kingdom.

Q3. [900684] **Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): The marriage plans of thousands of couples were dashed last week by the sudden announcement of a big increase in the salary requirement for a spouse visa. Can the Prime Minister give any reassurance to those with well-advanced marriage plans that now appear to have been scuppered, and to families already in the UK who need to extend their stay but who will not comply with the new rules? Can he at least offer some transitional help for families, or does his party's support for the family now apply only to the highly paid?

The Prime Minister: We have a long-standing principle that anyone bringing dependants to the UK must be able to support them financially. We should not expect this to be done at the taxpayer's expense. The threshold has not been raised in over a decade and it is right that we have now brought it in line with the median salary. The family immigration route does contain provision for exceptional circumstances, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, but more generally it is also right to look at transitional arrangements to ensure that they are fair, and I can tell him that the Home Office is actively looking at this and will set out further information shortly.

Q11. [900693] **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): I make no apology for once again raising the issue of steel—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] We are now at serious risk of losing the ability to make virgin steel here in the UK. I know that the Government are working hard on this, but it is a matter of national security and we need the Prime Minister's leadership on this issue. What is he doing to ensure that we are able to make our own virgin steel and that we do not lose it on his watch?

The Prime Minister: I praise my hon. Friend's leadership in championing her local community and also the steel industry in the UK. She is right to do so, because it is an incredibly important part not just of our local communities but of our economy and security. She is right to put this issue on the agenda.

We are committed to working with the steel sector to secure a decarbonised future, supporting local economic growth and our levelling-up agenda. That includes our commitment to major support with energy costs and also access to hundreds of millions of pounds of grants to support energy efficiency and decarbonisation. I obviously cannot comment on conversations with individual companies, but my hon. Friend can see from our track record on working with either Celsa or Tata Steel that we have been able to support our fantastic steel industry, and we will always continue to do so.

Q4. [900686] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): A rogue company has walked away from 13,000 tonnes of hazardous waste in Lancaster, and it has now been on fire for 10 days. There are plumes of smoke covering our city. Lancaster City Council has been left to pick up the tab, and to date it has spent £262,000. Without Government support and intervention this fire will burn for several months, so will the Prime Minister provide my local council with swift Government support?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this incredibly important question. I know she has been working alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) on this. I also thank the emergency services in her constituency. My understanding is that Lancaster City Council, the Environment Agency, the UK Health Security Agency and the emergency services are working together to ensure that the health risks and environmental consequences are minimised, but I will ensure that the relevant Minister understands the absolute urgency of the issue the hon. Lady has raised and make sure that she meets them as soon as possible.

Q12. [900694] **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): Some dental practices are taking advantage of post-covid demand to take their NHS practices private, earning more money but leaving behind those most in need. Training a dentist costs constituents in Broadland more than £300,000. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if a dentist accepts public funding in order to qualify, they should be asked to commit to NHS dentistry for a number of years before going private?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are investing £3 billion in dentistry. The NHS dentistry contract was reformed last year to improve access for patients, and around half of all treatment was delivered to non-paying adults and children. The number of adults seen has gone up by 10% and the number of children seen has gone up by 15%, but my hon. Friend is right that more needs to be done, which is why the Government will bring forward the dentistry recovery plan in due course.

Q5. [900687] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): There are 12 days until Christmas, and hundreds of families in Battersea are worried, not about being able to buy gifts for their children but about whether they can afford food and heat due to the Tory cost of living crisis. This year, over 4,300 emergency food parcels have been provided in Battersea by the Wandsworth food bank, which has told me that it is bracing for the worst winter yet. What is the Prime Minister doing to ensure that families do not go cold and hungry this Christmas?

The Prime Minister: We care deeply about making sure the most vulnerable in our society get the support they need through the winter, which is why we increased welfare by record amounts earlier this year. We supplemented that with £900 in cost of living payments for the most vulnerable. It is why we have provided energy bill support for those who need our help the most. Pensioners in the hon. Lady's constituency and elsewhere will receive up to £300 alongside their winter fuel payment. Indeed, that support will last not just

through the winter but into next year, because we are deeply committed to helping those who need it. This Government have a track record of delivering that help.

Q13. [900695] **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Prime Minister is rightly focused on taking long-term decisions to improve the lives of people in this country, so can I make a suggestion? Our mental health legislation is 40 years old, and we made a manifesto commitment in 2017 and 2019 to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 because people with learning disabilities and autism who are sectioned under the Act are being kept in inappropriate accommodation for long periods. People sectioned under the Act are not receiving the compassionate care they deserve and are, in a sense, criminalised. They have their mental health condition re-stigmatised by the act of sectioning.

In the absence of a Bill in the King's Speech, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and other like-minded colleagues to discuss how we might take forward the reform of the Mental Health Act, because it simply is not fit for the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. He is absolutely right about the work that needs to be done, and I am grateful to the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill. Our intention is to bring forward a Bill when parliamentary time allows.

I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and other colleagues to discuss this. I remind everyone that we are undertaking the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation, with £2.3 billion of extra funding by March 2024. We are increasing capital investment in mental health urgent care centres and, under the long-term workforce plan, providing the largest expansion of the mental health workforce we have ever seen in this country.

Q6. [900688] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Rather than the Government chaos that is dominating media headlines, much more important to the public, businesses and organisations is their deeply unsatisfactory day-to-day experience of engaging with this dysfunctional Administration. As far as they can see, Britain is not working. When is the Prime Minister going to get a grip?

The Prime Minister: The most pressing issue facing families is the cost of living. That is why this Government have delivered what we said, which was to halve inflation, and not only that; we are supplementing it with significant tax cuts, which will benefit working families from January—£450 for a typical person in work—demonstrating that we are absolutely on the side of hard-working families. This Government are cutting their taxes.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Breast cancer survival rates have improved, but we need to go further on harder-to-reach cancers. In Parliament this afternoon, there is a drop-in session on lobular breast cancer and the research we need. Could my right hon. Friend or his excellent new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care find time in their busy diaries to join us?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his work on this specific and important issue. I am happy to tell him that I believe the Health Secretary is attending this afternoon's event to hear more about that work. I can assure him that we are focused on fighting cancer on all fronts: prevention, diagnosis, treatment, research and funding. We are making good progress, but there is always more we can do. I look forward to hearing from him after this afternoon's event.

Q8. [900690] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): While the Home Secretary was in Rwanda signing his new treaty, his Department put out a contract to manage small boat arrivals until 2030, at a cost of £700 million to the taxpayer. Does that not show that even the Home Office does not think the Minister's plan will work?

The Prime Minister: That is a total mischaracterisation of what was put out, which was an advert, not a commitment. I am glad that the hon. Lady now cares about this issue—not something we have seen previously from Labour. Our track record is clear: we have got the numbers of small boat arrivals down this year by over a third. That is what we are doing about it. The Labour party is voting against every measure that we have taken.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I chair the caucus of 38 Conservative Members of Parliament who have Britain's longest river flowing through their constituencies, and we have presented a business case to the Chancellor for £500 million to try to manage the river holistically. Our constituencies are now facing flooding every year, causing damage to our businesses and our communities. This evening, I have an Adjournment debate on flooding of the River Severn. Will the Prime Minister take an interest, because the business case shows a gross value added uplift for the west midlands of more than £100 billion if we can manage and tame Britain's longest river?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I recall that he and I spoke about it when I was Chancellor, and I praise him for his work and

leadership on this issue in his local area. I will make sure that the Chancellor does look at the business case. My hon. Friend will know that we have significantly increased funding for flood defences, to over £5 billion, protecting hundreds of thousands more homes, but if it is an interesting opportunity for the Chancellor, I am sure he will take that up.

Q14. [900696] **Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What is worse: losing your WhatsApp messages as a tech bro, losing £11.8 billion to fraud as Chancellor, presiding over the biggest fall in living standards in our history, or desperately clinging on to power when you have become even more unpopular than Boris Johnson?

The Prime Minister: What matters to me is delivering for the British people, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Theresa Villiers.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Given the appalling reports of sexual violence committed by Hamas on 7 October and the risk that hostages could have that treatment inflicted on them as well, will the Prime Minister raise this issue in international forums so that the international community demands, strongly, humanitarian access to hostages in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: The reports of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas are deeply shocking. We have raised our concerns with the United Nations a fortnight or so ago, and we are engaging with the Israeli Government to consider what further support we can provide. More broadly, we continue to do everything we can to ensure that all hostages can return safely to their families, including the British hostages and those with links to the UK. My right hon. Friend can rest assured that the Foreign Secretary and I are working tirelessly to bring about their safe return.

LGBT Veterans Independent Review

12.34 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): With permission, I would like to set out the Government's formal response to Lord Etherton's LGBT veterans independent review.

The treatment of those armed forces personnel perceived to be LGBT between 1967 and 2000 has long been a stain on the conscience of the nation. Last year, this Government asked Lord Etherton to conduct a review into the impact of the historic ban on homosexuality in Defence. Following the call for evidence, the inquiry received 1,128 responses from those who were dismissed or discharged because of their sexual orientation; from those who felt compelled to resign, purchase their release from service or curtail their contracts because of the ban; and from those who, while not part of the LGBT community, witnessed the trauma of such antediluvian rules, as family members, colleagues or friends. Etherton paints an unflinching picture of the most shocking treatment of gay members of our Defence community by an institutionally homophobic organisation.

Out of the blue, when applying to be a reservist in 1980, I was asked if I was gay. Even then that struck me as hugely inappropriate, but that strong sense of impropriety, which has stayed with me for 43 years, pales into insignificance against the wall of hurt experienced by LGBT people in the course of their Defence journey, much of it evidenced by Terence Etherton.

Different members of the community have been impacted differently. Yet, for each and every one, the repercussions were enduring, with the tentacles reaching into all dimensions of their lives since. Sadly, we cannot turn back the clock, but we can apologise for decades of hurt. That is what the Prime Minister did after Lord Etherton published his report in July and what the Defence Secretary and chiefs of service have done in their turn. However, apologies alone are not enough.

Etherton demands more and we agree. That is why the Government took steps to right historic wrongs, even before the report was published. In 2021, we began handing back medals to anyone who had had them withheld or removed because of their sexuality. Medals matter; they should never have been snatched away. In December 2021, we removed the barriers that prevented those living with HIV from joining the military and, back in June, the Home Office extended its disregard and pardon scheme, wiping historic convictions for same-sex sexual activity. The extension was especially important for veterans, because it broadened the eligibility to include any same-sex conviction that would not be a crime today, thereby covering service disciplinary offences.

In addition, we published guidance helping to make LGBT veterans aware of things to which they might not have felt they were entitled. That includes information on mental and physical health support, as well as benefits that all veterans are able to receive, not to mention the armed forces veterans badge, which I handed out to a number of veterans at this year's Pride event in London.

However, today we go further still. I can announce we are accepting the intent behind all 49 of Lord Etherton's recommendations. In fact, to date we have already implemented almost half of them. We have established a legacy website to host the review, the Government

response and information collected by the review, including testimonies. Through Op Courage, we are ensuring a focus on the non-combat mental health impacts of the ban.

Significantly, in some instances we have gone above and beyond the review recommendations. For example, Etherton advised making certain restorative measures available for the next of kin of deceased veterans, but we have created a broader definition of next of kin—namely, persons of sufficient interest—recognising the impact the ban may have had on LGBT veterans' relationships and ensuring that those they would have nominated as next of kin are seen as such. Next year will see the expanded roll-out of the armed forces veterans card to all veterans who served in the UK armed forces before 2018, and planning for a veterans memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum is also now under way.

Today, we are throwing open the front door to our LGBT veterans. Today, we ask them to apply or register an interest for restorative measures that are relevant to them, including individual apology letters, return of berets and cap badges, amendments to veterans' service history and additional personal testimony to evidence collected by the review. That testimony will eventually become part of the historic record in *The National*

Archives, signalling that our LGBT veterans will never be forgotten and that 33 years of national shame will never be expunged, and affirming and celebrating the part that those veterans played in our country's history. I strongly urge colleagues across the House to encourage LGBT constituents to come forward, read the online guide and complete the application form for restorative measures. Importantly, the form will also allow veterans to indicate their interest in applying for a financial award when eligibility is confirmed and that scheme goes live.

Lord Etherton recommended that an appropriate award should be made to affected veterans, with the Government's overall exposure capped at £50 million. We have agreed to that in full, but, in order to develop the scheme, we will first need to gain a much better understanding of what the affected cohort looks like. Hence, we are calling for veterans to indicate their interest on the form that goes live today. That data will help officials and the community—working together—to design a fair and equitable scheme for distributing the funds that Lord Etherton has called for and that we accept. There will be an opportunity for a full debate in the new year once the financial award scheme is matured and we have the benefit of the data captured through the front door that I am opening today.

Once again, I place on record my gratitude to Lord Etherton and his team for their outstanding work compiling a comprehensive and deeply affecting report. I thank *Fighting With Pride* and our working group, including trusted stakeholders and independent LGBT veterans, who not only made sure that their voices were heard, but helped steer our response throughout. They will not seek it, but may I mark out Craig Jones and Caroline Paige in particular for their part in bringing us to where we are today? Above all, I pay tribute to all those who came forward in the first place. Those veterans showed tremendous courage in chronicling traumatic experiences, which for many had been suppressed, causing grief and groundless silent shame for decades.

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

Today's Defence has come a long way since 2000. We cannot change the past, but we can make the future better. In accepting Lord Etherton's recommendations, we salute a slighted generation and ensure that its successors can hold their heads high in a place that wants them, values them and honours them. I am today placing a copy of the Government's response in the Library, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.42 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Minister for early sight of his statement.

With due respect to the right hon. Gentleman, who is a diligent Minister, this statement should have been made by the Defence Secretary; the last one was. This no-show from the Defence Secretary downgrades the importance that the Government give in July to backing up the Prime Minister's apology to LGBT+ veterans. Crucially, it undermines the confidence that LGBT veterans will have in the Government being serious about fully implementing the Etherton review and fully righting the injustices arising from the ban on LGBT people serving in our armed forces until 2000.

This is unfinished business for Labour. We lifted the ban in 2000. We argued for the Etherton review in the Armed Forces Bill. We welcomed its publication and recommendations. We again thank Lord Etherton for his review and the inclusive way in which he conducted it.

At the heart of the review were the statements of those who were victims of the overt, often brutal, homophobic policy. We pay tribute to them for sharing their experiences and giving their testimonies. Like the Minister, I also pay tribute to groups such as Fighting With Pride, which have campaigned for justice, along with backing from wider veterans organisations such as the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes. This is a cause that unites the House.

The previous Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), said in a powerful and moving statement in July that he had

“decided specifically that a debate in the House should take place”

in order to

“make sure that the House properly debates the report and the Government's response to it,”

and not just the compensation scheme, as the Minister has implied. Will the Government honour that promise to the House in full? When will that debate take place? To be clear, the debate is of profound importance to veterans. It should be a watershed moment for defence to move beyond the long, shameful shadow of the past, and to say in the future, “We are deeply proud of our LGBT veterans. We honour your service to our nation. You are part of us.”

The previous Defence Secretary also said:

“We will be very happy to work with the Opposition...to discuss our thinking on the recommendations.”—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 921-24.]

That has not happened. The Minister confirmed today that the Government

“are accepting the intent behind all 49 of Lord Etherton's recommendations.”

The previous Defence Secretary pointed out that the Government

“may deliver a number”

of those recommendations

“in different ways from that described in the report.”—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 921.]

In his statement today, the Minister was not clear on that.

We welcome progress on handing back medals, on an armed forces veterans badge and on a national memorial, and we welcome the opening of registrations of interest for the restorative measures, but what action is the Minister taking to ensure that pensions are fully restored to those who were misinformed that their pension rights had been abolished, and to guarantee that those whose evidence of investigations was destroyed in 2010 do not lose out? Will he fully involve Fighting With Pride and other veterans groups in developing the compensation scheme, and confirm that the scheme will make provision for the two main groups proposed by Fighting With Pride? Is the financial provision of £50 million in the 2024 Ministry of Defence budget, and when does he aim to open up the scheme?

We cannot change the past, but we can act to make amends. We can honour the service of our LGBT veterans. We can take pride in the inspiration that they provide to future generations. That is what they, and we across the House, have the right to expect from Ministers.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I gently remind him that it was this Government who set up the Etherton review, and it is this Government who are carrying out the 49 recommendations. I am proud of that. He needs to be very careful: political parties should not throw stones, and I think that he would be the last to try to make party political points out of this subject matter. To a large extent, I think that we have resisted that.

I said that a full debate would happen in the new year, but it must have the advantage of there being something meaningful to debate—namely, the financial elements, which I perceive to be the main point of likely controversy. The right hon. Gentleman made it clear that we are all in agreement with the general thrust of the review, so the controversy will be around how we structure the financial award. I expect to be in a much better place in the new year to bring a suggestion to the House about how we might do that, having consulted others and observed the lessons of the past and experience in other countries. However, the debate will not be confined to the finances. I think that was implied by my use of the phrase “full debate”. I hope that reassures him.

On intent, we have discussed before other ways of delivering the same outcome to the satisfaction of veterans. For example, some veterans want a veterans badge that is different from the existing veterans badge; some do not. We have therefore designed a ribbon, which I have seen the prototype for, and I think that is a compromise. That is an example of how we might do things differently from the ways described by Lord Etherton. Lord Etherton also talked about re-listing people on the Navy, Army and Air Force lists. Those lists do not exist in the way they once did, but we can publish those names, if people want them published, via the *London Gazette*. That is a further example of doing the same thing, but in a different way.

We debated pensions in the summer, when we last went round this particular buoy, so the right hon. Gentleman will know that accrued pension rights remain. However, some people were misled when they left the armed forces, and I strongly recommend that they refer to the guidance available on gov.uk. The “LGBT veterans: support and next steps” page is very comprehensive and will take people through how they can apply for pensions if they are not currently drawing them.

Destroyed documents, as the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, are impossible to rediscover. However, there are tags attached to most of them that highlight the fact that material has been removed following the advice of the Association of Chief Police Officers in 2010, so there is a marker, at least, of why those pages are missing. He will know too that ACPO made those recommendations for very good reasons at the time—namely, the desire of people who had been wronged to have reference to those wrongs expunged from their records.

I think that I have covered most of the right hon. Gentleman’s points, but I want to be as comprehensive as I possibly can, so if I have missed anything out, I will be happy to write to him.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement. Last week, I met Fighting With Pride and one of my constituents, who I will not name because he has not given me permission to do so. Three points came across in that meeting. The first was the importance of testimonies. He was a grown man who had been discharged in the 1980s and whose mother had received a letter from his commanding officer outing him as gay. He was still traumatised and crying in my office last week. This is about making sure that those testimonies are heard. The second point was about having the debate on the Floor of the House and not farming it out to Westminster Hall. Will the Minister make sure that the debate happens on the Floor of the House?

The third point was about financial redress. I welcome the opportunity that my constituent will now have to feed in how he has been impacted—how he has lived a life alone, because he has carried that shame for all these years. On behalf of my constituent and all the other LGBT servicemen and women who suffered in that way, I put it on the record that they want the opportunity to feed in their own stories so that the financial redress addresses the harm they suffered.

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend is right that testimonies are vital. Those testimonies will ultimately be lodged in the National Archives and they will be part of our national story. I urge her to encourage her constituents to log on and provide their testimony—that is very important. I can confirm that the debate will be on the Floor of the House and not in Westminster Hall.

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

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. In it he said:

“The treatment of those armed forces personnel perceived to be LGBT between 1967 and 2000 has long been a stain on the conscience of the nation.”

It has also been a stain on the conscience of this place, so I welcome his statement today and the work of Lord Etherton. The apologies the Minister spoke of are welcome, but they will never take away the hurt or the terrible impact on the lives of those affected by this institutional homophobia. We must remember that while homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967, the ban on LGBT people in the armed forces remained for 33 more years. That is three decades of additional harm. The reality is that all our veterans deserve respect and proper support, and all the more so those ostracised and shamed in that way.

I recognise what the Minister said on reparations, but what assessment has he made of the adequacy of the reparations cap? I wonder how that arbitrary cap on reparations payments will work, particularly when, as he said, we are asking people to come forward. How can he set a cap at this stage? He said he is throwing open the doors today, but that needs to be done in a way that is as easy as possible for people to navigate and that works for all those affected. No one must be left behind.

My colleague Keith Brown MSP, himself a veteran, is leading a Members’ business debate in the Scottish Parliament today on Fighting With Pride. I was pleased that the Minister spoke about Fighting With Pride and I would be keen to hear more about his reassurances that he will continue to work with that group and others to make sure that all LGBT veterans are properly and adequately supported in the way that is right for each of them individually.

Dr Murrison: The cap is part of the Etherton report. We have accepted all 49 recommendations and are working them through. I do not know—the hon. Lady will have to ask him—but I suspect that Lord Etherton was mindful of the Canadian experience in that regard. The Canadian scheme is not directly comparable to anything we might set up, not least because of its scope, but nevertheless there is precedent and I imagine Lord Etherton was mindful of that. The hon. Lady is right to suggest that we should work with the community, and she cited Fighting With Pride in particular. We have of course done that throughout and I pay tribute to them. We will continue to work with them on the details of the financial scheme as we work those out in the next few months.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): When Fighting With Pride described to me, some time ago now, the awful things that we had done to LGBT veterans, it was the worst injustice I had heard of in my 26 years in Parliament. I welcomed the Etherton report, which came about as a result, and I welcome the Minister’s warm, deep and expansive response to it today. The fact that he is accepting all 49 recommendations is vital. The debate is also important, because veterans want to tell their tales through their own MP, and I think that will be a great opportunity to do so. However, like the SNP spokesperson, I have a concern: if the claims that come through the website that the Minister describes come to more than £50 million, will the Government undertake to revisit the cap? It would be crazy if £51 million was applied for, but the cap said that only £50 million could be paid out.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will know full well that we cannot write a blank cheque. It is just not possible to do that. Lord Etherton came up with £50 million, which

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is a significant amount of money. He will have been mindful of other schemes, albeit not directly comparable, in this country and overseas. That is why, I believe, the figure of £50 million was arrived at.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. Recommendation 16 of the report references pensions. In his statement, he said that people can apply for pension that had been accrued, but some individuals will have expected a pension for longer service but been dismissed before they could accrue it. Will that be taken into account, and will next of kin be able to access those pension benefits?

On the £50 million compensation, which is recommendation 28 of the report, I am a little lost to understand how that will be distributed. If the Minister is going to come up with a scheme, I suggest that he looks at the Post Office Horizon compensation scheme, of which I have been on the advisory board for the last year, helping to develop it. We are going to have to look at what elements are taken into account before we get to an accrued sum. Setting up an advisory board or some steering group to work up the scheme would be a good idea—and let me say that I do not think £50 million will even touch the sides.

Dr Murrison: There is precedent for such a scheme, as I say—I hope the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Canadian scheme—so we are not starting with a blank sheet of paper, and neither was Lord Etherton.

On pensions, it is important that those who thought they did not have an entitlement to pensions look again, because accrued pensions are accrued pensions and were not forfeit. I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about pensions that might have been accrued after the point at which individuals left the service. There is no way of restoring those pensions, and I hope he will understand that. It would be incredibly difficult to do that, so I am not going to give him any encouragement that that will form any part of our deliberations in relation to the financial award.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in defence, and of the Defence Committee's inquiry on women in the armed forces and female veterans, I wholeheartedly welcome the statement and thank Lord Etherton for his work. However, I am also acutely aware of the strength of feeling on this matter, which disproportionately affected women, and on the ban on pregnancy in our armed forces. Our armed forces still have pockets of misogyny, poor leadership and inappropriate behaviour, so will the Minister continue to commit to rooting that out so that we can have a better environment for our armed forces now and in the future?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and predecessor. I pay tribute to her for the work that she has done, not least in her report, which has been extraordinarily impactful. I agree with her 100%: we need to root out misogyny wherever it is found in defence. I hope she will accept that, thanks to her report and the work of others, we have taken significant strides in that direction.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On 9 May 1996, I spoke in this House about the case of John Beckett, one of my constituents. He was a young man who had been in the Royal Navy for five years and was going to train to be an officer. Along with three other young men, he was discharged for being gay. All he had done was to have a civilian gay relationship, about which we had told his padre and his commanding officer, and it was sufficient to have him discharged. We can try to undo the wrongs that were done to John Beckett and others at the time. I know that John got another job afterwards, but can the Minister possibly believe it is right that someone who committed no crime—all he did was offend against the bigotry and prejudice of those who discharged him—will potentially have to suffer financially for the rest of his life for what was done to him? Surely, when we come to look at compensation, the principle ought to be to not merely to rectify the hurt and the prejudice of the time, but to ensure that people do not lose out financially for the rest of their lives.

Dr Murrison: That is why Lord Etherton has made his recommendations on financial awards. The structuring of that is yet to be determined, but I just want to manage expectations—as I suspect my Canadian counterparts managed the expectations of the Canadian community—about the quantum. I do not want people to think that all that financial loss will be restored to them—it would be unwise of us to suggest that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned padres. I hope that he reads the Government's response to the report in full. If he does, he will see that there is a specific section relating to chaplaincy, and contrition on the part of chaplaincy about how some of its practitioners behaved during that period, which I think did them no credit at all. I am very sorry to hear the testimony that he has just given. I encourage his constituent to engage with the front door that I am launching today.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I join others in thanking Lord Etherton and all those who took the brave step of sharing their experience with him to inform the review and all 49 recommendations. Although significant work clearly needs to be done to follow through on those recommendations, will my right hon. Friend consider how we can use this work to help parts of the world that are still facing up to this realisation? They may need to do a wholesale piece of work to understand how they can change the way they deal with the LGBT community among their military personnel and veterans. The change that we are seeing in the UK must not be stopped from happening elsewhere in the world.

Dr Murrison: None of us has a monopoly on this. We are learning from the Canadian experience, and I expect others will learn from us. Across the board, this country is looked up to as a purveyor of norms and values of the highest order. When, for example, we train people from among our allies in how to conduct themselves, as is happening right now, those norms and values are inculcated, including this material.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In the late '80s, I was very close to someone who suffered considerably as a result of this ban when she was thrown out of the Army for being a lesbian. She had her

distinguished and lengthy period of military service cut short, she was humiliated in the process, and, initially, she found it hard to find employment commensurate with her skills and worth as a human being. All that happened to her just because she was a woman who loved other women. It was a ban based on sexual orientation—nothing more, nothing less. Her loss, and that of others, includes pain and suffering, loss of earnings, loss of employability and loss of pension rights. Any compensation scheme should seek to put them back in the position that they would have been in were it not for that homophobic ban. Can the Minister confirm that all those heads of damages—pain and suffering, loss of earnings, loss of employability and loss of pension rights—will be taken into account in the compensation scheme?

Dr Murrison: The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that, in the early 2000s, the MOD was taken to court by a significant number of people who had been maligned in the way she has described. The MOD was found wanting and awards were made at that time. I cannot give her the assurances that she seeks because the financial awards scheme—it is a financial awards scheme, not a compensation scheme—is still being worked through, but I hope that we will be able to come back to the House soon to describe at least the bare bones of what we have in mind.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the tone in which he delivered it, and express my pleasure that there will be a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in my constituency? What discussions has he had with colleagues in the Home Office regarding any convictions that there may have been for servicemen in connection with their military service and their sexual orientation?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will be aware of the disregards and pardons provisions in part 12 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. They have the effect of expunging those offences, which are no longer offences. That clearly applies to what we are debating today. The answer to his question is that that expunging of material will be complete in relation to offences that are service offences and go outwith the civilian—then criminal—offences listed in part 12.¹

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent worked for the Secret Intelligence Service between 1975 and 1984. In 1984, he was offered a posting overseas, at which point he declared that he was gay, and he was then dismissed expressly because of his sexual orientation. I thank Lord Etherton for the review and for meeting me to discuss this. Clearly, the review does not cover my constituent, but he and others in his position do not even have the comfort of being able to go public at any point because of the nature of their employment. Has the Minister spoken to colleagues in other parts of Government? If not, will he undertake to do so, because this experience should not be prolonged for those in the secret element of service to this nation?

Dr Murrison: I am more than happy to discuss the details of that constituent's concerns separately. This is a review into the way in which Defence handled the matter between 1967 and 2000, and Lord Etherton's

terms of reference were drawn up accordingly. From what the hon. Lady has just told me, I do not think that her constituent will be covered by the review, but I am more than happy to have a conversation.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I commend the Government for commissioning the review and thank Lord Etherton for such a thorough piece of work. I also thank the Government for accepting all 49 of the recommendations—it is pretty unusual to accept all the recommendations, so the Government should be commended for that.

To follow on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) about the disregards—or “expunging”, as the Minister suggested—am I right in thinking that those who have had service convictions would need to apply? If so, what more can be done to encourage them to apply to the Home Office for those disregards? Perhaps the Ministry of Defence could proactively suggest to them that they could do so.

Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), the UK intelligence community should not be overlooked. There should perhaps be a second review, or at least some sort of internal review, about the treatment of UK intelligence officers over the past few decades.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. Lord Etherton's terms of reference were deliberately drawn in the way that they were to focus specifically on defence, but my right hon. Friend has made a reasonable point, and I am sure colleagues across Government will hear what he has said. I am more than happy to have a discussion about this specific case with the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and with my right hon. Friend, if they wish to do so.

It is important that if we are considering the implications for wider public service, we learn from what has gone before and from this review. I am confident that colleagues right across Government will be looking at what we have proposed doing in response to Lord Etherton's report today and drawing their own conclusions. Perhaps they can learn from what has gone on and assure themselves that they, in turn, do not have dark corners that need to be given the light that Lord Etherton's report has certainly given to defence.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw attention to my declarations in the Register of Member's Financial Interests, including those relating to my recent Army Reserve service. I was very happy to be able to do that as an openly gay man alongside many other LGBT+ service personnel who serve us bravely around the world and in this country. That opportunity was not available to the many generations who went before who were equally courageous and brave in the service of our country in so many contexts, but who faced horrific discrimination.

One of those discriminated against was one of my constituents in Cardiff South and Penarth. She was discharged in a totally humiliating way from the RAF in the 1970s for being a lesbian, but in her service record, the reason was recorded as “services no longer required.” I have raised her case with the MOD over

1. [Official Report, 8 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 2MC.]

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many years, but was told that it could not be changed because it was correctly administered. In his statement, the Minister referred to amendments to veterans' service history, which recommendations 26 and 27 of the report also refer to. Will he confirm that where individuals were discharged for reasons other than their sexuality, but their sexuality was clearly the reason, that will be considered in restitution for them and their service?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—I remember him raising his constituent's case when we debated this matter in the summer. The straight answer to his question is “yes”, and I encourage his constituent to go to the front door that is now open to ensure her case is properly examined and, if she wants, references to what happened to her are removed or expunged.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is impossible to put a price on, or indeed measure, the extent of the grief, trauma and shame that was caused to LGBT veterans, so why should we be putting a financial cap on the compensation they are going to get? When I was at a Fighting With Pride event recently, that grief, trauma and shame were palpable, so I plead with the Minister that although there is much to celebrate in Lord Etherton's report—I congratulate him and the Government on it—there are clearly shortfalls, and given that nothing has been decided, he could go further. I am sure he agrees, and I think he should do so, given what has been experienced by our LGBT veterans.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lord Etherton recommended £50 million, and we have accepted that recommendation. The details of the scheme will be worked out in the next few months, and I hope she will be pleased with what she sees.

We need to know what the cohort looks like. At the moment, we really do not know that, which is why the front door opens today. In a very short while, I hope, with the help of right hon. and hon. Members across the House encouraging their constituents, we will have a better handle on who needs to be marked with this financial reward, and what they suffered at the time and the degree of that. Once we have a handle on that, we will be better placed to design a quantum that will be appropriate to people who were maligned between 1967 and 2000.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the Government's recognition of and apology for the persecution, dismissal or forced resignation of LGBT personnel, but the answers the Minister has given are raising more concerns. The first is the cap on reparations, the second is whether there is a deadline for those reparations, and the third is this: if people's records did not actually state that their dismissal was because of LGBT persecution, how are they meant to prove that it was?

Dr Murrison: The answer is “with difficulty”, given what happened in 2010 for perfectly understandable and perfectly good reasons—it is the law of unintended consequences, is it not? I cannot give the hon. Lady that detail at the moment, because it is being worked out. It is so very difficult: if everybody had their records marked

up, it would be quite straightforward, but they do not. We need to know who the folk are who are in scope, and then we need to look at what records exist. Many of those records had tags placed on them when papers were removed, which I think will help.

We also have to look at other schemes, such as the Canadian scheme. However, I suspect most right hon. and hon. Members in this House would be cautious about the Canadian scheme, because it drew the criteria very narrowly. Those who were nudged out, or inched out, through all sorts of means—innuendo, personal pressure, or being tipped the nod and the wink that somebody was on to them—would be disadvantaged under the Canadian scheme. I hope they will not be disadvantaged under ours.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The RAF lost a courageous serviceperson in 1997 when it sacked Carl Austin-Behan. Carl won the Royal Humane Society bronze medal for rescuing a pilot from a burning Hawk aircraft at RAF Chivenor. Last September, an inquiry found that there had been accelerated enlistment for women and ethnic minority candidates in the RAF, which was found to be dubious and possibly in breach of the Equality Act 2010. Clearly, we are not looking for that sort of overcorrection, but what assessment have the Government made of the legacy of the sackings of people such as Carl for recruiting the next generation of courageous gay service personnel?

Dr Murrison: Let me be absolutely clear: Defence wants people, regardless of their sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and social class. We just want people with talent—that is the touchstone for recruitment into the Army, Navy and Air Force right now. I do not care if people are gay; I welcome gay people serving side by side with everybody else. Our history is full of examples of the most courageous individuals who served in uniform and were gay.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am privileged to be an ambassador for Fighting With Pride, and I worked with the Minister for Veterans' Affairs on this matter before he took up his role. I pay tribute to Caroline and Craig in particular, as well as all the people they have been working with.

Fighting With Pride has welcomed the pace, positive intent and completeness of this process, but the next stage is a full debate in this Chamber to which Members can contribute. I hope the Minister will listen to the representations he has heard today. Finally, I put on record my concerns about the £50 million cap and the fact that the Minister has spoken about this being a financial award scheme, not a compensation scheme. I think the Government are in the wrong place on that and that they will end up causing themselves more problems if they do not seek to compensate veterans who have lost livelihoods, careers and pensions through their mistreatment by Government.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's observations. He may like to look up the Canadian scheme, which is a reasonable exemplar, although the circumstances are different. It awarded 110 million Canadian dollars, and this morning a Canadian dollar was worth 58p, but that scheme covered a much broader scope and the population of Canada is smaller than that of the UK. It covered police, the armed forces and

civil servants, so the scope was much wider. Although the two are not directly comparable, the Canadian scheme does at least make us feel that we are in the right ballpark. I am afraid I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the commitment he is seeking, but I urge him to look closely at other schemes and certainly at the Canadian one, which is probably the closest comparator we have.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): May I impress again on the Minister the importance of hearing LGBT veterans' voices on the Floor of the House, just as it was important to hear the apology from the Prime Minister at the time? I, too, want to share my concerns about the structure of the scheme that the Minister has talked about. He has referred to a front door; can we have an assurance that that front door will remain open for as long as is needed? Many of our LGBT veterans suffer great trauma and shame, and will be quite far away from that front door. They will need support from trusted partners such as Fighting With Pride to get anywhere near it.

Dr Murrison: Yes, the front door will remain open, but a stakeholder pack will also be sent to all organisations that we know are interested, urging them to socialise it, which is vital. I cannot emphasise enough that it is vital that those who believe they are eligible for some restorative action—in the first instance, non-financial—should register their interest. In doing so, they are able to register or flag the fact that they may be interested in a financial award as well. Unless we have that data, I think our job of determining what the scheme ultimately looks like will be very difficult, and the sooner we get a handle on that, the sooner we can start to get money out of the door.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This is an issue I raised many times over the five years that I was the armed forces spokesperson for the SNP, so I very much welcome Lord Etherton's review, and I pay tribute to Caroline and Craig at Fighting With Pride. We have mentioned the spurious reasons for which many LGBT veterans were dismissed. Of course, the other thing is that the colleagues they served with were encouraged to report their supposed misdemeanours. I do think one of the difficulties for the Government will be tracking down all those who have been affected and impacted by this, but it will not just be in their own records. I am sure there must be things in other people's records that can be tied into this as well.

I want to mention the £50 million. I have done a quick sum, and if the 1,120 people who responded each got a share, it would be £44,000 each, which is an absolute pittance for a lost career, a lost pension, loss of earnings and the loss of a reference to go on to a new career outside the armed forces. We really have to look at that £50 million figure, which does not even touch the surface.

Dr Murrison: The Canadian scheme offered sums ranging from 100,000 Canadian dollars to 5,000 Canadian dollars depending on what happened. It was tiered in a way that gave a range of awards depending on the experience evidenced, and it was evidenced. It is more difficult when we come to a scheme where evidence is difficult to come by. I think the hon. Member would accept that, for some of the higher level awards, we do have to have some form of evidence that people were forcibly ejected from the armed forces. Now, £50 million is a great deal of money. It is a recommendation in the Etherton report, which we have accepted. We will use that as our guiding star in designing the scheme that we have in mind for financial awards. I am not going to promise her or indeed give her any hope that we will breach the £50 million. It is the Government's intent that we should stick at that figure.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I want to add my gratitude for the work done by Fighting With Pride and to those affected veterans who gave evidence to the review, including a constituent of mine. In response to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), who is no longer in his place, the Minister mentioned—I hope it was a slip of the tongue—the debate today. I do hope that the debate will be soon in the new year in this Chamber and in Government time.

It is being reported that an earlier draft of the Etherton review recommended double the compensation offer for LGBT veterans than has come out in the final version. Can the Minister tell the House if that was the case and, if so, why the compensation offered has been halved?

Dr Murrison: I am certainly not aware of that. Lord Etherton is known for his independence, and his report was independent. Lord Etherton said £50 million, and I will leave it at that.

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

Afghan Resettlement Update

1.24 pm

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):

In September this year, I notified Members of the House that on 31 August the Government had successfully ended the use of bridging hotels for thousands of legally resettled Afghans, and through the hard work and determination of central Government officials and local authorities, the vast majority of them are now in settled accommodation. Hotels were never designed to be a permanent solution either for the Afghans who risked their lives working for UK forces in Afghanistan or, indeed, for the British taxpayer. Ending the provision of bridging accommodation was the right thing to do for our Afghan friends, who can now get on with rebuilding their lives.

The hotel exit plan required a considerable cross-Government effort and represented a significant national achievement, but our debt of gratitude to our Afghan partners is ongoing. We are now working to ensure that Afghans who are eligible for relocation via the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and who remain overseas in Pakistan and other third countries, are moved over here at pace so they can start to rebuild their lives here in the United Kingdom.

On the current trajectory estimates, we expect to have welcomed around 3,500 arrivals by the end of 2023 across ACRS and ARAP, and wherever possible new arrivals will go straight into settled accommodation. For ARAP families, this will largely be into service family accommodation options, which have been made available by the Ministry of Defence across the country. The Ministry of Defence is also providing shorter-term transitional accommodation until movement into settled accommodation is possible. For ACRS arrivals, we are committed to bringing eligible persons over to the UK as fast as possible, and this week we will welcome 250 arrivals from Pakistan, with a further flight arriving next week. Some 70% of families manifested on these flights have been pre-matched into settled accommodation, but for a small number of this cohort transitional accommodation will be required.

The Government remain committed to ending the systemic use of hotels, and we do not plan to open new hotels to meet this increased demand. A small number of hotels with existing contracts will be extended for a limited time period to help accommodate ACRS arrivals who have yet to be matched to settled housing solutions in the United Kingdom. The Home Office has already undertaken initial engagement with local authorities in which those hotels are located, and it will continue to work closely with councils across the United Kingdom to ensure they are receiving the support they need to relocate Afghan families into settled accommodation as quickly as possible.

The Government recognise the challenges that local authorities face when it comes to resettling communities across the United Kingdom, and that is why we put in place a generous funding package of £285 million in March to help fund housing solutions and support councils to provide integration support to Afghan families. While the scale of the task is much smaller this time than it was in the summer, with the vast majority of arrivals this year already pre-matched to settled

accommodation, the Government will be matching the commitment we previously made to local authorities by offering a similar funding package of financial support for the resettlement of these new arrivals.

That includes wraparound funding of £28 per person per day, which is available to councils that are supporting households in transitional accommodation. In addition, local authorities will be able to draw on the flexible housing fund, which provides over £7,000 per Afghan individual to enable them to support move-ons, and that will be capped at £35,000 per household. Furthermore, funding will be provided to mitigate any additional pressures of homelessness from transitional accommodation, and there will be up to six months of wraparound funding for those in temporary accommodation. Where local authorities are supporting Afghan arrivals into settled accommodation, they can claim the integration tariff funding of £20,520 per person over the first three years towards resettlement and integration costs.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will continue to explore a range of accommodation options to ensure the use of transitional hotel accommodation is kept to an absolute minimum. This includes exploring a pilot sponsorship scheme that aims to support ACRS households and builds on the learnings from the Home Office community sponsorship scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme that proved so successful. As was the case before, the role of the voluntary sector is vital in providing support at a local level.

I want to reassure Afghan families who remain in Pakistan and other third countries, and who are eligible to come to the United Kingdom, that this Government will work night and day to bring them over as quickly and as safely as possible. I recognise the uncertainty that comes with living in temporary accommodation. That is why Departments across Government continue to work at pace, and in step with their local authority and third-sector partners, to provide suitable settled housing solutions as quickly as possible. The Prime Minister has asked me to oversee the successful delivery of that operation, and that is exactly what I intend to do.

No one knows more than me the debt we owe to our Afghan partners. We have a collective responsibility to ensure that we continue to support them, as they once supported us. I urge local authority leaders to engage as much as possible with central Government over the coming months, to replicate the collaborative spirit that proved so successful during the hotel exit scheme over the summer, and to ensure that all new arrivals to the United Kingdom under those pathways continue to be met with the warm welcome they deserve. I remain determined to deliver that for the Afghan people, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As this is my first outing at the Dispatch Box in my new role as shadow Minister for Veterans, let me say that the Labour party is proud of our service personnel, our veterans and our armed forces communities. I also thank my excellent predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for all her

hard work. I will attempt to build on her efforts to improve the lives of veterans and their families across the UK—I hope I can work with the Minister on that.

I pay tribute to all those involved in Operation Pitting, all those who served alongside our forces in Afghanistan, and all those who worked to assist them. I thank the Minister for, as he acknowledged, his first oral update on Afghan resettlement since September. Since then it has been confirmed that, unfortunately, Ministers have missed their target to clear the ARAP backlog. Thousands are still waiting in Pakistan. There is real concern that ARAP and ACRS applicants could be sent back to Afghanistan.

Families are still awaiting permanent accommodation in the UK, and military sites, as we have heard, are being used as temporary housing. Just today, I understand that the Government have been fined £350,000 by the Information Commissioner's Office for a data breach concerning the ARAP scheme. It is hard to feel proud of our record in relation to those events. Britain's moral duty to assist these Afghans is felt most fiercely by the UK forces they served alongside. We as a nation gave a commitment to those who served with our forces that we would do right by them when they arrived on our shores.

I note the Minister's comments about the hotel exit plan. Will he confirm that zero Afghans have returned to bridging hotels since September, and that the contracts that he referred to as being "extended" are only for new arrivals? How many new arrivals have been placed in hotels since September? The Minister said in his previous statement that

"some families have moved into temporary accommodation under local authority homelessness provision. That is less than 5% of the 24,600 people we have relocated from Afghanistan."—[*Official Report*, 19 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 1254.]

That was still over 1,000 people registered as homeless. What is the figure now?

As the Minister mentioned, it has been reported that the Ministry of Defence has made available 700 service accommodation units for Afghans. Yesterday it was announced that the Government are now using Chickerell Camp near Weymouth to house Afghans who supported the UK. How many Afghans are currently in military accommodation, how many MOD sites are currently in use for that purpose, and for how long does the Minister expect Afghans to be accommodated in military housing?

The Minister for Armed Forces said on Monday:

"There are around 2,000 people in Afghanistan who we need to move out and around 1,800 left in Pakistan who we need to bring in. In all, I would expect another 4,000 to 4,500 arrivals."—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 635.]

When does the Minister expect those people to arrive, and where will they be housed? Too much of this feels like a saga of failure. It cannot continue. Lives cannot remain in limbo, and Afghans cannot be put in danger from the Taliban. On behalf of our veterans and members of the armed forces, who feel so strongly about this, we must fulfil our duty to them and provide a new and secure life in the UK.

Johnny Mercer: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post, and on another day I look forward to engaging with him across the Dispatch Box on veterans policy. As of 8 December, 215 families remain in temporary accommodation, and as of a few days ago, around

1,826 ARAP-entitled personnel are still in Pakistan. That is obviously blending with the ACRS pathway. Indeed, a flight of 246 people is arriving today on the ACRS pathway and will be met by Home Office officials. As I said, 70% of those have been pre-matched to houses, and we are looking to accommodate the remainder and get them into settled accommodation as soon as possible.

The red lines remain the same: nobody has slept rough as a result of this policy. We are clearly juggling multiple different dynamics when it comes to getting people into this country, into temporary transit accommodation so that we do not delay the flow out of Pakistan or Afghanistan, and then into settled accommodation, which is where we all want these people to be. The numbers are changing every day, and I am more than happy to share what they will be. I do not want anybody to be in a hotel for a day longer than they want to be, whether in Pakistan or the United Kingdom. I am not really interested in what has happened before; we are where we are today.

I am determined that we will see through our duty to this cohort—both ARAP and ACRS—and I will turn myself inside out until we get to the place where all entitled personnel are in settled accommodation in the United Kingdom, in line with our commitments.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is a matter of honour and common human decency that we should give these people, who served us so well in Afghanistan, proper accommodation and a safe refuge here in the United Kingdom. I very much welcome the fact that the Minister is doing that for the remaining people in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I also welcome the fact that he has been clear that hotels are not the right place for these people to be housed, and I am proud that we in Wiltshire are making a significant amount of our empty military accommodation available to them, including 40 in my own constituency, but also a large number across the county. That is a good use for empty military accommodation and I hope it will work extremely well.

Will the Minister make representations to his colleagues in the Home Office that the strength of feeling against the use of hotels for these people stands in some contrast to the Wiltshire golf club hotel, not one mile away from Lyneham, where those people will be housed, which is crammed to the doors with 120 other asylum seekers and refugees of one kind or another? The Home Office must take steps to do what the Minister has done by removing those people from unsuitable hotel accommodation and into decent, permanent accommodation.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Wiltshire Council is one of many local authorities across the country—I had a call on Monday with officials, and yesterday with council leaders, 270 of them across the country—that are part of this real national effort, and I pay tribute to them for their work on this. The operating box that I am within is the Afghan cohort, both ACRS and ARAP-entitled personnel. Those in the Home Office are dealing with the wider migration issue, and I will let them write to my hon. Friend and answer those points in due course.

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

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in August 2021, and it should be a source of shame and embarrassment to this Government that we are still talking about bringing people to safety over two years later. A marker of the failure of the ACRS and the ARAP schemes is that it is known that there are 17 Afghans in every small boat in the channel for every one who has come over on those schemes. When the Government talk about small boats, they know that it is a result of their own failure to deal with and to support Afghans, to whom he says—and I agree—we owe a significant debt of gratitude.

Can I ask the Minister about his conversations with his counterparts in Pakistan, because it seems very much as if the Government are watching as Pakistan sends people back into the hands of the Taliban? I would like to know what those conversations are. The message going out that he will bring people in Pakistan as quickly and safely as possible will ring hollow to the many constituents who are still in touch with me and desperately afraid for friends and family who are in hiding in Pakistan, waiting for a chap at the door.

I will return to the case of those people who are perhaps owed a debt of gratitude in the schemes and who have not been successful in applying. The case of the Triples has been called a “disgrace” by General Sir Richard Barrons, because:

“It reflects that either we’re duplicitous as a nation or incompetent.”

Which of those does the Minister think he is?

On access to services, the Minister talks about £28 a person a day. That will barely cover the cost of an interpreter, never mind anything else that people who have experienced such trauma may require. It is just not appropriate at all. On the accommodation side of things, I agree that hotel accommodation is never appropriate for the long term, but I have visited the former Napier barracks, which are also extremely poor quality and not suitable for long-term accommodation, particularly in the depths of winter. How long will people be held in that accommodation before they can move on to something more suitable? What support services will be put in place, because I have found them to be completely inadequate?

A constituent of mine has been working since the fall of Afghanistan to get a particular colleague and his family over. He has found it desperately difficult to negotiate the paperwork. As far as I am aware, they have still not been able to bring them over. Will the Minister look at that particular case if I write to him? Finally, can he tell us some numbers? How many expressions of interest are still outstanding? How many people have been lost contact with or have passed away waiting for this incompetent Government to deal with their case?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Member refers to what has happened in the past, and I have been asked to look at this from a clear date in time. Since then, I have been working day in, day out to get as many as we possibly can of those to whom we owe a duty back to this country and into settled accommodation.

When it comes to conversations with Pakistan, I am clear and have had assurances—as have the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff—that these individuals will not be deported back to Pakistan.

Alison Thewliss indicated dissent.

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Member shakes her head, but that serious threat is hanging over these families. It has not happened, and it is not right to overplay that when officials and others are working incredibly hard to make sure that we do not cross that red line for anyone who is entitled to be here in the United Kingdom. She well knows it is not £28 per day; that is on top of the £7,000 a person and the £20,520 for integration. I am focused on trying to solve an incredibly complicated and difficult scenario so that we see through our duty to those to whom we owe it. If there are contributions that will help me do that, I will always listen to them, but I am obviously not going to engage when contributions are just used as a stick to try to beat the Government.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for this statement, and I know he takes these matters seriously, as do Members across the House.

On Monday, in response to an urgent question, the Minister for Armed Forces, the right hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey), said that

“certain members of the CF333 and ATF444 taskforces, will not be eligible for relocation under ARAP.”—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 629.]

The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs well knows, as do I, that the Triples were recruited by the UK, led by the UK and paid by the UK. By design, they served shoulder to shoulder alongside us. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and it is a matter of honour. Does the Minister share my concern that, based on what the Minister for Armed Forces said on Monday, the ARAP criteria do not guarantee qualification for the Triples? He will share my concern that many have already been rejected, and some undoubtedly already are dead. What more can be done to support the Triples?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my friend, the hon. Member, who I know commanded one of these units at a similar time to when I was in Afghanistan, and he has a deep and intimate knowledge of how these taskforces were set up, paid for and funded. It is for the Ministry of Defence and the Minister for Armed Forces to speak about what that Minister said on Monday, but I am clear that we have a duty to these individuals. While technically the Minister for Armed Forces was right that they were led and had direct command chains into the Afghan Government, there will be no attempt whatever from this Government to close down avenues for those who served in 333 and 444, who the hon. Member personally trained and fought alongside. While I recognise the concern, he will know that I will not oversee a scheme that does not do its duty to those he and I served alongside in Afghanistan, particularly in the 333 and 444 taskforces.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister’s statement, but I have to use the opportunity to speak on behalf of my constituent. Since travelling to the UK as part of Operation Pitting in August 2021, my constituent, who was a military police officer, has been separated from his wife and four children who were unable to travel due to the chaos at Kabul airport. Two years on, he has been resettled under ACRS pathway 1, yet he is still waiting for further information on how his family will be resettled. His wife, unfortunately, is receiving death threats. He is concerned for their safety,

and they are still in Afghanistan. Will the Minister meet me to help get clarity on how my constituent's family can travel to the UK so that they can get on with their lives together?

Johnny Mercer: If the hon. Member writes to me with that particular case today, I will have a look at it and have an answer for her today.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The data breaches affecting 265 people who worked with the UK Government in Afghanistan, for which the MOD was fined by the Information Commissioner's Office yesterday, are incredibly serious and could have cost numerous lives. We know now that the Afghan resettlement scheme, which was set up to support such individuals, has had numerous issues from the start, with a number of people being incorrectly categorised as ineligible. I welcome the families who are settling into service accommodation in Leuchars in my constituency, but does the Minister accept that eligibility loopholes remain, as eloquently pointed out by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)? Will the Minister commit to correcting those in the new year, so that we can support all those who are rightly eligible?

Johnny Mercer: I reiterate what I said earlier: it is a clear red line for me, as it is for this Government. For those who are eligible for those schemes and who are entitled to be in the United Kingdom in settled accommodation, it will happen. We will keep going until we achieve that objective. We stood here in the summer looking to get 8,500 Afghans out of hotels and into settled accommodation. That was a significant challenge, but we achieved that, and I fully intend to achieve this task, too.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, but the system is still shambolic. I had a constituent who was a member of the special forces who arrived here, but trying to get his family here was complete chaos. We were being bounced between the Home Office, Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence. We finally succeeded, but the process was not easy. Who is actually in charge of this? The frustration in this case—it was clear that they were eligible for the scheme—was that without my intervention, it perhaps would not have been solved.

May I pick up on what the Minister just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)? Is the Minister actually saying, in contradiction to what the Minister for Armed Forces said on Monday, that this scheme does apply to the Triples? The Minister for Armed Forces clearly said that it did not.

Johnny Mercer: The two things that the Minister for Armed Forces was saying on Monday are correct. Being in a taskforce does not automatically entitle someone to be in the United Kingdom, because while that might initially get them through the eligibility criteria, there may be well-founded reasons why that individual does not settle into accommodation in the UK, including many different national security reasons that have been outlined. He was correct to say that, and he is correct to say that the Afghan taskforce had an Afghan command reporting chain. I am clear about the criteria for ARAP entitlement, and the vast majority of triple-three and triple-four operators should fit within those criteria. If

they meet the criteria and deserve to be in the United Kingdom, I will do everything I can to get them here. This is a Government effort; it is not led by a single Department. This is a cross-Government issue for the Home Office, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Ministry of Defence. I have been asked by the Prime Minister to oversee it, and that is what I am doing at the moment.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for including the word "integration" in his statement. This weekend I met a man who is now settled through the ARAP scheme in a permanent home in my constituency after living for over a year in a hotel elsewhere with his family. Although he is hugely grateful to the Government, Hounslow London Borough Council and Refugees Welcome Hounslow for the support he has had to ensure that he and his family are safe and secure, it is not everything. He is working 16 hours a week in a minimum-wage catering job. He has had no support to find properly paid work that uses the skills and experience that the UK valued when he worked for our specialist services in Afghanistan. As well as providing adequate housing, will the Government please ensure that those settled through ARAP and ACRS get quality support to help them into a future career in this country, so that they can be fully integrated?

Johnny Mercer: I do not accept that this individual will have had no support. There would have been a lot of money and support thrown at such individuals and communities as they came in. There is the £20,520 integration fund, which is specifically for that purpose. Clearly, we are balancing different competing pressures when it comes to individuals getting into jobs and using skills that they had in Afghanistan, and that work continues. That will be stood up again for the process that we stood up in the summer, to make sure that we get people out of hotels and into good, long-term accommodation. I fully accept that there is a job of integration to be done there, and that is what we are working to do, using the voluntary sector, the third sector, local authorities and everybody else who is willing to lean into this.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My constituent's sister and 70-year-old mother, who were accepted on to the ACRS in January this year, have since been stuck in Pakistan alone and are now homeless, with the constant threat of being returned to Afghanistan. They cannot afford exit visas from Pakistan, and the UNHCR is not currently paying for exit payments. My office has contacted the Home Office on several occasions, receiving only template responses, so will the Minister take a look into this individual case and get back to me as soon as possible?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman must be telepathic, because just this morning I have commissioned work to look at what we can do about visa fees. I do not want an extraordinarily complex and expensive programme set back by having to pay a £500 visa exit fee in Pakistan. We are looking at how we overcome that, but I am more than happy to look at his individual case as well.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I was pleased to hear this week that unused MOD service family accommodation in my constituency is going to

[*Joanna Cherry*]

be utilised to house Afghan families, and that the Government now aim to bring people waiting in Pakistan to the UK. The Minister seems to have gone some way to unblocking the logjam—I am buttering him up because I want something.

I met the Prime Minister earlier this year to ask him to look at rescuing Afghan women judges and prosecutors, who have been left behind in severe danger, yet nothing has happened. We could look at doing this through community sponsorship, but in the meantime these women are at desperate risk. Will the Minister meet me in the new year to see if he can help break the logjam on this issue as well?

Johnny Mercer: I will absolutely meet the hon. and learned Lady, because I hope we will soon have something to say on one of these schemes. She can have a look at it when we get to that moment, and then we can meet in January to discuss what else she thinks we might do.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister again for visiting Cardiff to meet Afghans living in a hotel in my own constituency. He will know about the constructive approach that was taken by Cardiff Council and Vale of Glamorgan Council in working with his Government's officials to move people into long-term settlement. Can he assure me that underused MOD estate in Wales will be used to the fullest extent that it can be to support new arrivals? All our local authorities are obviously under substantial housing pressures at the moment. They have gone above and beyond in giving Afghans a very warm welcome. Can we make sure that we are using the MOD estate in Wales fully?

Johnny Mercer: Yes, of course. I had local authority leaders on the phone yesterday, and I know it is frustrating for people if they feel that the MOD has empty properties

in their area that it can be using. To be clear, the MOD is bending over backwards to try to accommodate as many people as we can. Just because a property is empty does not mean that it can be used; there will be plenty of rotational work going on, plenty of maintenance upkeep and so on. We are straining every sinew to make that happen, and it is happening in Wales as well, but I will continue to work closely with MOD colleagues and make sure that we meet this challenge.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and his clear commitment to honour, in his words, the debt we owe to our Afghan veterans. Yesterday's debate on immigration and those who have entered the country illegally underlined the fate of Afghan soldiers who served with the UK forces and who are soon to be forced back to Afghanistan, probably to face certain death. These men, who put their lives in danger, seek to find a legal home under the promise given to them. I say this very gently: does the Minister accept that rather than send a message that people travelling illegally in boats will have more success than those signed up to the present scheme, we must instead emphasise the need to revisit why so many applications are failing while immigration through illegal means seems the easier and more successful route?

Johnny Mercer: I recognise the challenges with the eligibility process, and people's concerns and frustration. That is an MOD issue, but as a Government we are working together to remedy it and to make sure that we arrive at the correct outcome. Anybody who has been to Afghanistan or worked with this cohort will know that it is incredibly difficult to identify these people. They have extremely complex families and histories. No one is sitting there and trying to put up barriers to their coming to the United Kingdom, but it is right that we are careful and clear when we process applications. I have given a commitment to this House, and to the Afghan community, that I will keep going until we have seen through our duty to every last one of them.

Point of Order

1.57 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The daughter of my constituents Brendan and Marion Chesterton died of a pulmonary embolism after she was seen twice at her GP practice by a physician associate. She was 30 years old and a budding actor in musical theatre. The coroner at her inquest said that Emily should have been immediately referred to a hospital emergency unit and that:

“If she had been...the likelihood is that she would have been treated for pulmonary embolism and would have survived.”

Since I raised serious issues in an Adjournment debate about the way that the physician associate was used in this case, I have seen many serious concerns raised by doctors about the risks to patient safety from the way that physician associates are being used, yet the Government are ploughing ahead with their plan for a rapid increase in the number of physician associates in the NHS. I understand that today the Government will lay or have laid an Order in Council—the Anaesthesia Associates and Physician Associates Order 2023—which amends the Health Act 1999 to regulate physician associates via the General Medical Council. There is a real and widespread concern among doctors about the risks of regulating physician associates as if they were doctors, which they are not. Has there been any indication from the Health and Social Care Secretary that she intends to make a statement on this matter? There is a real concern that this is too important an issue to be dealt with by delegated legislation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. She raised whether a statement was likely to be made. I certainly have had no indication from the Government that they intend to make an oral statement on this matter. I note that the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, the right hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), made a written ministerial statement on Monday, and I understand that there will be further opportunities to scrutinise the draft legislation to which she referred. She is an experienced Member of the House, and I am sure she knows how she can contribute to that process. If not, I know that the Table Office will give her advice. I think we will leave it at that.

BILLS PRESENTED

GOVERNMENT OF WALES (REFERENDUM ON DEVOLUTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Rob Roberts presented a Bill to make provision for a referendum on devolution in Wales; to provide that no further such referendum may take place within twenty five years; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 137).

IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY FEES (EXEMPTION FOR NHS CLINICAL STAFF) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Rob Roberts presented a Bill to exempt NHS clinical staff from the requirement to pay fees under section 68 of the Immigration Act 2014; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 138).

WELFARE BENEFITS (ADEQUACY, DEBT AND DEDUCTIONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

David Linden presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the potential merits of prohibiting the making of deductions from certain social security benefits within the first six months of a claim, of restricting the making of deductions in cases where a claimant is at risk of hardship, of reducing the maximum proportion of a claim that may be deducted, and of changing the priority order in which debt repayments are recovered by deductions; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the adequacy of the rate at which social security benefits are paid; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for increasing the availability of free debt and money advice for people claiming social security benefits; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 49).

Finance Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 29 November 2023, on the Autumn Statement 2023, HC 286; oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the afternoon of 28 November 2023, on the Autumn Statement 2023, HC 286; and oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the morning of 28 November 2023, on the Autumn Statement 2023, HC 286.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must inform the House that the reasoned amendment in the name of Drew Hendry has been selected.

2.1 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I start the debate, I should declare, to avoid any potential conflict or perception of conflict, that, with reference to my previously published entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my ministerial interests, I have recused myself from making ministerial decisions on issues relating to pillar two, which will be dealt with more than ably by the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies).

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered an autumn statement with a clear intention to strengthen the economy now and for the future. The Government proposed to do that by putting money back in people's pockets and cutting taxes. The Finance Bill that we are debating today does just that. First, it supports British businesses by allowing them to invest for less, which will encourage innovation and enhance productivity. Secondly, its measures will improve and simplify our tax system, which will ensure that it is fit for purpose.

The Bill covers 36 different measures in total, some of which are more complex than others. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased—or perhaps displeased—to know that I do not intend to cover every one in detail in this opening speech. I would like to focus on some of the key themes and measures.

I will first detail the Bill's measures to support British business. The Government understand the simple truth that a strong private sector drives economic growth. That growth in turn serves the public good by allowing the Government to invest in public services. Perhaps most importantly, it allows the Government to support the most vulnerable. That understanding has shaped our approach. That is why we are lowering business taxes: because it will incentivise investment and boost private sector growth.

The Bill's first measure to achieve that will make full expensing permanent, allowing businesses to invest for less. As a result, the UK's plant and machinery capital allowances will increase. It is effectively a tax cut to companies of over £10 billion a year—the most generous of any major economy. The benefits to the economy of the policy—just this measure alone—are that it will drive 0.1% GDP growth over the next five years, increasing to almost 0.2% in the long run, and it will unlock an

additional £3 billion of investment per year. That is only one of many Government policies backing British businesses.

The Government also recognise the important role of research and development in driving both innovation and economic growth as well as the benefits it can bring to society as a whole. Therefore, we will merge two Government programmes: the research and development expenditure credit scheme and the small or medium enterprises scheme. That will have two key impacts: it will simplify the system and provide greater support for UK firms to drive innovation. Those changes will apply from April 2024 onwards.

The support does not stop there. The Government will also introduce greater support for loss-making R&D-intensive SMEs. We will also lower the R&D intensity threshold required to access that to 30%. That will help about 5,000 extra SMEs, and they will receive £27 per £100 of qualifying R&D invested. Let us be in no doubt that this is a major boost for innovators across the UK. These measures significantly increase support to R&D firms to about £280 million a year by 2028-29, and overall they will ensure the success of UK plc.

I will now outline the next measure to back British businesses. The Government will extend the sunset clause for two more programmes: the enterprise investment scheme and the venture capital trust scheme. Both will be extended to 6 April 2035. That will support young companies to raise capital for successful growth.

The Government applaud our world-leading creative sector—after all, it grew 1.5 times faster than GDP between 2010 and 2019. In response, a new measure to back British business will go even further through reforming tax reliefs to refundable expenditure credits for the film, TV and video games industries.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am pleased to hear the Minister outline support that the Government are giving to the creative industries, which secures thousands of jobs around the UK, and particularly in the north-west of England, where we have seen a huge creative hub develop. Does he agree that it is not just about jobs, though? It is also about soft power, which the creative industries ensure goes right around the world, with great British TV and film. Does he also agree that we want to see that continue?

Nigel Huddleston: Yes. My hon. Friend makes an important point. The jobs and economic activity are hugely important, but we are known throughout the world for excelling in the creative sectors—we always have, and we always will. We can all be proud of the incredible creative talent in the UK. He is also right to highlight how it is spread right across the UK.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Minister is talking about creative industries, and the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) talked about soft power, but I wonder whether the Minister will get on to the changes to other cultural tax reliefs included in the Bill. Among other proposed changes, the Bill will remove European economic area expenditure from qualifying costs for orchestral tax relief from next April. That will result in a significant long-term cut for orchestras that tour Europe frequently. Does he not see that orchestra tax relief—an important

cultural tax relief—is working as it is and should not be amended to the detriment of those orchestras, which should be supported?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the success of our creative industries, and particularly the music industry and orchestras. She will be well aware, though, that we are not in the European Union any more, so some of the EEA measures no longer apply. Instead, we have to be World Trade Organisation-compliant. That brings some challenges, but we are certainly there to support the industry across a whole range of measures. I have already mentioned some of them, but we are doing even more with targeted measures to support the sector, because we want to boost investment in three other areas: animated film, animated TV and children's TV programmes. As a result, those will be eligible for a 5% uplift to a 39% credit rate.

Barbara Keeley: The Association of British Orchestras has warned that, for some orchestras, the proposed changes to orchestral tax relief risk making European touring financially unviable. Given the financial and administrative burdens that the Government have already forced on orchestras through their botched Brexit deal, it seems ludicrous to create more difficulties for orchestras that are touring, especially as orchestra tax relief is working fine as it is. Does the Minister not accept—I know that he has had evidence on this—that the changes are unnecessary and damaging to orchestras?

Nigel Huddleston: As I outlined, I think the hon. Lady is hoping for measures to turn back the clock to when we were in the EU. We are not in the EU any more, and therefore the world is a different place. However, we are always keen to support and engage with the creative industries, and orchestras in particular. When I was at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, we raised those issues again and again—actually, with considerable success—to enable orchestras and tourers to get across Europe, often by doing individual deals with individual countries, which we sometimes have to do now that we are no longer in the European Union.

I will now outline measures to support our employment-boosting agenda. The path to achieve this is clear: we must remove both barriers to work and incentives not to work. Perhaps most of all, though, we must ensure that hard work is rewarded. That is why our spring Budget announcements were so important. Let us take the abolition of the lifetime allowance. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that that will retain 15,000 workers annually and the Bill completes that change by removing the lifetime allowance from the statute book completely.

I now turn to the measures to simplify our tax system. Complex and inefficient taxes are one of the biggest restrictions on businesses. They often come at a high cost in terms of both time and capital. It is the Government's duty to deliver a modern, simpler tax system and the measures in the Bill will help to do just that. Making full expensing permanent is a huge simplification for larger firms, but we are going further by expanding the cash basis for over 4 million smaller growing traders. This will simplify the process to calculate

their profits and pay income tax. We have also listened closely to feedback from businesses and, as a result of that consultation, some of the main restrictions on using the cash basis will be removed. The simpler cash basis will be the default method for calculating profit, and businesses will therefore start on the simpler regime as standard. We will also be taking forward other technical small measures. Those will include improving the data that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs collects from its customers. These measures will result in a trusted modern tax administration system.

We must also build a tax system that is fair and works for everyone. We cannot understate the role of tax in supporting our public services. Taxes pay for them directly and, through attracting investment, indirectly. We must all fairly play our part. The Bill will make promoting tax avoidance a crime in circumstances where persons continue to promote a scheme after the receipt of a stop notice. It will also enable HMRC to act more quickly to tackle promoters of tax avoidance by introducing a new power for HMRC to bring disqualification action against the directors of companies involved in promoting tax avoidance. We will also reduce the scope for tax fraud in the construction industry by amending the construction industry scheme. The amendment will add VAT to the gross payment status test. This means two things: that compliance will now be checked as part of this process, and that HMRC powers to remove gross payment status will be enhanced.

Of course, it is only fair that we also guard against over-collection of tax. The Bill addresses a concern here, too. It will do so by enabling HMRC to reduce the off-payroll working PAYE liability of a deemed employer who is responsible for ensuring that PAYE is calculated and sent to HMRC correctly. This will apply where that engagement is incorrectly treated as self-employed for tax purposes.

It also remains important that we are in lockstep with our international partners during such unprecedented times. In spring, we legislated to implement OECD pillar two in the UK, building on the historic agreement built by the Prime Minister, to a two-pillar solution to the tax challenges of a globalised digital economy. In the Bill, we are making technical amendments to the main pillar two rules identified from stakeholder consultation. That is to ensure that the UK remains consistent with the latest internationally agreed guidance.

The Bill builds on the autumn statement that focused on the long-term growth of the UK economy and sound economic policy. What a contrast to Labour's fantasy economics, including £28 billion per year of additional spending without any idea where that money will come from—although we all know at heart that it will be taxpayers or through more debt, which is, of course, just deferred taxation. In contrast, this Finance Bill backs British businesses, rewards hard work, and supports a modern and simpler tax system. In doing so, it delivers on the Government's commitments to prioritise economic growth, encourage business investment, nurture innovation and simplify our tax system to combat tax avoidance. For those reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

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

2.13 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): After 13 long years of the Conservatives in power, it is clear that, no matter what they try to do or say, they cannot escape the reality of their record in office. That reality is one of people across Britain being worse off, public services collapsing, and a Conservative party that puts its own interests before the country's.

We now have a governing party barely able to govern and a Prime Minister barely able to lead, but at least the Chancellor is still following the Prime Minister's example by trying to emulate his reverse Midas touch. Frankly, whenever the Chancellor talks about getting the economy growing, the country is pushed in the opposite direction. In his speech three weeks ago, he used the phrase "autumn statement for growth" seven times, and what did we see? The growth forecast for next year cut by more than half, cut again the year after that, and cut yet again the year after that. It seems that the Financial Secretary is getting in on the act, too. Today, he talked about what he has been doing to support growth, and what do we see? Figures out today confirm that the UK economy contracted unexpectedly in October, with GDP falling by 0.3%.

It is not just in relation to growth that the reverse Midas touch applies. Last month, the Prime Minister said:

"I want to cut taxes, I believe in cutting taxes."

But what have we seen? Even after all the changes the Government have announced, the tax burden is still on track to be the highest since the second world war. The truth is that after 13 years of failure on the economy, the Conservatives are incapable of getting our country back on track. After 13 years, they do not have the determination or the plan to get us out of this doom loop where growth is low, taxes are high, public services are collapsing and families are worse off. Only Labour's plan will bring stability and responsibility back to our public finances, give families the security they need and reform our public services for the future. Only Labour is ready to work with businesses day in, day out to get our economy growing, to create good jobs for the future and to make people across Britain better off.

There are a number of individual measures in the Bill that we have been calling for for some time; we will not oppose its Second Reading, and we look forward to considering it in detail in Committee. However, it is clear that the Bill and the autumn statement it follows are simply the latest chapter in 13 long years of Conservatives failing to get the economy growing and make working people better off. It is sobering and frankly staggering that, as the Resolution Foundation set out following the autumn statement, real average weekly earnings are now set to remain below their 2008 level until 2028. That is two full decades of pay stagnation. That is what happens when the Government cannot find a plan for growth that works.

To be fair, it is not for want of trying. The "autumn statement for growth" is the 11th attempt at an economic growth plan we have seen from the Conservatives. The problem is that the Conservatives simply do not have the ideas we need for our times, nor the focus on the country that the British people deserve from their Government. As Conservative MPs meet behind closed doors to plot their next leadership election, families

across Britain are fed up of struggling and being squeezed, businesses yearn for stability and certainty, and our country misses out on the chance to fulfil its potential.

Of course, people across Britain are feeling the hit not just from growth being weaker and inflation more persistent than in similar countries, but from the 25 tax rises the Conservatives have already pushed through in this Parliament alone. There is, however, one small group of people who will continue to be protected from this Government's tax rises on much of their income. That group of people is non-doms: those who live in Britain but do not pay UK taxes on their income from overseas. As we have long said, Labour believes it is only fair that if a person makes Britain their home, they should pay their taxes here. Closing the non-dom loophole—replacing that archaic status with a residence scheme like other countries have—could raise crucial funding to bring the NHS waiting list down. Yet today we have another Finance Bill from this Government that leaves the loophole open. The Government are continuing to help a few at the top to avoid paying their fair share of tax when they keep their money overseas, while letting families across the UK face a tax burden that is climbing to a post-war high. Whatever the Government say, that is the reality facing working people in Britain.

As the Resolution Foundation points out, any cuts to personal taxation announced in the autumn statement pale in comparison with previously announced tax rises through the freezing of national insurance and income tax thresholds. The Resolution Foundation concludes that the combined effect is an average tax rise of £1,200 per household, with almost every single person in the country who pays income tax or national insurance paying higher taxes overall. Across all taxes that the Government levy, the Resolution Foundation points out that

"despite the tax cutting rhetoric, the reality is that the tax burden is rising, with tax receipts as a share of the economy set to reach 37.7 per cent in 2028/29, the highest level in 80 years."

That is the reality from which the Conservatives cannot hide.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend is making a great speech. He has been talking about the tax burden, and I raised the subject of cultural tax reliefs earlier. Another change in orchestra tax relief is that eligibility requires 10% of expenditure to be on goods or services that are used or consumed in the UK, rather than being incurred in the UK. The Association of British Orchestras has said that there is a lack of clarity about what orchestras will now be able to claim. This level of uncertainty is very unfair on UK orchestras, which have been through a turbulent time as a result of Brexit, covid and the cost of living crisis. Will my hon. Friend agree to raise that point with the Minister in Committee, to obtain some clarity and to enable Members to consider what these changes are doing? I appreciate that the subject is too complicated to be dealt with at this point.

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point; she is a great champion for orchestras. It is only right, when we consider the details of the Bill in Committee, for us to push the Government to provide the certainty that is so often lacking from many of the measures that they propose.

I was talking about the reality from which the Conservatives cannot hide. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is present, has been desperately trying to claim that the tax burden is going down. Three weeks ago, she claimed that

“taxes for the average worker have gone down by £1,000.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 360.]

Two weeks ago, she claimed:

“Taxes for the average worker will have gone down by £1,000 since 2010.”—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 1084.]

However, analysis conducted by the House of Commons Library makes it very clear that national insurance and income tax for the median earner will rise by well over £1,000—up from £6,112 in 2010-11 to £7,364 in 2024-25.

In an attempt to understand the tension between the Chief Secretary’s comments and the Library analysis, I wrote to her and also tabled written parliamentary questions. The Financial Secretary responded to both the letter and the questions with rather more careful wording, saying that

“an average worker in 24-25 will pay over £1,000 less in personal taxes than they otherwise would have done.”

He was careful to make it clear that the Government’s “calculations are on a same-year basis against a counterfactual”, and that this was not, in fact, a comparison over time, as that

“would include the effects of earnings growth on cash totals of tax due”.

I wonder whether the Chief Secretary’s statement that taxes for the average worker have “gone down by £1,000” may have inadvertently misled the House, given that her colleague’s written response to me tacitly admitted that the Government’s statistics do not refer to the actual taxes that a worker pays. When the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury responds to the debate, perhaps he will tell us if he knows whether the Chief Secretary would like to correct the record. Whatever the Conservatives say—however they twist and turn—the truth is that people across Britain are feeling the squeeze, and life is very different from the picture that Ministers are desperately trying to paint.

I have already made it clear that we support a number of the individual measures in the Bill. We welcome, for instance, the measure in clause 1 to make full expensing permanent; we have been calling for that for some time. Welcome as it is, however, it simply cannot make up for the years of uncertainty that businesses have faced. When I meet businesses across the country, they are clear that they want stability, certainty and a long-term plan, but even during the time for which I have been shadow Financial Secretary—a period that has seen five different incumbents of the office that I shadow—business taxation and reliefs have been chopped and changed every year.

Let us take the annual investment allowance. At the start of this Parliament, it had been raised to £1 million on a temporary basis. That temporary basis was extended first by the Finance Act 2021 and again by the Finance Act 2022, and was then made permanent by the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023. During that time, of course, the super-deduction, which Members may recall, came and went entirely, and last year full expensing for expenditure on plant or machinery was introduced—but, again,

only on a temporary basis for three years, before being amended yet again this year to be made permanent. Frankly, while the latest Treasury Ministers may say that full expensing is now permanent, how long any policy under this Government may last seems to be decided by the Conservatives’ internal battles rather than what is right for the country.

Andy Carter: The hon. Member has said that Labour will support the Bill today, and I welcome that, but I have been doing some calculations. Does he agree that if Labour remain committed to their £28 billion borrowing plan, debt will soar and they will break their own fiscal rules?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman was desperate to make an intervention about fiscal responsibility, when just a year ago his party crashed the economy and sent interest rates soaring, and working families throughout the country are still paying the price. We on this side of the House take fiscal responsibility seriously. We want to have a fiscal lock in place, we want to get debt falling, and we want to get the economy growing. That is the difference between us and the Conservatives.

Clause 2 contains measures on research and development. In Committee we will probe the impact of those changes in greater detail, but it is clear straightaway that stability and certainty have been lacking here as well. We need only look at the changes in the current Parliament’s Finance Acts. The Finance Act 2020 raised the rate of the R&D expenditure credit from 12% to 13%. The Finance Act 2021 made changes to the amount of R&D tax credit that small and medium-sized enterprises could claim. The Finance Act 2023 again changed the rates of R&D tax reliefs, and that same year the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023 made yet further changes to how the relief operates. Now, of course, the Finance Bill before us introduces a whole new regime. Businesses making investment decisions yearn for stability and certainty, but after 13 years in office, the Government are proving themselves incapable of providing those crucial foundations for success.

We acknowledge, of course, that the tax legislation in Finance Acts needs to be kept updated, and that some change is not only inevitable but important in enabling legislation to function well. However, with this Government it is hard to avoid the sense that changes are being made without a long-term plan in mind. It looks very much as if there has been no long-term plan for capital allowances or research and development reliefs, and the same is true of tackling tax avoidance and evasion.

Although we welcome any measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, again there has been a busy history of legislation in this Parliament alone. The Finance Act 2020 made changes to the general anti-abuse rule, introduced to deter taxpayers from using tax avoidance schemes. That was followed by more changes to the rule in the Finance Act 2021, alongside other changes to the legislation covering avoidance. In the Finance Act 2022, a further round of changes were made to the legislation relating to avoidance, including on HMRC’s publication of information about avoidance schemes. Now, in 2023, we see the latest set of changes to the rules and penalties in respect of avoidance and evasion. While we will consider the detail of those changes in Committee, it is already clear that a long-term plan is very hard to see.

[James Murray]

Stability and certainty are crucial foundations when businesses are making decisions about where to invest and where to create jobs. We in the Opposition hear that from business leaders day in, day out, across all sectors and in all parts of our economy. We know how much damage is done to economic growth and people's standards of living when that stability and certainty are not there. We saw that at its most extreme last autumn, when the Conservatives crashed the economy and trashed their reputation in a matter of days, through a reckless disregard for our economic institutions and for working people's security. But it is not just about last autumn; it is about 13 years of Conservative government. It is about the inability of the Conservatives to provide the stability, the certainty and the plan for the future that businesses and our economy need.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): If we have crashed the economy and we do not have a long-term plan, why are you voting with us today? [Interruption.]

James Murray: Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker, I took that question to be addressed to me rather than to you. We have made it clear that when it comes to the measures in the Bill for which we have been calling for some time, we welcome and will support them. We would not oppose measures that we have been calling for. However, given the Government's chopping and changing year on year from one Finance Act to the next, it is desperately clear that there is no evidence of a long-term plan over the past 13 years, and no evidence of the plan that we need for the future. I hope that in a general election, when businesses and working people across the country look at the Conservative party and at the Labour party and ask themselves who has a plan to grow the economy and make working people better off, they will conclude that it is us.

Barbara Keeley: May I make a further point about cultural tax reliefs? It seems to me that there is not quite enough understanding of the importance of this subject on the Government Benches. International touring is vital to the survival of many orchestras and makes up a fifth of earned income. That is a substantial proportion. My hon. Friend has talked of the changes that have been made, and all the flip-flopping. There is a strong economic and strategic case for incentivising touring in the European economic area for UK orchestras, because it boosts cultural exports and enhances the UK's place on the world stage. That does not apply only to film and video, which the Minister has mentioned; our orchestras are world-class too. There is a move to limit the cultural tax reliefs, including orchestra tax relief. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that that will be reviewed in Committee, but the key issue is the continuing importance of those cultural reliefs, and what the Minister has said today does not convince me that he understands that. I therefore fully support what my hon. Friend is saying.

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention on that point, and we will certainly raise questions on her behalf in Committee to try to get clarity from the Government. As she rightly points out, clarity and certainty have been distinctly lacking from this Government over a whole range of topics. We will certainly press them on that in Committee.

As I was saying in response to the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), we will not be opposing many of the individual measures in the Bill, including those on capital expensing, on research and development and on tax avoidance and evasion, but they all serve to remind us just how much of a merry-go-round this Government have become and just how much they lack a plan for the future. A plan for the future is what has been sorely missing from this Finance Bill and from the autumn statement, and it is clear that the Conservatives are now incapable of offering one. With no stability, no real certainty and no plan for growth that works, businesses are left without the partner in Government that they need, and without the growth that our economy needs, working people are left worse off, with the tax burden set to rise to a peacetime high.

If Labour wins the next general election, we will overhaul and accelerate the planning system, modernise our electricity grid, attract far greater private investment, scrap and replace business rates, set out a road map for business taxation and boost skills and training across the country. We will do all that to get the economy growing and to make working people better off. That is the change our country needs. Without change, we would have a fifth term of the Conservatives, and what on earth would that mean for Britain? What would the Conservatives speak of as their achievements in this Parliament? Twenty-five tax rises, the highest tax burden in eight decades, taxes up £1,200 per household and two decades of pay stagnation, as well as a fall in real household disposable incomes—the first time that has ever happened in a Parliament. That is the record of the Conservatives. That is what they cannot hide from and that is why it is time for change.

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

2.31 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What an extraordinary experience that was. I have just listened for nearly 20 minutes to the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) ranting on about tax hikes, but at the same time not proposing a single concrete economic policy. Indeed, Opposition Members have gone entirely AWOL. Where are they? There is no one on the Opposition Benches this afternoon. They are not going to oppose a single measure in this Finance Bill. I have scoured Wikipedia for any policy they might have come up with on taxation, and all I have found is that they are proposing an additional £28 billion in borrowing. That is simply more taxes for our children and grandchildren to pay in the future.

I have also spotted that the Opposition have two additional new taxes that they think would be a good idea. Those two taxes are the ones that were outlined by the shadow spokesman. The first is the non-dom taxation, which analysis shows would actually result in a net subtraction in tax revenue to the UK economy. Furthermore, they are proposing that we should be the only country in the world that taxes education, with a tax that would increase the cost to the state and again fail to pay for itself. So that was my scour of Wikipedia. I am now going to move on from discussing the Opposition rant to talk about the excellent points that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) has made.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Harriett Baldwin: I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Barbara Keeley: I am standing in part to illustrate that I am here, because the hon. Lady just said that there was nobody on this side of the House. Well, here I am, and I have been intervening on both the opening speeches, so I hope she will take that back. Also, could she clarify what she was talking about when she mentioned a tax on education?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is the honourable exception that proves my rule. She is indeed engaging thoroughly in the debate from the void that is the Opposition Benches this afternoon. The tax on education is her party's Front-Bench policy to add VAT to school fees. She may not be aware of that policy, but it is not a good one and I recommend that she use her influence to get her Front Bench to drop it.

Let me turn to the excellent remarks made by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. It is the view of the Treasury Committee that the tax system in the UK is far too complicated. We were concerned earlier this year, as we mentioned in our report, about the abolition of the Office for Tax Simplification, because we want to see the Treasury team look at more ways in which it can simplify the tax system. We also published a report on tax reliefs that identified more than 1,000 tax reliefs in our tax system, many of whose impacts or costs to the Exchequer the Treasury does not even know. They really should be thought of as expenditure lines, and they should be looked at a bit more carefully. Some of the steps announced in these measures, and indeed in last week's National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill, will do some good in that regard, and I want to highlight those.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In relation to what the hon. Member was saying about national insurance, would she like to comment on the fact that, overall, the richest fifth of households will be £1,000 better off on average by 2027 whereas the lowest fifth are set to gain only £200. Does that make it the progressive autumn statement that has been claimed?

Harriett Baldwin: I can also attest to the fact that the hon. Lady is the second Labour Back Bencher in the Chamber. That brings the total to the two who are visible to me at this time on the Opposition Benches—*[Interruption.]* I think that the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) is also providing the shadow Parliamentary Private Secretary role. National insurance is indeed a terrible regressive tax as it stands and I wholeheartedly endorse any measures that reduce that burden and simplify things. The hon. Lady has pointed out that this is work in progress, but I think she should welcome the abolition of class 2 national insurance. That has simplified the national insurance system, and in the spring Budget we had the welcome simplification of the lifetime allowance charge. We also had a great simplification in childcare entitlement with the announcement of a much wider offer of free childcare. These simplifications have been broadly welcomed.

There are further welcome simplifications in this Finance Bill. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury was kind enough to write to me yesterday to summarise his principles for the simplification of the tax system. He wants tax rules that

“have a clear consistent rationale”.

He wants it to be

“easy for taxpayers to get their tax right”.

He wants taxpayers to be able to understand what they need to do “at key life cycle points”, and he wants a tax policy that

“does not...distort the decisions of taxpayers and result in poorly informed choices.”

In summary, the Government want

“the tax system to be simpler, fair and to support growth.”

The Financial Secretary's letter, which we will be publishing on the Treasury Committee website this afternoon, also outlines further simplifications, which were in the remarks he made earlier. They include expanding the cash basis for small businesses, improving the design of Making Tax Digital, simplifying research and development tax credits, which we welcome, and simplifying capital allowances and making them more permanent. I will draw to the House's attention to other measures for individuals that he did not highlight. There is an increase in

“the threshold for individuals with income taxed through Pay As You Earn to file a Self Assessment return to £150,000”.

That is important because more and more people would otherwise be caught by the freezing of the thresholds. From April 2024, that threshold will be abolished altogether. There are also simplifications for individual savings accounts in this Finance Bill, as well as measures to simplify customs processes. I think the Financial Secretary's heart is in the right place on simplification, and there is no question but that R&D tax credits were being abused.

I draw the Financial Secretary's attention to future opportunities for simplification while welcoming the fact that venture capital tax relief is being extended to 2035, as the Treasury Committee called for in our report. I would love to see the Financial Secretary focus on the unintended disincentives to taking on additional work and additional hours that exist throughout the tax system, at all sorts of income points. We have made huge strides on simplifying it for people on universal credit, making every extra hour of work pay, but once people get into the tax system, there are cliff edges and high marginal tax rates that deter them from working more. I will highlight two in particular.

First, the Treasury Committee is currently holding an inquiry on “Sexism in the City,” and we have had evidence on how we could improve some of those marginal tax rates. The child benefit taper was introduced 10 years ago with my wholehearted support. It was the right thing to do in 2013, but it is now time to look again at how it interacts with the free childcare offer. We should consider the opportunity for simplifying the tax system by getting rid of the taper altogether, as it is a terrible deterrent to the families who get caught.

A person with a lot of children, earning between £50,000 and £60,000, can have a marginal tax rate of over 100%. It has become far too complex, and it is deterring many women from taking on more work. With the childcare offer we now have, it is time to look again.

I also want to throw the evidence from our “Sexism in the City” inquiry into the mix. The City has the highest pay and, indeed, the highest pay gap in the country. Some of the best paid careers for women are in financial

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

services, but we hear time and again that, because of the tax-free childcare cut-off at £100,000, some women are choosing to work less than a full week. The freezing of the thresholds is having side effects. As the Financial Secretary thinks ahead to next year's fiscal events, I urge him to consider those two potential simplifications.

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

2.42 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and add:

"this House, while approving the changes to taxation of tobacco in the Finance Bill and full expensing being made permanent, declines to give the Bill a Second Reading because it fails to make a much-needed reduction in VAT for the hospitality and tourism sectors, and fails to introduce measures through the tax system that would help alleviate poverty."

It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Treasury Committee, on which I serve, even though she is at odds with the London School of Economics and the University of Warwick on non-dom status—we might return to that later.

The problem with this Bill is not so much what is in it but what is not in it. For example, full expensing is being made permanent, which is laudable and is to be supported, but the Minister and, indeed, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) did not mention that choices are being made that fail to support families, that make people poorer and that reduce community resilience and sustainability, which is no way to grow an economy. There was no mention of tackling the growing cost of living crisis that people face every day. There was nothing on rents, mortgages, food bills and, most of all, energy costs, as we go deeper into winter. The Minister is an affable person, but he has a brass neck as wide as the Dispatch Box to say that the Government are looking to invest in public services—I will come back to that in a moment.

Today, the Bank of England has told us that the proportion of mortgage balances in which the borrower is behind on payments is the largest in six years. The SNP asked for direct help for people: a £400 energy bill rebate, a social tariff on energy, a lower price cap, mortgage interest tax relief and help for tourism businesses through VAT adjustments. Of course, there could have been much more, but we got none of that from the Chancellor or from this place.

Instead, the Government turned a deaf ear to the inflationary costs for households, in addition to starving the public sector of funds. Councils in England are already going bust: Labour-controlled Birmingham, Hackney, Croydon and Slough; Conservative-controlled Northamptonshire and Thurrock; and Lib Dem-controlled Woking. The Local Government Association says that one in five councils—60 of them—is at risk of issuing a section 114 notice, but the Chancellor, while doing nothing to help families, is slashing public sector spending. Richard Hughes, from the Office for Budget Responsibility, has pointed out that there are £19 billion of public sector cuts coming:

"the real spending power of Government departments in England goes down by about £19bn over the forecast period".

The Chancellor has also frozen capital spending, which has a direct negative impact on the spending available in Scotland. When Labour is asked what it would do differently, we hear only silence. There is no attempt by this place to protect public services. Scotland's block grant has, over the past few years, been cut by 17% in real terms compared with 2010—the House of Commons Scrutiny Unit has given those figures. We all know that inflation running at 4.7%—do not forget that it was much higher last year, at 11.1%—means that any increase is dwarfed by inflation, so when Scotland's block grant increases by just 1.4% next year, it is wiped out before it touches the sides. This is a savage real-terms cut for Scotland.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that living standards will be 3% lower in 2024-25 than they were before the pandemic, which is the largest reduction in living standards and the highest tax burden since the 1950s. There is zero growth forecast for the economy. The GDP figures from the Office for National Statistics show that for the three months to October 2023 there was no growth, and the economy actually contracted in October.

David Bharier from the British Chambers of Commerce says that this

"confirms the low-to-no growth cycle the UK economy is in."

That, of course, takes us directly to the choices that this Government and this place have taken since Brexit. Labour, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems support Brexit, so the self-harm continues to cause difficulties.

The UK suffered a broad-based fall in both openness and competitiveness between 2019 and 2021. UK trade fell by 8%, compared with 2% in France. That is not my description; it comes from the London School of Economics. Our industries face severe challenges due to the Westminster-inflicted harm of Brexit, yet this place cannot point to a single benefit, beyond a made-up line about vaccines. Workforce shortages in tourism, hospitality, the NHS and care have all dramatically increased since Brexit—a Brexit that Scotland rejected and continues to reject. Yet for the people of Scotland, Westminster continues to show indifference.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that the 2p cut to national insurance in the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill is almost entirely eaten up by frozen tax thresholds, due to what is known as fiscal drag. Basically, this Government are giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

We have seen nothing on energy bills, which are due to rise again in January; nothing on food bills, while countries such as France and Canada take action; nothing on mortgages, on which the Government could have delivered some relief; and nothing to reduce VAT in a range of areas, where the Government could have taken action to help people and to ease inflation at the same time.

Although certain measures, such as full expensing being made permanent, are welcome, the biggest problem with this Bill is what it fails to address, and that is to help millions of households that are struggling with the cost of living. This place should have introduced a UK-wide version of the Scottish child payment to help

families. It should have introduced a £400 energy bill rebate and a social tariff, and it should have provided for a household essentials guarantee.

The Government could have addressed unfair tax loopholes by abolishing the non-dom tax status. As I said, the University of Warwick and the London School of Economics reckon that would raise £3.6 billion per year. The Government could have done that and they could have decided to put a tax on share buy-backs, but instead they decided to set their sights on ill and disabled people, telling them to get back to work. It is worth remembering that, according to research in 2015 by the University of Liverpool and the University of Oxford, old-style incapacity assessments were “associated with” an extra 590 suicides across England between 2010 and 2013. This is a scandalous thing to bring to people at this time. Positive Money has noted that a windfall tax on the profits of the big four banks could have raised £20 billion in the first six months of this year, but the Government chose to do nothing.

The autumn statement delivered the worst-case scenario for Scotland and for our people. We needed proper funding for public services, but instead we face massive cuts—the health funding announced represents just 0.01% of the budget for 2024-25. We needed immediate help for people in our energy-rich country to pay for some of the highest energy bills across the nations of the UK.

By contrast, the SNP Scottish Government have ensured that people in Scotland pay less council tax than those in England, and we have frozen council tax for the next year in order to assist with the cost of living crisis. At the moment, people do not have to pay prescription charges or tuition fees, and they do not have to pay for eye tests. Under-22s and over-60s do not pay for bus travel. We also have the Scottish child payment and much more. In Scotland, we have used the limited social security powers we have to provide dignity, respect and support for people. Those are manifestations of the values of a progressive Government looking at every opportunity to help people who are struggling.

Imagine what would happen to all of that for the people of Scotland if this place had control of all of those issues, as Labour and Conservative Members want to happen. The Scottish Government are using all the levers at their disposal to help people through this cost of living crisis, but the implications of this Westminster fiscal event are clear; with the current reliance on Westminster for our capital grant allowances and limited borrowing powers, this place is stamping its austerity on Scotland. The path for Scotland is ever clearer: we need to be an independent country, to rejoin the EU and to have the ability to look after our own people.

2.53 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Let me start by declaring an interest in relation to clause 15, as I believe I am one of the Members who managed to discriminate against themselves via pension changes a decade ago and therefore will benefit from the tax changes in this Bill. I should therefore perhaps not touch on that any further.

Overall, there is nothing to oppose in the Bill. I will break the habits of this debate and try to speak about the Bill, rather than stuff that is not in it or might have been in it. I will try to address some of the clauses it contains. Clause 1 deals with the full expensing of expenditure on plant and machinery, a matter I raised in the debate on the autumn statement. I welcome the measure, which I hope will work to encourage greater capital investment across the UK economy.

However, we should not underestimate how fundamental a change in our tax system that measure is. We have built, over decades, a series of rules on how companies—and individuals too, but we are talking about companies for this purpose—get tax relief on the capital spend they make. A large amount of work has to go into tracking what is counted as revenue spend and what is counted as capital spend, but now there is no point in doing that work in respect of plant and machinery, because companies are going to get the same tax treatment either way round—so all that can go.

Then there are all manner of ways of getting that relief, be it through the main general pool for plant and machinery, the long-life asset pool or the short-life asset pool. We have different rules for cars, for environmentally-friendly assets and for environmentally-friendly cars. We should take a step back and ask, “Is it necessary to keep this whole complicated regime if, for the vast majority of spend, we are giving 100% tax relief in year 1 when that spend happens? Should we now look at striking away a load of that and just accept that we could have a very different regime?” Perhaps we should just accept the accounts depreciation for all the other assets that are not plant and machinery? I suspect that the loss to the Exchequer for accelerating tax relief on those things would be tiny, but it would take away a huge burden of having to follow a different set of rules.

We also ought to ask, “What do we mean for buildings?” We are now being generous for tax relief on plant and equipment, but not generous at all if a brand-new factory is built. Tax relief is given very slowly on that and even then not on the whole spend. Is that what we want? Or should we be trying to incentivise people to build brand new, modern, energy-efficient factories? We give very little tax relief for office buildings. We want more people to come back to work together in offices, so should we not be incentivising people to build brand-new offices in the right parts of the country, rather than giving no tax relief?

We end up driving an entire leasing industry, because a completely different tax treatment is given where assets are leased or rented, rather than bought outright in someone’s own name. Do we really intend that if someone finance-leases something, they get 100% relief up front? What happens with a hire purchase? All this stuff is so complicated. Having made this radical and expensive change, the Government should go away and think, “What is the future of tax relief for capital items in the UK? How do we incentivise the right form of spend?”

I wish to raise one other question for the Minister to think about. It is very likely that a lot of businesses will be unable to get full relief for this in the first year, because they just will not have enough profit to absorb all their capital spend being relieved in a year. The chances of a medium-sized business that buys a multi-million-pound printing press having multi-million-pound

[Nigel Mills]

profits are low, so it will end up having a loss to carry forward. Such a business will get benefit in the fullness of time, but we will have restricted how much of its losses it can carry forward and use—if it is a business of a certain size, it can offset only up to £5 million. Do we really mean that now? Or do we mean that if a business has spent a load of capital and generated a big loss that is carrying forward, it should be able to relieve that as early as possible when it makes a profit? Do we need to revisit some of those restrictions we have introduced for sensible reasons in the past?

I urge the Minister to commission some work, now that he has made this big and expensive change, on what the whole regime should look like. Do we need all those hundreds of pages of rules and all the compliance effort that has to go in, for what will probably now be relatively small amounts of tax relief at stake in the grand scheme of things?

I wish to discuss a few other clauses. I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill's anti-avoidance clauses. It is absolutely right to extend the punishments we give individuals who recklessly promote tax avoidance schemes that they ought to know do not work and in many cases do not work but carry on trying to sell. It is entirely reasonable to have the sanction of being able to disbar them from being a company director if they carry on doing that. There has been a lot of encouragement for the Government to go further on duties to prevent all manner of economic crimes, so I fully welcome these things.

In Committee, we could perhaps think about whether we are sure we have drafted that measure perfectly. A lot of tax advisers work through limited liability partnerships, but where someone is a member of a limited liability partnership that is promoting unacceptable tax avoidance, they will not be caught by these rules because they are not a director of a company that is doing it. Therefore, such a person will not be disbarred from remaining as the designated member of an LLP, because they are not a director of a company. Is that what we mean? Given that LLPs and their members have to be registered with Companies House, should we not broaden that sanction out to catch as many people as possible? Perhaps the Minister would think about whether we could make some extension to this, to ensure that we are catching everyone engaging in this industry, not just a small subset of it.

Clause 21 has further amendments on pillar two; at times, I think I am the only Back Bencher who supports pillar two. I will continue to support it but, as I said a year ago, the rules are fiendishly complicated. Anyone who tries to read clause 21 and the schedules that come with it will realise they contain an almost impenetrable set of rules for a relatively small number of situations, in relation to a simple principle about subsidiaries in tax havens that are paying less than 15% tax having their tax topped up to 15%, in order to discourage tax havens and the artificial movement of profit.

We have ended up with a hugely complicated shadow tax regime that every company with subsidiaries around the world will have to apply to every subsidiary they have. Even if they are in a respectable country with tax rates even higher than ours, they will have to work out whether they have accidentally managed to trip themselves below that rate. That cannot be what we intend, so can

we try to find a way to filter out most of this work, so that we can catch the guilty but not make life miserable for the innocent?

With those few remarks, I welcome the Bill. The provisions are entirely sensible and I look forward to supporting them. I will have to vote against the SNP amendment, because I want the Bill to proceed today.

3 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats do not support the Bill. It is a deception from the Government after years of unfair tax hikes on hard-working families.

The Conservatives talk about tax cuts, but there are no tax cuts. The autumn statement maintains the Government's unfair stealth taxes through the freezing of tax thresholds, dragging millions of people into a higher band or into paying tax for the first time. Changes to national insurance rates will not even touch the sides after years of tax hikes and spiralling mortgages. Thanks to the Conservatives' decision to freeze tax thresholds, next year someone on a typical salary of £35,000 will pay an extra £400 in tax, and someone earning a middle income of £65,000 will pay an additional £1,200. Meanwhile, the typical mortgage will go up by £220 per month. Nobody is better off after years of this Conservative Government.

Worse still was the deafening silence on health in the autumn statement. The Government should be using any additional tax revenue to tackle the crisis in our NHS, to give people the quality of care they deserve and to let more people return to work to grow our economy. We cannot fix the economy without fixing the NHS. OBR growth forecasts have been halved, largely because people are waiting for NHS treatment. It is a no-brainer that we need to treat the millions of people on NHS waiting lists and allow them to return to work, but this Conservative Government simply do not care.

The Bill offers nothing to households struggling amid the cost of living crisis. It fails to introduce a proper windfall tax on the super-profits of oil and gas producers. That revenue could be used to fund energy support for the most vulnerable, such as doubling the warm home discount and launching a proper home insulation scheme. It could also be used to invest in British farmers, to bring down food prices for the long term.

The Bill fails to reverse tax cuts for big banks, a measure that could fund support for vulnerable mortgage holders and renters. Worst of all, it takes none of the vital steps we need to grow the UK economy, such as launching an industrial strategy, reforming business rates and the apprenticeship levy, and reducing trade barriers for small businesses.

As other hon. Members have highlighted, the creative industries are a major driver of the UK economy and the Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring their continued success. The Finance Bill has some implications for theatre tax relief, which plays a crucial role in enabling the development of new theatre productions. UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre have raised concerns to the Treasury about these implications, which could damage how this essential relief operates. I urge the Treasury to work with representatives from the creative sectors to address these concerns and provide clear guidance on changes to the administration of theatre tax relief introduced in this Bill.

While the Liberal Democrats support of certain measures within the Bill, such as the extension of full expensing, we cannot support any legislation that arises from such a deceptive and unjust autumn statement. Ultimately, the Office for Budget Responsibility says living standards are forecast to be 3.5% lower in 2024-25 than their pre-pandemic level, which is the largest reduction in real living standards since official records began in the 1950s. Households across the country are crying out for real support from this Government, as well as action on the cost of living crisis and investment in our NHS, but all we have heard is more stale announcements that show just how out of touch the Conservative Government are.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I now have to announce the results of today's deferred Divisions.

On the draft Representation of the People (Overseas Electors etc.) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2023, the Ayes were 325 and the Noes were 154, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Equality Act 2010 (Amendment) Regulations 2023, the Ayes were 464 and the Noes were 11, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Representation of the People (Overseas Electors etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, the Ayes were 324 and the Noes were 186, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

3.5 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I praise and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on bringing forward the Bill. As we have previously discussed, it will implement the important measures set out in the autumn statement.

We have already debated some of the key measures that were included in the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill, which was considered in the other place yesterday. I do not want to go over the arguments on fiscal drag and lower taxes, as I have set out my views previously, but I commend the Government for bringing forward those measures quickly and in the right way, as they will go some way to easing the tax pressures the public are feeling.

My right hon. Friends on the Front Bench are well versed in my views on the tax burden, so I will not go on about how about I feel about that or measures we can bring in going forward. However, I would like to press them to ensure that we think about long-term provisions and that the next Finance Bill goes further by raising thresholds for income tax, including for higher-rate taxpayers, and for national insurance.

It is worth noting that in the Budget after the general election of summer 2015, the then Chancellor outlined plans to increase the tax-free threshold to the equivalent of 30 hours' pay at the national living wage. The new £11.44 national living wage rate for 2024 commences in April, so if the tax-free threshold rose to cover 30 hours per week next year, that would equate to £17,000 to £18,000, rather than remaining at £12,570 through to 2028, as currently planned. I press my right hon. Friends to keep that under review—thankfully, all tax measures are under review—and to prioritise uplifts to those thresholds, because we believe in enabling people to keep more of their earnings.

At the same time, when we see GDP figures not growing as fast as they could, as we have today, it is important to focus on how we can grow the economy much more, and with that people's incomes. We want to see more growth in those GDP figures, but they represent the impact of high interest rates and what they mean for inflation. High interest and inflation have placed a burden on businesses and households. The Bill outlines reductions in business taxation that are well timed and well placed but, as ever, they need to be kept under review. Businesses grow the economy by employing more people, which helps economic growth, and that is the space where we, as a Government and a country, want to be.

It will not surprise my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench that I wish to speak to certain clauses, as I have spoken about clauses on business taxes in the past. I want to focus on the provisions in clause 21 and schedule 12 of the Bill, on pillar two and the global minimum corporation tax measures that we are adopting. I have been on record about this previously, but the Minister is also well aware of my long-standing concerns over the implementation of pillar two measures. Binding ourselves to pillar two undermines our fiscal sovereignty and risks deterring investment into our country. I labour this point because we have just seen the publication of our GDP growth forecasts. Obviously there will be revisions in our growth forecasts, even by financial institutions, and we should be mindful of that, but this measure undermines our competitiveness. It is known that some 130 countries have signed up to pillar two, but, unlike the UK, barely a quarter of them are implementing it at the end of the year. Given our economic backdrop and GDP forecasts, I would rather see a delay in the implementation of this measure.

A written parliamentary answer earlier this month shows that just 30 countries are implementing this measure at the same time as we are. They will be followed by Japan in April, and then Guernsey, the Isle of Man, Jersey, Hong Kong and Singapore from January 2025. We also know that the US, our big economic ally, is not likely to implement the measure, so by pressing ahead with this fiscal measure, we are basically limiting the scope that we give ourselves—oxygen, basically—to develop and grow.

When the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023 went through Parliament last year, it contained more than 150 clauses, which were spread over two parts, with a further five schedules, covering 170 pages in total. Many of us remember carrying those weighty tomes into the Chamber and flicking through all the pages. There was a large and complex change in tax laws. But despite that legislation being passed in the summer, this Bill makes even further changes to pillar two and the domestic top-up levels. Clause 21 and schedule 12, which cover those changes, span 55 pages and include multiple amendments to the Finance (No. 2) Act passed only a few months ago. I recall saying that the amendments alone would generate more complexity to the system. I say politely to those on the Front Bench that the 55 pages here point to the complex nature of the matter. The fact that we are amending something that went through the House not that long ago says it all.

No impact assessment has been provided of these measures, which give effect to the accounting periods beginning on or after 31 December 2023. Companies

[Priti Patel]

and partnerships will be impacted by the changes coming into effect in less than three weeks' time, even though the Bill will not receive Royal Assent until next year. We must be cognisant of the burdens that we are again putting on businesses. I am no fan of accountants, but by putting more burdens on to businesses, we are increasing their dependency on accountants and on process, which we should be freeing them from. I ask the Minister to provide us with further details as to why these changes are needed when the previous Finance Act was passed only earlier this year, and with an impact assessment of them.

I would like to understand the merits of the global minimum income tax, and I hope that, in the same way that all tax is under review, Ministers will consider removing all the provisions from our statute book in due course, because other countries will not follow suit or are delaying implementing some of these measures.

I wish to comment on clause 2, relating to research and development tax credits. It merges the current R&D expenditure credit with the small and medium-sized enterprises scheme. These tax credits help and support businesses to invest and take risks, and, importantly, to innovate and grow, set up jobs and employ people. I have previously raised the concerns that some businesses have about the complexity of claiming them and the processes that they experience. I am aware of many businesses that have spent more than a year having their claims investigated, with multiple rounds of questions and inquiries from HMRC officials. There are many live cases, which I will not reflect on now, but previous Treasury Ministers have committed to hold discussions on them.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. In Staffordshire, which is a manufacturing powerhouse, R&D tax credits are vital in driving productivity in manufacturing businesses. Does she agree that it would be good to hear those on the Front Bench make a commitment to reviewing and slimming down that scheme, so that it actually gets those small businesses embracing it and getting the investment that we need?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is spot on. The scheme was set up for a very good reason, which is, effectively, to support entrepreneurship and innovation and to grow businesses. Now we are seeing those businesses saddled with bureaucracy and burdens. What is worrying is the number of small businesses that have been under investigation by HMRC for over a year, as that is now having a detrimental impact on their performance. As a representative not just of Witham, but of Essex as a whole, I can see businesses that have now come together to make wider representations to HMRC and the Treasury about that. I hope that those on the Front Bench will learn from some of these experiences and look at how we can evolve and adapt the process, so that the scheme can revert back to its original premise of supporting businesses. As I have said many times, the only way is Essex. Essex is a county of entrepreneurs and they are the ones who are feeling the pressures.

In his summing up, will the Minister outline the operational aspect of these changes? In particular, what interactions is he having with HMRC about some of the

cases that have been under investigation for more than a year, and the impact that that is having on those smaller businesses? At the end of the day, they are SMEs that are not able to grow their businesses because of these inquiries and investigations. Naturally, that has an impact on the profits that they can then reinvest in their businesses.

I also wish to make a few comments on air passenger duty and the provisions in clause 24. Many of us in this House have spoken about air passenger duty for many years. I have been a long-standing campaigner for reform of this tax to encourage and support economic growth. It is ironic that we are having this debate on a day when the GDP figures have come out as they have. I believe in globalisation—in the sense of more global competition—and in our being more open to the world when it comes to those global dynamic markets.

We should also make travel more competitive and affordable for families, especially as they are struggling with the impact of the cost of living. Reforms that have taken place under previous Conservative Chancellors have been welcome. I query the small increase in the APD rates for 2024-25 in the Bill. Back in the summer, in his speech on net zero, the Prime Minister pledged to scrap plans for new taxes on flying, but the Bill provides for an increase in APD rates, ranging from 50p to £6 per flight. Although they are small increases, they are still increases. They are lower than the rate of inflation planned for and assumed in previous Government statements and OBR forecasts, which is to be welcomed. Therefore, any clarification on what is happening with APD going forward is welcome. Again, that is important for certainty and also for forecast purposes.

On the subject of air travel, I am disappointed that the autumn statement and this Finance Bill do not contain reforms to end the so-called tourism tax. I was one of the few Members to speak on that during the Humble Address debate. If we look at London, our great city, we can see that, at this time of the year, it is a magnet for tourism and for people coming from overseas. It is great for our businesses, great for our country and great for our brands—our British brands and our small brands. Our tourism sector and shopping and retail businesses are losing out to their European competitors as a result of the removal of the VAT refund and the VAT-free shopping and arrangements that had previously been in place. I think that we can reintroduce those measures. In the last debate, those on the Front Bench committed to looking at dynamic modelling in this area, and some external reviews of the potential revenue base. It would be a boost for business and jobs, and we should be looking at all measures to boost economic growth and competition. There are plenty of reports and studies out there. I do not want to labour the point; I know that those on the Front Bench will be aware of them.

It is winter, and we are heading towards a spring fiscal statement. Since 2010, the Government have consistently kept fuel duty down, cutting and freezing rates. This is an opportune moment to remind the public what the Government have achieved on that alone, because it is very important. Families, businesses and households depend upon it, and I very much hope that we will continue to stand up for the measures that we have put in place historically. I urge the Government to commit to maintaining the 5p reduction, and perhaps even to go further where there is fiscal headroom.

Finding fiscal headroom is difficult, but sometimes—I say this as a former Treasury Minister—it can be found when we really look for it.

As the Bill passes through the House and is subject to further scrutiny, I know that my colleagues on the Front Bench and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is dedicated to dealing with the difficult fiscal challenges that we face, will be focused on unleashing future growth by reducing taxes and, importantly, empowering the very businesses that employ people and keep people in their jobs for long-term economic security.

3.21 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I agree with a lot of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) said. I was in this House for 13 years of Labour Government. Twice a year, we had the autumn statement and Budget, and all taxes were reviewed. In not one of those fiscal statements did they change the arrangement for non-doms. Why? Because it brings in more money. I am therefore shocked at the criticism from those on the Labour Front Bench of their Chancellors when in government. What we have with the Opposition is the politics of the magic money pot. The magic money pot is called non-doms, and the Opposition think that it will pay for everything. It will not; because such people are internationally mobile, they will move. The best things to tax are things that do not move, such as property. People can move, and we will not get sufficient money in as a result.

The Government have done a lot of good things. Putting up the triple lock is the right decision to look after pensioners, but those who pay tax might, because their pension will go up, pay more tax. Putting up the living wage is a good thing, because we want a higher-paid economy, but as lower-paid workers' pay goes up, they pay more tax. It is one of the features of the modern world that those in the most successful and highest-paid economies tend to pay more tax. Although the overall tax burden, because of the freeze, has gone up, we need to reverse that, and we have started the process in the autumn statement.

The Government have set out a good long-term plan, which is essentially based on increasing the incentives for business to invest. We have a problem in Britain on productivity. One way of getting productivity up is to get pay up and investment in machinery and equipment up. If we can do that, we can pay for the public services that we all want, on both sides of the House, in terms of better education, a better health service and better outcomes. However, that requires getting productivity up. One of the problems since 2008 has been that Britain has struggled with productivity. Whatever we do, whether it involves incentives, higher pay, or credits for research and development, if it gets productivity up, that has to be a good thing.

I welcome an awful lot of what is in the autumn statement, but we should not look at it as one event; it is part of a series of events brought in by the Chancellor that mean that our national debt is falling over the plan. Our yearly deficit looks like it will be in the 3% range rather than the 4% range. Even the trade gap looks like it is improving. Our economic situation does not look too bad, and when we look over the channel to the EU and the eurozone, our problems seem rather less than theirs, with some of those countries going into recession.

I, too, saw today's GDP figures. I would caution against any flash estimate of GDP. The monthly figures bounce around. I spent six weeks on a Finance Bill Committee during the days of the coalition when every day those on the Labour Front Bench talked about the double-dip recession, which was revised away six months later. The key point is to do the right things for the economy, get productivity up and get the economy growing, and the other things will come right. They will certainly come right when a lot of data is in. Even the three-monthly GDP data is based on something like a quarter of the stats. It is constantly updated over years and months. We should not be too fixated on short-term figures.

One reason I think the economy will grow over the next 12 months is that living standards have gone from falling to rising. That means that ultimately the British consumer ought to come to the rescue of the British economy and get it growing, if the Government can keep a stable economic situation, and pay continues to outstrip inflation, which I am very optimistic about. Brent crude has fallen under \$75, which means that gas prices are now barely above where they were before the invasion of Ukraine. That has improved since the autumn statement. Petrol prices are falling again. This morning, the 10-year bonds interest rate was under 4%. That is a sign that the pressure now is to lower interest rates. The overall Government economic policy is not only to balance the books and reduce taxation in terms of national insurance, which will help 29 million people, but to get interest rates down so that, when people come to refix their mortgages, they can do so at a more reasonable rate. Good progress has been made, but we will not be free with one bound; it will take Budgets, statements and steady persistence. That means not giving in to every request for extra spending, however worthy they are individually. I commend those on the Treasury Bench and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He has put together a good package, and I look forward to what will happen in March.

Before I sit down, I will pay tribute to a Labour Chancellor, Lord Alistair Darling of Roulanish, who was a very modest but very competent man. He faced what would be anybody's nightmare in the Treasury, with banks collapsing. I think that history will treat him well for his management of the economy at that very difficult time. He is missed by this House and I am sure the other place will miss him too.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I echo that tribute to Alistair Darling. I was in the House with him for many years. He was a great politician and an excellent Chancellor of the Exchequer.

David Simmonds will make the last Back-Bench contribution. We will then move on to the wind-ups. I anticipate at least one Division.

3.28 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, having been here to listen to some incredibly insightful and useful contributions from so many colleagues. I will endeavour not simply to repeat those excellent points, but to focus on some additional ones that have been raised in the course of the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin),

[David Simmonds]

the Chair of the Treasury Committee, touched on something that is not in the autumn statement, but that I am sure those of us on the Government Benches will wish to seek further assurances about from Ministers: the tax on education proposed by the Opposition.

I represent a constituency in which there are five independent fee-paying schools, which have certainly been in contact with me to raise their concerns about the Opposition's proposal. Every secondary school that serves my constituency, including the state-funded ones, is an independent school, because they are all academies. Every special educational needs and disability school that serves my constituency is an independent school, including those that have never been part of the state sector but came into existence as charitable organisations with a view to providing specialist SEND services. There are even stables in this country that provide equine therapy to non-verbal autistic children that, because they serve more than one child, are registered as independent schools with Ofsted.

The implications of the proposed policy, which it is said would raise £1.7 billion, would be additional VAT on fees paid by local authorities up and down the land and, more significantly from the Exchequer's perspective, to bring a huge amount of VAT within scope of being reclaimed by that wide variety of institutions. I hope that Ministers will state with great clarity that it remains the policy of this Government that we support the excellence in our incredibly diverse independent sector, which includes both SEND and state-funded education.

We have been challenged to say what has been the biggest achievement of the Government in the past 13 years. For me, it is the thing that forms the backdrop to this Finance Bill and to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's autumn statement: the transformation in the number of people in our country who earn their own living through work. The Office for National Statistics data shows an incredibly clear trend in youth unemployment. Under the last Conservative Government, it was falling and falling; once Labour took office, it began to rise. Since this Government took office in 2010, the rate of youth unemployment has halved. That makes an incredible difference to both the financial wellbeing and, most importantly, the mental and physical health of our young people. It gives people prospects. It gives people hope. It means all our citizens have a stake in the economy of our country.

The same trends are replicated elsewhere. I remember what it was like as an employer trying to engage with the incredibly complicated systems under the last Labour Government, in which so many people were disincentivised to work—especially women who wanted to work part time and fit that around bringing up children. The changes in policy—particularly universal credit and really good childcare offers—have transformed the ability of people in this country to access the workforce over that period. While that has not always meant that those individuals are much better off, the fact that they are able to earn their own living and take pride in having a stake in our economy is incredibly important.

There are particular reasons why this Bill strikes me as important. I would like to develop the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) about tax avoidance stop notices. I have a number of constituents who have been affected by the loan

charge over the past few years, and it particularly concerns me to hear from them that, in some cases, they are still being contacted by businesses trying to sign them up to schemes of the kind that have already got them into significant financial trouble.

I enormously welcome the fact that the Government are taking steps to make sure that that behaviour can be brought to an end and that we do not see any more of our constituents trapped in financial situations not of their own making as a result of the marketing of organisations that should know that, while what they are doing is theoretically and perhaps technically within the law because a loan is free of tax, if it is not a genuine loan and not to be repaid during the person's lifetime, it should be considered part of their remuneration for the purposes of taxation. I welcome the step that the Bill makes in that respect.

The second thing I particularly welcome is the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge. I have heard from a very large number of professionals across my constituency, especially in the NHS, but also in other types of businesses in the private sector. The impact of the lifetime allowance has been the loss of highly experienced staff from those organisations. These are generally people in their 50s and 60s who are at the peak of productivity and have an enormous amount to give, but face a financial cliff edge and are forced by that limit to make a decision to leave a career that, in many cases, they love and enjoy and in which they have much to contribute. In the NHS in particular, the change will enable experienced GPs, surgeons and consultants to return to the workplace or continue working at a higher level than they would have been able to in other circumstances. For that reason, it will benefit our public services enormously, both in productivity and by ensuring that waiting lists, which are already beginning to fall, come down much faster.

Let me turn to some of the measures designed to support our small businesspeople and the self-employed. In politics, the loudest voices in debates about the economy are often those of large corporations with substantial, well-funded public affairs departments. However, we also know from the ONS that around 70% of people employed in the UK economy are in an enterprise with fewer than five staff. The voices of those small businesses, which are the bedrock of our economy, are not heard collectively as often as the voices of big international businesses.

The measures to simplify and reduce national insurance for small businesspeople and the self-employed are enormously welcome, and not just because of the money that they put in people's pockets—it is important for us to remember that point. We heard some scoffing and comments of “big deal” from the Opposition when the reductions in class 2 national insurance contributions were mentioned, but the reductions represent about a quarter of what most households in the UK spend on Christmas, or a significant contribution to a child's school uniform, a summer holiday or maintaining the car. All of those things make a small difference individually and a big one collectively. They send a message to our lower-income but entrepreneurial people that we are a Government who are on their side and keen to get off their backs.

I will finish with two suggestions. The first—to develop again a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire—is to tackle some of the cliff edges in our tax system. The abolition of the lifetime

allowance charge is one example of that. It is clear that around the £100,000 income level—that is a significant sum of money, but one typically earned by many of the public sector professionals on whom services such as the NHS, GP practices and schools depend—many of the benefits of extra earnings begin to be withdrawn. The situation in which two earners on £99,000 a year, with a joint income of £198,000, can continue to enjoy the benefits of tax-free childcare, but if one earner goes to £100,001 a year, those benefits are completely withdrawn, creates a significant marginal tax rate for professionals with children.

I have heard from a number of constituents who work in public sector bodies, particularly the NHS, that they have had to scale back their hours or decline to take on additional waiting list initiative work funded by the Government because the impact of that cliff edge is so financially significant for them. Of course, we see the same impact at that point from the pensions taper. I suggest to my Front-Bench colleagues that, as we think about the public sector productivity strategy, we need to consider how to take out some of those cliff edges so that the people we are asking to work and contribute more, and who are in a position to make a transformational difference to some of our public services, have good financial incentives to do so.

Finally, the OBR has been mentioned a few times in the debate. There is a degree of controversy about whether it is the correct body to provide a view about the sound financial management of our national finances. Having spent a lot of time in the local government sector, it is striking to me that it is a legal requirement for councillors making decisions in any of our local authorities to have before them the financial and legal implications of the decision, whereas in this House we usually decide on policies in a crowded debate with a big row about what we should do and then, sometimes months later, have a scantily attended debate at which the financial implications of the policy are debated and agreed. We do not take the financial implications and the policy decision together. I suggest that Ministers should consider whether, in order to emphasise the sound financial management approach of a Conservative Government, in addition to statements such as those about compliance with the requirements of the European convention on human rights, we should seek to ensure that every Government policy and paper on which this House makes a decision states what the financial implications of that decision might be.

Coming back to the point about VAT on school fees, I will make a forecast: should there be a change of Government, we will find ourselves back in the position that we were in under Gordon Brown. The announcement will be, “We want to spend the extra £1.7 billion that we have assumed, but we can’t actually raise that in taxes because the policy doesn’t work in practice, so we’ll borrow it,” and the £28 billion will become £29.7 billion. In addition, the non-dom money will not be forthcoming, so the Government will say, “We’ll assume how much that might be when we get around to tackling that and add that on to the borrowing as well.” That is the reason why under Gordon Brown we spent something like 10% more in every year than we raised in tax revenue. As a measure to prevent future Governments from running our finances into the ground again, let us make sure that we have that clarity of financial rigour in the

decision making of Parliament, so that when Members cast our vote, we all understand the implications for taxpayers of the policies on which we are making decisions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Tulip Siddiq to begin the wind-ups.

3.41 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): This afternoon, we have been told that the measures in the Finance Bill and the wider autumn statement will deliver the growth that our economy urgently needs. Unfortunately, our leading economic institutions and economists do not seem to agree. Despite the Conservatives’ attempts to distract attention with headline figures, the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has described their numbers as “sort of made up”. The Chancellor wants us to believe he is cutting taxes to give people back more of their pay packets, but the reality—as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) helpfully clarified for the Government—is an average tax rise for working people of £1,200, with nearly everyone who pays national insurance left with a bigger tax bill next year.

The Chancellor may want gratitude and praise for his recent interventions, but the reality is that growth forecasts have been cut for next year, the year after and the year after that. Meanwhile, the Bank of England is forecasting zero growth before 2025. The Conservative party might want us to believe that that is due to events outside its control and that things are starting to improve, but we learned just today from the latest GDP figures that growth fell in October, demonstrating that our economy is still going backwards despite all the warm words we have heard from Ministers. Taxes up, debt skyrocketing and the biggest hit to living standards ever recorded—that is the legacy of 13 years of Conservative government, however much they try to escape from the reality of their record. Only the Labour party has a clear plan to grow our economy by boosting wages, bringing down bills and making working people in all parts of the country better off.

As we have set out, there are a number of specific measures in the Bill that we support and, indeed, have long called for, so we will not oppose the Bill’s Second Reading. For example, we welcome the Government’s decision to heed the calls of industry and make full expensing for businesses permanent, because we know that if the UK is to turn a corner and we are to drive growth in the economy, we need to address our chronic lack of business investment.

While we wait for Committee stage to examine in great detail the decision to consolidate research and development tax relief schemes, it is worth noting that that is the latest of eight separate changes to the R&D regime that this Government have made since the last election. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North took us on a comprehensive tour of the constantly shifting tax policy we have seen from the Tories during this Parliament. It is now clear that by chopping and changing their business taxation and reliefs, from the annual investment allowance to the short-lived super-deduction, the Government have kept businesses guessing and not given them the confidence they need to grow.

[Tulip Siddiq]

The measures set out today do not scratch the surface when it comes to undoing the years of uncertainty for business and investors, while industry is crying out for stability and a long-term plan. The truth is that, despite the words of Conservative Members, the UK is now lagging behind our international competitors when it comes to private sector investment as a share of GDP, at a time when we cannot afford to drag our feet. It is Labour who will address this head-on with a comprehensive plan to boost business investment, working with our businesses to expand and compete with rivals in the US, Europe and Asia.

It is clear from this Finance Bill and the recent autumn statement that this Government lack the imagination, leadership and appetite to transform our economy after 13 years in power. Without that stability, certainty and long-term plan, our businesses will be left unequipped to deliver the growth that we so urgently need at this time. If we do not deliver that growth, the poorest in our society will pay the price as their living standards stagnate. The Government may want us to believe that our economy is turning a corner, but back in reality, millions of people are struggling to make ends meet.

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) asked what the greatest achievement of this Government is. Frankly, I think that is quite a dangerous question, but I will try to answer it for him anyway. Was it crashing the economy, or producing the shortest serving Prime Minister in the history of our country? Was it the tax burden being at its highest since the war, household incomes that will be 3.5% lower next year than before the pandemic or, my personal favourite, the latest growth forecasts showing us plummeting and plummeting even further? Was it—shall I turn to my own constituency—people having to make the choice between turning on the heating and eating? That is the reality facing people in the country after 13 years of a Conservative Government.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: I have one line of my speech left, but I will give way.

Drew Hendry: If, as the shadow Minister says, and I agree, the Bill is this bad, why is she voting for it?

Tulip Siddiq: We are not actually voting. [Interruption.] I think the hon. Member is slightly misguided, as we are not voting.

There are specific measures that we support, but, overall, we do not support the economic plan of this Government. If the Government are so sure about their economic plan, why do they not take their opinions to the public? Why do they not call a general election, and we will see who is smiling and smirking after that?

3.47 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): What a great pleasure it is to close this debate on the Finance Bill on behalf of the Government. I want to thank my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, who is new in post, and to recognise the work of his predecessor and my constituency neighbour in Lincolnshire,

my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who carried out a great deal of work on this Finance Bill in the run-up to the autumn statement.

I will address a number of the points raised in this very good debate—it was lacking on quantity, but high on quality from a number of sources—but before I reflect on the comments, let me reflect on the Bill. Be in no doubt but that this Finance Bill will mean that companies will pay less tax if they invest more. It will simplify and strengthen tax reliefs to bolster innovation, and it makes the tax system fairer and more secure. Taken together, the measures contained in it will strengthen our economy and create more opportunities for more rewarding work in every corner of this country.

I will now turn to the comments made by a number of colleagues. I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, who has carried out significant work on the tax simplification programme with her Committee. The Government are clear that we want the tax system to be simpler and fairer, and to support growth. As she mentioned, the Financial Secretary has written to her just this week setting out the progress we are making on simplification. This autumn statement, and the Finance Bill in particular, has a number of measures, not least the capital allowances and the R&D expenditure credit consolidation. This a step in the right direction, but we are not complacent and we will continue to go further.

I was heartened to hear cross-party support for full expensing. That is in the context of the lowest headline rate of corporation tax in the G7, but the autumn statement announcement, and the provision in the Bill, is a £10 billion-a-year effective tax cut, called for by the IFS, the CBI, the IOD, Make UK, and many other businesses across the country. It is also in conjunction—this is not in the Bill—with a business rates package that will see a freeze for more than 90% of rate payers in this country.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) made a comment about the oil and gas sector. Let me be clear: this Government have resolute support for our domestic oil and gas sector, and its 210,000 jobs. She called for a “proper tax” on oil and gas companies, and I can tell her that we already have one of the highest rates of windfall tax in the world. The energy price levy strikes the right balance between providing support for families and businesses through an energy crisis—namely through the energy price guarantee, which effectively paid 50% of people’s energy bills—while also encouraging investment to bolster our energy security. Conservative Members want to see the sector’s profits reinvested to support our domestic economy, our jobs, and our domestic energy security. Investment allowances within the EPL help to do that, and the energy security investment mechanism, which I announced in June, will help to provide banks with certainty in their modelling as they provide financing to the oil and gas sector, and as they are part of the transition to net zero.

Along with SNP Members, the hon. Member also said that she would like an increase in tax on banks, but she failed to mention that tax on banks has increased in recent times from 27% to 28%. She failed to mention that the tax revenue contribution from banks has increased significantly from £17 billion in 2010, to more than £33 billion today. That helps to pay for our NHS, our

education, our defence, and many other public services that we all rely on. We want our banking system to be internationally competitive, and to keep the 1 million jobs that it employs stable and secure.

Many Opposition colleagues have mentioned living standards, and they are right. Conservative Members care deeply about that issue. That is why as part of the autumn statement, we increased the state pension by 8.5% as part of the triple lock which, by the way, has brought 200,000 pensioners out of poverty since it was introduced by a Conservative Prime Minister. We have also uprated benefits by 6.7%, and uprated the local housing allowance, which will benefit 1.6 million households across the country. That was on the back of a £289 billion welfare budget. Under this Government 400,000 children have been brought out of absolute poverty, and we have seen the Government step in with significant support through two global shocks of covid and the energy price spike, with £500 billion of support to get people through.

Drew Hendry: Will the Minister give way?

Gareth Davies: I will not give way. We are going to proceed I'm afraid; the hon. Gentleman has had his chance.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) who has great consistency when it comes to reducing the tax burden. She has made clear her views on our tax system, and we agree with her. We have a keenness to bring taxes down, but we will do it in a responsible way that is in line with sustainable public finances. She also made clear her consistent campaign on pillar 2, and we are very alive to her concerns. I am pleased that the Chancellor recently met and wrote to her, following the two fiscal statements. I understand her concerns about sovereignty, and I assure her that the pillar 2 provisions do not impact on sovereignty or indeed on competitiveness. The provisions in the Bill are technical amendments that we will discuss in more detail as it goes into Committee.

Finally I thank, as always, my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) for his positivity about our economy, which does not always get reported. For me, his critical point was about looking at the long-term performance of the economy, not just at the provisions we are putting in place. Instead of looking month by month, we should look at long-term provision.

In conclusion, in January this year, the Prime Minister set out his priorities for the Government. Three of them were economic and, since then, we have seen our inflation cut in half and our economy is expected to grow in every year of the OBR's forecast period. That is half a decade of uninterrupted growth. Because we are reducing borrowing, debt is now forecast to fall. Put simply, we have turned a corner, and it is because of the actions of this Government, this Prime Minister and this Chancellor.

This is a Conservative approach through supply-side reform, and it is in stark contrast to the Labour party's debt-driven ambitions. We know that its plans to borrow some £28 billion every year for green initiatives will put at risk the great progress that we and the British public have achieved. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has issued a stark warning for Labour's plans. It said they will increase inflation and drive up interest

rates, leading to more debt, higher rates, higher inflation, fewer jobs and more tax. That is the Labour party's playbook. We cannot let that happen, and we will not.

We want an economy driven by enterprise, and by workers and by businesses throughout this country who push and strive, making us more competitive abroad and resilient at home. We want a tax system that pushes up businesses and workers who want to succeed, not that pulls them down when they do succeed. The autumn statement was a statement for growth, investment, work and reward. The measures in the Bill will deliver much of that, so I strongly commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 46, Noes 296.

Division No. 32]

[3.56 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah	Linden, David
Black, Mhairi	MacAskill, Kenny
Blackford, rh Ian	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Blackman, Kirsty	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Brock, Deidre	McDonald, Stuart C.
Brown, Alan	McLaughlin, Anne
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Monaghan, Carol
Chapman, Douglas	Nicolson, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Cherry, Joanna	O'Hara, Brendan
Cowan, Ronnie	Oswald, Kirsten
Crawley, Angela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Day, Martyn	Sheppard, Tommy
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Smith, Alyn
Doogan, Dave	Stephens, Chris
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Thewliss, Alison
Edwards, Jonathan	Thompson, Owen
Fellows, Marion	Thomson, Richard
Flynn, Stephen	Webbe, Claudia
Gibson, Patricia	Whitford, Dr Philippa (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Grady, Patrick	Williams, Hywel
Grant, Peter	
Hanvey, Neale	
Hendry, Drew	
Hosie, rh Stewart	
Lake, Ben	
Law, Chris	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steven Bonnar and
Gavin Newlands

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Baldwin, Harriett
Afriyie, Adam	Baron, Mr John
Aiken, Nickie	Baynes, Simon
Aldous, Peter	Bell, Aaron
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Benton, Scott
Anderson, Lee	Beresford, Sir Paul
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Berry, rh Sir Jake
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bhatti, Saqib
Ansell, Caroline	Blackman, Bob
Argar, rh Edward	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Atherton, Sarah	Bowie, Andrew
Atkins, rh Victoria	Bradley, rh Karen
Bacon, Gareth	Brady, rh Sir Graham
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Braverman, rh Suella
Bailey, Shaun	Brereton, Jack
Baillie, Siobhan	Bridgen, Andrew
Baker, Duncan	Brine, Steve
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Bristow, Paul
	Britcliffe, Sara
	Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, rh David
 T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike

French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela

Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Tellers for the Noes:
 Amanda Solloway and
 Mark Fletcher

Question accordingly negated.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 54.

Division No. 33]

[4.11 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey

Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heapey, rh James

Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryllyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom

Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill

Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim (*Proxy
 vote cast by Mr Marcus
 Jones*)

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Amanda Solloway and
 Mark Fletcher**

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
 cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
 cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Davey, rh Ed
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote
 cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Dyke, Sarah
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hendry, Drew

Hobhouse, Wera
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 MacAskill, Kenny
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
 cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
 vote cast by Marion
 Fellows*)
 Wilson, Munira

Tellers for the Noes:
**Steven Bonnar and
 Gavin Newlands**

*Question accordingly agreed to.
 Bill read a Second time.*

FINANCE BILL: PROGRAMME

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing
 Order No. 83A(7))*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Finance Bill:

Committal

(1) The following shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House—

- (a) Clause 1 (capital allowances: permanent full expensing etc for expenditure on plant or machinery);
- (b) Clause 2 and Schedule 1 (new regime for research and development carried out by companies);
- (c) Clause 21 and Schedule 12 (Pillar Two);
- (d) Clause 25 (rebate on heavy oil and certain bioblends used for heating);
- (e) Clause 27 (interpretation of VAT and excise law);
- (f) Clauses 31 to 34 and Schedule 13 (tax evasion and avoidance);

(g) any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of the Clauses

and Schedules mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (f).

(2) The remainder of the Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House

(3) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be completed in one day.

(4) The proceedings—

(a) shall be taken on that day in the order shown in the first column of the following Table, and

(b) shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

Proceedings	Time for conclusion of proceedings
Clauses 1 and 2 and Schedule 1; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses and that Schedule	2 hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill.
Clause 21 and Schedule 12; Clauses 31 and 32 and Schedule 13; Clauses 33 and 34; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses and those Schedules	4 hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill.
Clauses 25 and 27; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses	6 hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee etc

(5) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 18 January 2024.

(6) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

(7) When the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Public Bill Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill shall be proceeded with as if it had been reported as a whole to the House from the Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

(8) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(9) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

Programming committee

(10) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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

That the draft York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Opposition to parking charges in Audlem, Cheshire

[P002890]

4.24 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Audlem, Cheshire in the Eddisbury County constituency,

Declares their opposition to the introduction of parking charges to public car parks in the village, and the coterminous reduction in its on-street parking capacity, pursuant to a change.org petition of 1,808 signatures opposing the same; further that the petitioners believe that such measures would threaten the vibrancy of Audlem as a countryside business, tourism, events and infrastructure hub for residents and visitors, and reduce access for vulnerable service users in a rural area which is readily accessible only by private car and one regular bus service.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that such proposals are only developed and deliberated on following rigorous and renewed local public and economic consultation, having due regard to Government policies supporting rural high streets, services, businesses, communities, and healthcare, amongst others.

[P002889]

Proposed West of Ifield development

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This petition to stop the West of Ifield development is supported by over 7,300 local people. Homes England has put forward proposals for up to 10,000 housing units on a greenfield site that is prone to flooding, and these proposals would put intolerable pressure on already strained local public infrastructure such as highways and doctors' surgeries. The petitioners therefore

“urge the House of Commons to ensure the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities work with Homes England to ensure these proposals are withdrawn.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Crawley

Declares that proposals put forward by Homes England for up to 10,000 housing units on land to the west of Ifield are unsustainable, and would see the loss of greenfield sites and intolerable pressure on local public infrastructure

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities work with Homes England to ensure these proposals are withdrawn

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Ulverston Library

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I rise to present this petition on the urgent need to reopen Ulverston library in my Barrow and Furness constituency. Since Ulverston library's closure due to an electrical fault, the amazing library team have done a remarkable job in setting up two pop-up libraries but, as the 600-plus signatures on this petition attest, local people want a full service to be restored as soon as possible. Our library enables far more than just the lending of books and is a true community hub. The petitioners therefore “request that the House of Commons urge the Government to help ensure that Ulverston has a full library service restored as soon as possible.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that the Ulverston Library offers a vital service to a local people from lending books to supporting literacy, to enabling community groups, and bringing local people together; further that Ulverston Library must be re-opened as a matter of urgency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to help ensure that Ulverston has a full library service restored as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002891]

Flooding: River Severn Catchment Area

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

4.27 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I now consider flooding to be the single biggest barrier to my Shrewsbury constituency's economic development. We are now flooding on an annual basis, and the sheer misery, damage and destruction that takes place in my town every single year is causing my council, local authorities, businesses and homeowners a great deal of financial stress.

In February 2019, when the Coleham area of Shrewsbury flooded, I invited the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), to visit. I will never forget the day he went around Shrewsbury with me to meet many businesses—butchers, hairdressers and cafés—and homeowners, or the sheer, raw emotion that we experienced and saw on the streets of Shrewsbury.

People's properties were devastated, and one has to remember that an Englishman's home is his castle. People's personal possessions and homes were badly affected. I know one lady in my constituency whose home is flooded every single year. It was a very emotional time for both the Environment Secretary and me, but it was an important visit, because I introduced him to Professor Mark Barrow from Shropshire Council. He helps to run the River Severn Partnership, which is a consortium of the councils all the way down the river. We have had enough of acting in silos; we understand the key aspect from an emotional intelligence perspective—the interdependence of all the communities along the River Severn. My council, Shropshire Council, has reached out to other councils all the way down the river to create the River Severn Partnership, so that as a consortium they can speak with one voice in lobbying the Government.

I am pleased to inform the Minister that in 2019, after that visit to my constituency, we received £50 million of taxpayers' money, not only to help us with some small flood defence schemes in the constituency, but, most importantly, to start the work of creating a plan to manage the River Severn holistically.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the extraordinary amount of work he has done over the past few years in achieving a momentous investment, potentially, in the whole of the River Severn valley. He has also been successful in securing £50 million for his constituency. The last Prime Minister but one was also incredibly generous to Wyre Forest, in committing £10 million to the Bewdley flood defences, which are going up at the moment. Some action is being taken, as well as the excellent work my hon. Friend is doing.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I put on record how much my team and I appreciate his consistent support in working with me on the caucus that I manage here in the House of Commons.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important Adjournment debate. My constituency contains the River Severn catchment, the River Teme and the River Avon, so it is also prone to flooding. Does he agree that it is wonderful that the Environment Agency has delivered schemes in Upton upon Severn, Pershore, Uckinghall, Kempsey and Powick? Does he also agree that it would be good if the Environment Agency would complete the schemes it is working on in Tenbury Wells and in Severn Stoke?

Daniel Kawczynski: I am happy to echo those sentiments, with the Minister listening and making notes. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the constructive way in which she has worked with me and others on the River Severn caucus. I wish her every success with getting those flood defences completed.

Although the flood defences that my hon. Friend refers to are essential—they are critical in the short-term to medium-term—there is also a long-term objective of managing the River Severn holistically. Hitherto, we have had the idea of building small flood barriers. They are important, but inevitably they push the problem further downstream; that is counter-intuitive to a certain degree, because we are protecting ourselves and making it more difficult for the community further downstream. Later in my speech, I will explain how, now that we have left the common agricultural policy, we want to start to manage this river holistically.

I pay tribute to Mark Barrow of the River Severn Partnership and to the Environment Agency, whose new chief executive, Mr Duffy, I met recently. As a result of our work, we have presented a business case to the Minister for flooding, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I am grateful to her, because she has visited my constituency twice in the past year. At my invitation, she has come to Shrewsbury, sat with the officials of the River Severn Partnership and been presented with the business case that we are now sharing with the Government on how we intend to manage the River Severn. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all her work, as well as her determination and ability to visit my constituency to hear our proposals at first hand. Following those discussions, the then DEFRA Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), visited Shrewsbury earlier this year at my invitation. She was presented with the business case that has now gone to Government and she was impressed with what she saw.

Finally, as I mentioned, I invited the chief executive of the Environment Agency, Mr Duffy, to visit Shrewsbury two months ago, which he did, and he was presented with the proposals as well. Those proposals have been developed through a collaboration between the caucus of 38 Conservative MPs whose constituencies the river flows through. As I said to the Chancellor, "You have heard of the blue Danube—well, this is the blue Severn", because 38 of us Tory MPs have the river flowing through our constituencies. I presented the proposals to Mr Duffy and he understood the importance of the plans.

We presented the plans to the Chancellor at a meeting of the River Severn caucus last month, and I know some of his senior special advisers and assistants are currently examining the business model in order to

understand its economic impact on the midlands. We hope and expect the Chancellor to have positive things to say to us in the spring Budget.

I also raised the matter at Prime Minister's questions today. The Prime Minister kindly recognised the many dealings I had with him when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He promised that the new Chancellor will look at the proposals and stated that the Government have already given an extra £6 billion for flood defences. I recognise that and thank the Government for allocating an extra £6 billion of taxpayers' money to flood defences. However, the situation is grave across the whole of the United Kingdom and I have heard that a lot of that money has been spent in London. Protecting our capital city is obviously a priority, but I would argue that £6 billion is a drop in the ocean, if you would pardon the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker, compared to what is required.

We are not prepared to go to DEFRA to ask for a piece of that £6 billion. We want to go directly to the Chancellor, give him a business case and a business plan, and explain that if £500 million is invested today, there will be an economic uplift in the west midlands, which is the industrial heartland of England, of over £100 million gross value added. That is what is in the business case that has gone to the Chancellor.

I am proud to have campaigned for Brexit, but I am even prouder that my constituents in Shrewsbury voted for Brexit. One clear benefit of leaving the European Union is that we no longer have to comply with the ghastly common agricultural policy, which was difficult for us to benefit from and almost designed to be uncondusive to English farming practices. Now that we are no longer part of the common agricultural policy, we can, for the first time, pay and incentivise farmers and landowners to hold on to water. That was not allowed under the common agricultural policy. Now that we have left, for the first time we can go to farmers and say, "If you want to be part of a major solution to flooding, we can incentivise you financially to hold on to that water and manage that water during extreme times of flooding." We can also pay landowners for helping to be part of that solution.

I have had two very productive discussions with two Secretaries of State for Wales. I think you were once a shadow Secretary of State for Wales, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you were brilliant. You will know, from having held that position, the extraordinary interdependence that we have in western England with our neighbours in Wales. We are all part of the same Union, and, of course, this solution to managing Britain's longest river can be achieved only if we have collaboration and co-operation from our partners across the border. Having represented a constituency on the English-Welsh border, I am acutely aware of the need to have schemes that enhance and promote the interdependence of both of our countries, as we share this one island together.

I am very grateful for the close support from my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), who is the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. We collaborate on many things, but he has already stated to his local press that he supports these plans. A counter-intuitive person would say, "No, I am not interested. That's your problem. You deal with it" but he has said that he understands how some of his landowners and farmers

could benefit enormously from financial payments if they were part of the solution. He understands the potential of the vast economic investment in his constituency, particularly at a difficult time for farmers and agriculture.

Shropshire Council has taken the lead with the River Severn Partnership. I chair a caucus of 38 Conservative MPs who have this river flowing through their constituencies. We are approaching—I say this unequivocally—a general election. Every year, Mr Blair and John Prescott came to Shrewsbury. In 1999, they ostensibly walked around Shrewsbury, saying, "Don't worry, folks, we are going to protect you." Well, we had a flood barrier, which protects a car park and 38 houses and that was the extent of the help that we got from Mr Blair and Mr Prescott. We cannot have just little sticking plasters on this problem, bearing in mind that this situation will only get worse—I think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you and I can agree on that. Given climate change and the number of months and days of floods that we are experiencing, this situation will get increasingly worse for our children and our grandchildren. If we can invest today in an innovative, progressive and modern way of holistically managing rivers, that will be not just a prototype for other parts of the United Kingdom, but, potentially, a massive British export worldwide. Think about the suffering and the misery in Bangladesh. Think about all the millions of people around the world who face economic hardship and sometimes death as a result of these rivers spilling over. If we can invest in this technology of managing rivers, it could be of huge benefit not only to our exports, but to our international development aid programme.

Finally, with £500 million—that is what is in the business case—we can show an uplift of more than £100 billion for the west midlands economy. I am not begging for £500 million; I am saying to the Chancellor, "This is the return on investment that you will get if you invest in this scheme." I know how difficult the public finances are at the moment, which is why I am so proud of the way in which we have presented the plans.

I am grateful for the constructive dialogue that I have had with the Minister. I welcome him to his position, and I know that he will do a superb job. We need his support. I have sent his officials copies of the business case that has been presented to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am asking for the Minister's understanding of our proposals, and for him to lobby the Chancellor with me ahead of the spring Budget. I am sure he will agree that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will need more than £6 billion in the years to come to manage flooding.

Finally, let me tell the House about my constituent Mr Bob Ashton of Cambrian House, an apartment building that floods almost annually. He has taken me to see it, and the residents themselves have built flood defences to protect the entire building; a sort of electronic shield goes up to protect it. That is a very innovative way of trying to protect a whole apartment building, and I pay tribute to Mr Ashton and his fellow residents for their innovation. They live in Coton Hill in Shrewsbury. I must declare an interest, because I too live in Coton Hill, an area of my constituency that floods annually.

I go to see businesses in Shrewsbury not just when they are flooding, but 30 businesses tell me their takings during the floods and in the weeks after them, and they

[Daniel Kawczynski]

are significantly down even two weeks after the flooding has subsided. As we know, the media are brilliant at highlighting when Shrewsbury is under water, but they are not so interested in broadcasting that the floods have subsided and we are back to normal.

Flooding is the single biggest barrier to Shrewsbury's economic development. We have more listed buildings—Edwardian, Elizabethan and Georgian—than any other town in England. We are so proud of our architectural beauty. Charles Darwin was born in Shrewsbury. We are a very historic town and we are very proud of our town, but, as I say, the flooding is causing horrendous problems for my citizens, adversely affecting people's ability to get insurance for their properties and putting tourists off coming to our town when they see the consequences of it.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on a subject that I feel so passionately about. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate to build his case for dealing with the challenges that not only he and his constituents but those across the whole River Severn catchment area are experiencing with flooding. Not only was my hon. Friend successful in securing an Adjournment debate, but he did so for a day on which we could continue to speak about the subject for another couple of hours if we wished. That enables me not only to set out the position that the Government are taking nationally, but to pick up on some of the specific concerns that he has rightly voiced to me, as the Minister with responsibility for flooding, on behalf of his constituents.

Of course, the Government and I sympathise with my hon. Friend's constituents, and all households and businesses that experience regular floods. I was taken by the point my hon. Friend made at the beginning of his speech, when he talked eloquently about having hosted the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who visited his constituency back in 2019 to meet some of his constituents who had unfortunately been flooded, get to grips with the emotional challenges of flooding for them, and its impact not only on their property, but on their livelihoods, their families and some of their businesses.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend was able to introduce the then Secretary of State to Professor Mark Barrow, who heads up the River Severn Partnership, to make sure that the Department is alive to my hon. Friend's ambitions for his constituency and further afield. The number of times he has raised this issue in the House is extraordinary, and he did so again earlier today at Prime Minister's questions; I was in the Chamber to listen to not only his question, but the Prime Minister's reply from this very Dispatch Box.

As climate change leads to rising sea levels and more extreme rainfall, the number of people at risk from flooding and coastal erosion continues to grow. That is

why this Government are acting now to drive down flood risk from every angle. Given that we have some time, I want to set out what the Government are doing at a national level, and then I will come back to some of the specifics that my hon. Friend raised.

Our long-term policy statement, published in 2020, sets out our ambition to create a nation more resilient to future flood and coastal erosion risk. It includes five ambitious policies and a number of actions that will accelerate progress to 2027 and beyond, to prepare the country and better protect it against flooding and coastal erosion in the face of more frequent extreme weather. We are now halfway through our significant £5.2 billion flood and coastal erosion six-year investment programme. In that time we have invested more than £1.5 billion to better protect more than 67,000 homes and businesses in England alone, taking the total number of properties protected to more than 380,000 since 2015 and more than 600,000 since 2010.

That record £5.2 billion investment is double the £2.6 billion investment from the previous funding round, which ran from 2015 to 2021. That programme delivered more than 850 flood defence projects to better protect 314,000 homes, nearly 600,000 acres of farmland, thousands of businesses and major pieces of infrastructure. That demonstrates how dedicated this Government are to dealing with not only the challenges that my hon. Friend has raised in the River Severn catchment, but other challenges across England.

With double the investment, we will continue to build on past achievements and improve flood resilience for all. However, it would be insincere of me not to point out the findings of the recent National Audit Office report on resilience to flooding, which highlighted that our current investment programme has faced challenges. It is absolutely right that, like previous Ministers, I ensure that we are delivering for constituents right across England who need protection for their homes and for the businesses that are impacted, and that we audit the money being spent so that we can get better protection for all.

Unfortunately, the start of the programme was impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in fewer people being available to develop projects and delayed the mobilisation. However, I am pleased to be able to reassure all hon. Members that we are well on course to delivering the funding that we have allocated during this funding round and that, despite the challenges, 67,000 properties have already been better protected from flooding under the programme, which started in April 2021. The delays do, however, mean that the original target of better protecting 336,000 properties by 2027 is under review, and I am asking my officials to give me further advice on that. The Environment Agency's revised forecast is that 200,000 properties will be better protected in that time. I am currently in discussions with the Environment Agency on how we can make sure that the budget is spent properly.

We are ensuring that projects are delivered in every region, and we are providing flooding protection across the country. In April 2023, we announced the first communities in England to benefit from the £100 million frequently flooded allowance. The first 53 projects will be allocated more than £26 million in total in 2023 and 2024, safeguarding 2,300 households and businesses alone. In September 2023, we announced a further

round of £25 million through the natural flood management programme; successful projects will be announced early in 2024.

As part of that wider approach, we have also funded a £200 million flood and coastal innovation programme, which has three elements: £33 million to develop a coastal transition accelerator programme in a small number of areas that are exposed to significant risks of coastal erosion; around £150 million to support 25 innovative projects over six years to improve their resilience to flooding and coastal erosion; and £8 million for four adaptation pathways in the Thames and Humber estuaries, the Severn valley and Yorkshire, enabling local places to better plan for future flooding and coastal change and to adapt to future climate hazards. In addition, we continue to invest in flood and coastal defence maintenance with an extra £22 million per year for the current spending review period to 2024-25. Currently, 93.5% of major flood and coastal erosion risk management assets are in target condition, but that is not where we need to be; we aim to achieve 98% relatively soon.

In addition to all that new funding, we are working closely with partner agencies to tackle surface water flooding. Unfortunately, 3.4 million properties in England are at risk of surface water flooding, and the Environment Agency and the Met Office are investing an additional £1 million over the next three years, through the Flood Forecasting Centre, to advance the modelling, forecasting and communication of surface water flood risk. In addition, the Government are focusing on water companies, where we will be investing over £1 billion between 2020 and 2025 to reduce the impact of flooding on communities across England and Wales.

Let me address the specific points that were raised in the debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, because he is representing not just himself but 38 other colleagues as part of a wider caucus. I know the hard work that he has done with that caucus, and not just in the House. Not only has he already lobbied me in my first three weeks in this role, but I know that he lobbied the last flooding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), on several occasions, including on visits, and he raised his case at Prime Minister's questions today. I know that his business case has been submitted to the Chancellor, and it has already reached my desk. I await the opportunity to digest it—it arrived only today—so that I can speak in more detail not only with my officials, but with those at the Treasury.

Let me pick up on the points made by my hon. Friend Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) about the Environment Agency scheme at Tenbury Wells and the Severn Stoke alleviation scheme. I want to reassure her that the outline business case for the Tenbury Wells scheme has been approved by the Environment Agency, which is reviewing design options for it. It has been advised that the scheme is complex, but nevertheless, we will ensure that it progresses. While there have been some complexities associated with the Severn Trent flood alleviation scheme, I reassure my hon. Friend that the Environment Agency is working to secure a contractor, so that the agency and I can be reassured that that scheme will be able to commence construction from spring 2024.

As has been pointed out, we have already invested £50 million in the English Severn and Wye catchment between 2015 and 2021, protecting 3,000 homes. That programme has invested almost £8 million within Shropshire alone, better protecting over 200 homes, and under the new funding round that covers the period between 2021 and 2027, we expect to invest another £150 million to reduce flood risk and better protect a further 3,000 homes and businesses across that catchment. Almost £45 million of that funding will be invested specifically in Shropshire, better protecting almost 600 homes and businesses. That is in addition to the summer economic recovery fund, which has already allocated £40 million of investment to the River Severn catchment. Projects in Shropshire that will benefit include the highly innovative Severn valley water management scheme, which is already shaping landscape change in the upper catchment across England and Wales.

I want to pick up specifically on a point rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham. We are now out of the European Union, and will be coming out of the common agricultural policy. That creates opportunities for not only DEFRA but the Treasury to look at how we can incentivise more upstream schemes, so that we increase the lag time of the water getting into the River Severn. I am very keen to explore those options as part of my flooding portfolio and alongside my DEFRA colleagues, making sure that those schemes work not only within urban environments, but upstream in more natural environments.

The Severn valley water management scheme aims to reduce flood risk across Shropshire, but will also secure water resources for the future, benefiting and improving water quality, natural assets and the environment. The Environment Agency is working closely with local authorities, landowners and communities to identify places where it is feasible and effective to deliver such innovations. It is likely that not all funding will need to come from Government—that is important, because we need to secure value for money, not only for the taxpayer but from public funds and private initiatives. I am happy to look at the options that are available; no doubt, those options might be included in the business case that has already been submitted to the Chancellor, but that is something that I, with my officials, will concentrate on as well.

As I mentioned, the Severn valley will also benefit from £1.5 million in funding as one of the adaptation pathway projects. The River Severn adaptation pathway project will help ensure that people and wildlife within that vibrant river catchment can adapt and be resilient in the face of the changing climate we are all experiencing. That suite of pathways and actions is being developed, and will help manage flood risk and ensure that water resources can be used much more effectively across the River Severn catchment, not only today or tomorrow but well into the future. The county of Shropshire is also benefiting from approximately £3.5 million of maintenance of current flood risk assets to ensure that we can continue to be effective in better protecting communities from flooding, not only those in my hon. Friend's constituency but others across the River Severn catchment.

In total, since 2015, approximately £245 million has been committed to reduce flooding in the River Severn valley area, demonstrating this Government's commitment

[Robbie Moore]

to areas impacted by regular flooding. As I have said, I will pay deep attention to the business case that has been presented to my colleagues in the Treasury, and on the back of this Adjournment debate, I will be more than happy to have a meeting with my hon. Friend and members of his caucus, which he is doing an excellent job of leading.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am very grateful for the very positive way in which my hon. Friend is responding to the points I have made. Will he also commit to visiting Shrewsbury in the new year to meet the River Severn Partnership and to see, in practice, some of the proposals that we wish to create?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before the Minister responds, may I urge him to face forward? I know the temptation is to look at Mr Kawczynski, but when he is facing forward he is speaking into the microphone, and it can be picked up by *Hansard*.

Robbie Moore: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I was coming on to that point. I am happy not only to pay my hon. Friend a visit, but to meet his colleagues who have been working on the business case in his constituency to make sure that we are able to take fully into account the proposals being put forward to my Department. I am always happy to get out and practically speak to people on the ground who are being negatively impacted by flooding. I hope that a visit, which I am more than happy to do, will be of value not only to him, but to me in my role.

I want to reiterate that I fully understand the anxiety and frustration felt by my hon. Friend's constituents, which is why I am absolutely committed to providing full attention to and focus on flooding and flood resilience. Storm Babet provided significant challenges to many local authorities across England, and I hope that some of the reassurance I have provided him, through the amount of money that this Government are spending across England, gives him some sense of reassurance about how importantly flood resilience and flood improvement projects are taken by this Government.

I also want to outline quickly some other work that falls into other Departments. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has activated the flood recovery framework and its package of support includes these measures. There is the community recovery grant, from which eligible local authorities will receive funding equivalent to £500 per flooded household to support local recovery efforts. I know this has been rolled out on the back of Storm Babet and others. In addition, there is the business recovery grant, from which the Department for Business and Trade will provide eligible local authorities with up to £2,500 for each eligible small and medium-sized enterprise that has suffered severe impacts from flooding that cannot be recovered from insurance. There is the council tax discount, under which the Government will reimburse eligible local authorities for the cost of a 100% council tax discount for a minimum of three months. Finally, there is the property flood resilience repair grant, and areas flooded by Storm Babet have been able to benefit positively from that grant. The scheme offers a package of funding for property owners directly flooded by a specific weather event, and grants them up to £5,000 per property to install flood resilience measures. In addition, these grants will be supported by the existing Bellwin scheme, which can provide financial help to local authorities for the immediate actions that they take in the aftermath of an emergency, such as setting up rest centres and temporary accommodation.

To conclude, I want to reassure my hon. Friend that his debate has been absolutely welcomed by me as the Minister. He used the opportunity before this debate to speak to me very specifically on the level of detail with which his business case is being put forward, and I am more than happy to meet him and to pay a visit to his constituency so that I can understand the business case in more detail. Let me be clear: we will continue to improve the resilience to flooding of our villages, towns and cities across England and the wider UK, and we will do that in a holistic manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thought we were going to have a two-hour speech. I was looking forward to that.

Question put and agreed to.

5.9 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE (NORTHERN IRELAND)

That the draft Representation of the People (Overseas Electors etc.) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 23 October, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 325, Noes 154.

Division No. 29]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon

Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Farron, Tim
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foord, Richard
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam

Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John

Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McGinn, Conor
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will

Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Williams, Hywel
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha

Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate

Question accordingly agreed to.

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Equality Act 2010 (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 464, Noes 11.

Division No. 30]

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee

Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan

Baldwin, Harriett	Daly, James	Glen, rh John	Jones, rh Mr David
Barclay, rh Steve	Davey, rh Ed	Glindon, Mary	Jones, Fay
Barker, Paula	David, Wayne	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Jones, Gerald
Baron, Mr John	Davies, rh David T. C.	Gove, rh Michael	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Baynes, Simon	Davies, Gareth	Graham, Richard	Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Begum, Apsana	Davies, Dr James	Grant, Mrs Helen (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Jones, Ruth
Bell, Aaron	Davies, Mims	Gray, James	Jones, Sarah
Benn, rh Hilary	Davies-Jones, Alex	Grayling, rh Chris	Jupp, Simon
Beresford, Sir Paul	Davis, rh Mr David	Green, rh Damian	Kane, Mike
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Davison, Dehenna	Greenwood, Lillian	Kawczynski, Daniel
Betts, Mr Clive	De Cordova, Marsha	Greenwood, Margaret	Kearns, Alicia
Bhatti, Saqib	Debonnaire, Thangam	Griffith, Andrew	Keegan, rh Gillian
Blomfield, Paul	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Griffith, Dame Nia	Keeley, Barbara
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Grundy, James	Kendall, Liz
Bowie, Andrew	Dixon, Samantha	Gwynne, Andrew	Kinnock, Stephen
Bradley, rh Karen	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Haigh, Louise	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Docherty, Leo	Halfon, rh Robert	Kniveton, Kate
Brady, rh Sir Graham	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Hall, Luke	Lamont, John
Braverman, rh Suella	Donelan, rh Michelle	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette	Largan, Robert
Brereton, Jack	Double, Steve	Hammond, Stephen	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Brine, Steve	Doughty, Stephen	Hands, rh Greg	Lavery, Ian
Bristow, Paul	Dowd, Peter	Hanna, Claire	Leadbeater, Kim
Britcliffe, Sara	Dowden, rh Oliver	Hanvey, Neale	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Brown, Ms Lyn	Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hardy, Emma	Levy, Ian
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Drax, Richard	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Browne, Anthony	Drummond, Mrs Flick	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Lewer, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona	Duguid, David	Harrison, Trudy	Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Bryant, Sir Chris	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Hart, Sally-Ann	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Buchan, Felicity	Dunne, rh Philip	Hart, rh Simon	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Eagle, Dame Angela	Hayes, Helen	Lightwood, Simon
Burghart, Alex	Eagle, rh Maria	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Lloyd, Tony
Burgon, Richard	Eastwood, Mark	Healey, rh John	Lockhart, Carla
Butler, Rob	Edwards, Jonathan	Heappey, rh James	Loder, Chris
Byrne, Ian	Edwards, Ruth	Henderson, Gordon	Logan, Mark
Cadbury, Ruth	Edwards, Sarah	Henry, Darren	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Cairns, rh Alun	Elliott, Julie	Higginbotham, Antony	Lord, Mr Jonathan
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Hillier, Dame Meg	Loughton, Tim
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Hinds, rh Damian	Lucas, Caroline
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Elmore, Chris	Hoare, Simon	Lynch, Holly
Carden, Dan	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Hobhouse, Wera	Mackrory, Cherilyn
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Eshalomi, Florence	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Maclean, Rachel
Carter, Andy	Esterson, Bill	Holden, Mr Richard	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Cartlidge, James	Eustice, rh George	Hollern, Kate	Madders, Justin
Caulfield, Maria	Evans, Chris	Hollinrake, Kevin	Mak, Alan
Chalk, rh Alex	Evans, Dr Luke	Holmes, Paul	Malthouse, rh Kit
Chamberlain, Wendy	Evennett, rh Sir David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Hopkins, Rachel	Mangnall, Anthony
Champion, Sarah	Everitt, Ben (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Howarth, rh Sir George	Mann, Scott
Chishti, Rehman	Fabricant, Michael	Howell, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Maskell, Rachael
Churchill, Jo	Farris, Laura	Howell, Paul	Mather, Keir
Clark, rh Greg	Farron, Tim	Huddleston, Nigel	May, rh Mrs Theresa
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Fell, Simon	Hudson, Dr Neil	Mayhew, Jerome
Clarke, Theo	Firth, Anna	Hughes, Eddie	Maynard, Paul
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Fletcher, Colleen	Hunt, Jane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	McCarthy, Kerry
Clarkson, Chris	Fletcher, Katherine	Hunt, rh Jeremy	McCartney, Jason
Cleverly, rh James	Fletcher, Mark	Huq, Dr Rupa	McCartney, Karl
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Fletcher, Nick	Hussain, Imran	McDonald, Andy
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Foord, Richard	Jack, rh Mr Alister	McDonnell, rh John
Colburn, Elliot	Ford, rh Vicky	Jarvis, Dan	McGinn, Conor
Collins, Damian	Foster, Kevin	Javid, rh Sajid	McKinnell, Catherine
Cooper, rh Yvette	Fovargue, Yvonne	Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil	McMahon, Jim
Costa, Alberto	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	McMorris, Anna
Courts, Robert	Frazer, rh Lucy	Johnson, Mark	McVey, rh Esther
Coyle, Neil	Freer, Mike	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Mearns, Ian
Crabb, rh Stephen	French, Mr Louie	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Menzies, Mark
Creasy, Stella	Fuller, Richard	Johnson, Gareth	Mercier, rh Johnny
Crosbie, Virginia	Garnier, Mark	Johnson, Kim	Merriman, Huw
Crouch, Tracey	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Johnston, David	Metcalfe, Stephen
Cruddas, Jon	Gill, Preet Kaur	Jones, Andrew	Miliband, rh Edward
Cryer, John	Girvan, Paul	Jones, Darren	Miller, rh Dame Maria
Cunningham, Alex			Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Daby, Janet			Mills, Nigel
Dalton, Ashley			Mishra, Navendu

Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Owen, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Randall, Tom
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simmonds, David
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spellar, rh John
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stringer, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick

Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Benton, Scott
 Blackman, Bob
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Green, Chris
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Kruger, Danny
 Longhi, Marco
 Millar, Robin
 Mortimer, Jill

Question accordingly agreed to.

POLICE

That the draft Representation of the People (Overseas Electors etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 23 October, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 324, Noes 186.

Division No. 31]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David

Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Farron, Tim
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foord, Richard
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony

Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McGinn, Conor
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria

Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David

Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr James
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty

Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah

Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Doogan, Dave
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew

Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael

Mather, Keir
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Hussain, Imran
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote
 cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Williams, Hywel
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 13 December 2023

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

Copper Wire Telecoms

9.30 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the withdrawal of copper wire telecommunications networks.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. Sometime ago the Government decided that the copper wire network—the analogue service—would be switched off in about December 2025. I can understand the reasoning behind the decision that the switchover would be industry led. We can see the sense in that, given how the telecommunications market operates these days. We have come some way from the days when everything was held under the General Post Office, which was the responsibility of a Government Minister. Although I understand the logic, I am afraid I have to bring a fairly simple and blunt message to the Minister this morning: it simply is not working.

It is apparent from the communications that I have with the industry and my constituents that the private companies are focusing on what matters to them rather than the needs and wishes of their customers and the communities we are elected to serve. The Government, after having made the decision that the switchover should be led by the industry, now have to step up to the plate, take charge and make sure that it is done properly. We have until the end of 2025 to get this right, but in terms of Government policy and given that there will be a general election in that period, we know that that sort of timescale can pass in the blink of an eye. This matters to people throughout the United Kingdom. It predominantly causes concern in rural communities because, in the switchover from analogue to digital communications, we have been the ones who have constantly been left behind—although I know that there are also urban communities that will be affected.

In Shetland and Orkney, our particular concern is around the resilience of the digital system—the fibre-optic system to which we will be transferred. For people in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, power cuts are significant events because they are so rare. For us they are just part of everyday living, especially in the winter months. Occasionally we suffer catastrophic weather episodes such as we had last December, when parts of Shetland were left without electricity for six days. I am not always Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks' biggest fan, but it really put in a shift along with council workers, the coastguard and other emergency services. It did a remarkable job in getting people connected back to electricity and making sure that those in the more hard-to-reach parts of Shetland were properly cared for.

Such events are occasional but not unknown. As we all suffer more and more catastrophic weather events in future, we have to assume that there will be a growing

pattern of disruption for which the new system, when it is introduced to us, has to be fit for purpose; at the moment, with the lack of battery powered back-up, there simply is not that. Having a telephone line that we can plug in to the socket at the wall is very often the only means of communication left to people in such circumstances.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing a really important debate. One such incident happened in the lakes and the dales and Eden just a week and a half ago when we had serious snowy weather, which locked people in their communities, and many places—the Langdales, Coniston, Eden Valley and so on—lost electricity. During that time, people lost access to digital connectivity because the electricity went down. Having access to analogue and copper wire telephones gives people the opportunity to get care and reach out for help—to not be isolated. Does he agree that the Government need to get a handle on this issue to make sure that isolated communities are not cut off from the communications they will desperately need in these far too frequent extreme weather events?

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely do. By way of illustration, I received an email from a constituent in Walls, in the west side of Shetland, describing what life was like for him, his family and his neighbours during the six-day power outage last year. He said:

“Power was down...Internet was down...Heating was down (Our house has a gas cooker thank goodness)...The roads were impassable to cars for most of that period. 4x4 pick-ups could get through latterly into the week...The local shop was closed because it needed power to price items...Advice from the emergency services was that in the event of an emergency we were to wave down a passing police car. (This rather desperate advice was pretty hopeless, but more hopeless given road condition)...I need to emphasise that during this week an analogue phone with self-powered phone line was THE critical means of external contact with the outside world other than listening to the news on a battery-powered transistor radio.”

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am interested in my right hon. Friend's point about the passing police car; we have precisely six police officers in the entire vast county of Sutherland. Does he agree that in a constituency such as mine, the distances are so vast and the time it takes for the emergency services—an ambulance, a doctor or whatever—to get to where they need to be is so long that any delay in getting the call through because of what he describes is unacceptable?

Mr Carmichael: It is absolutely unacceptable, because it would be unacceptable to people living in a town or a city, and if it is unacceptable to them, surely it must be unacceptable to those of us who live outside the major conurbations.

Alongside my Scottish Parliament colleagues, I run regular digital forums. They started originally to raise issues relating to the transfer from analogue to digital television—we have been going that long—and they have morphed over the years to deal with concerns about broadband, superfast broadband and mobile connectivity. We held two such sessions in Kirkwall and Lerwick just last month, which representatives from EE, BT, the Scottish Government's digital team and

[Mr Carmichael]

other mobile companies attended either in person or online, and their inability to answer questions was remarkable. The people in the audience asked fairly basic questions about how the switchover would work and what it would mean for them, but the people on the panel just looked at each other blankly and shrugged. The companies have no proper understanding of the scale of the problem.

Ahead of this debate, we have received a number of briefings. I draw the attention of the House to the one from BT Group, which runs to two sides of A4—that is quite instructive in itself. It is, if I may say so, fairly heavy on assertion and light on evidence to back up the assertions. It explains that the change is inevitable, and we know that the copper network will have to be replaced eventually, but BT says that it

“will provide a better quality, more resilient service for the future.” Well, it is that question of “more resilient” that I would query; and, again, I see nothing in the briefing that gives me particular comfort.

The briefing does deal with resilience. It says:

“In the event of a power outage, a back-up, resilient solution for Digital Voice will be required to remain connected.”

There’s a blinding statement of the obvious if ever I saw one. It goes on to say:

“We advise customers to use their mobile phone where possible, as the simplest way to remain connected.”

Well, a number of my constituents would love to use a mobile phone to stay connected, but for obvious reasons—which BT has been telling me for the past 20 years are too difficult to solve—they are unable to do so. Very often, getting a mobile signal requires them to go out of their house and down to the bottom of the garden because they will not get a signal inside the house. Doing that in the middle of winter, in the dark in a howling gale—I can tell you because I have done it—is not much fun. The briefing goes on to say:

“They typically have a longer battery life and calls to the emergency services can be made over any mobile network, including over 2G. Our battery back-up unit provides up to four hours of standby time and up to two hours of talk time to keep customers connected during a power outage. This is available free of charge to vulnerable customers and others may purchase one if they wish.”

Four hours of back-up time in a six-day power outage such as we had in Shetland really is not what we need. It concludes:

“For the very small proportion of customers (less than 1%), with insufficient mobile or broadband connectivity to make a call to the emergency services, we will continue to meet our commitments under the Telephony Universal Service Obligation (USO) to ensure they remain connected.”

That is a pretty good idea, but I suspect that many of those 1% of customers live some distance away from the person who wrote that briefing. It is remarkable that, despite the assertion, there is absolutely no indication of how that laudable aim will be met.

I had a much better briefing from Alice Mathewson, the development manager for North Yell Development Council. With Members’ indulgence, I will take a bit of extra time to read this into the record. Alice was at the digital forum in Lerwick, and she wrote:

“As you are aware I asked a direct question about this to all panel members at your digital forum in Lerwick last month, and

no one could give any viable response to this. In addition, the lack of awareness from everyone on your panel was both quite telling and very frightening.

Our community is well used to power outages and disruptions caused by storms. However, the storms seen on our island in December 2022, which resulted in some areas being without electricity for four days, have reminded us of our vulnerability and the need to improve our resilience.

Coupled with electricity outage was severe snow and high winds. All communications on and to the island failed, including mobile and landline services, and travel to and within Yell came to a standstill. Whilst luckily there were no fatalities locally, there were a number of near misses particularly among the more vulnerable in our community, and a complete communications black out on the island, including landlines, resulted in difficulties undertaking welfare checks and an inability to put out any form of emergency response request.”

North Yell Development Council is taking this properly seriously. It is setting up a network of community hubs so that there will be places people can go where there will be warmth, food and whatever other support they need, and they will have connectivity through very high frequency radios. The briefing says:

“We intend to put VHF radios in these hubs in order to try and have some form of emergency communication for our communities. This will be limited in its scope and is a step back to a predigital age. However, it is at least some form of solution, which is more than was offered by anyone on your panel. It also will not help communities outwith our island.”

That, I suggest, gives a proper understanding of the scale of the challenge. It is light years away from what we have seen from the telecommunications companies.

There are particular concerns about availability for older people in these communities who rely on telecare services—for instance, pendants that they can press when they are in difficulty. My father, who is now living on his own at 92, has a little box that sits in the corner of the room, and just when it is least expected—at about 6 o’clock at night—a rather bossy voice booms around the room, saying, “Have you taken your pills yet?” These are examples of the ways in which we are able to help people who want to remain in their own home to do so, in communities like the one I represent. Without the availability of these services, we know what will happen. The families who live closer or elsewhere in the country will quietly, one by one, say, “Come on, you can’t continue to live here. You need to move into the town or come and live with us.” In that way, choices expected to be available to people in other communities are taken away from ours, which becomes denuded of people who want to remain there.

Finally, I get a steady trickle of complaints about one particular issue. I cannot yet say that this is a business practice, though it appears it may be, and we need to get to the truth: people tell me that they have had their analogue line switched to a digital line by BT, without being told what was happening and without proper consent being obtained. The undertakings we get from BT are in relation to vulnerable people and all people over 75. As I said, I cannot yet say that this practice is widespread, but I do see a trickle of these complaints coming in; my caseworkers deal with them and it causes me concern.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has been outlining the problems faced by his rural-based constituents, many of which are

replicated in parts of Northern Ireland. We managed five or six years ago to negotiate a confidence and supply deal with the previous Government, part of which has resulted in fibre-optic cables being fitted. That means that many people are not suffering the same complaints and delays as they did previously. Perhaps that technology could be rolled out in isolated communities in places like his constituency.

Mr Carmichael: Absolutely. As I said earlier, we know that the copper network is not going to last forever and that a solution has to be obtained. The bottom line is that that requires two things: resource and political determination. The reference to the confidence and supply arrangement is not lost on me in that respect. The resource will doubtless end up as an arm wrestle between the companies and the Treasury. The political determination can come from the Minister. That is absolutely necessary if the Government's stated end is to be achieved. This can be his moment to shine, and I hope to hear from him that he is prepared and looking forward to stepping up to the challenge.

9.48 am

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. It is an important issue, not just for my constituents and his, but across the country. I am thinking in particular of rural communities but also of the elderly and vulnerable communities that he mentioned.

The United Kingdom has embarked on a transformative journey of departure from traditional copper wire networks that have long underpinned the country's communication infrastructure. Copper wire has been the backbone of telecommunications and still provides a vital service lifeline for many residents. However, I am conscious that the advent of digital technologies and the exponential growth of data usage have rendered copper wire networks less capable of keeping up with modern needs.

Copper wire networks are limited in bandwidth and data capacity, impeding the ability to deliver high-speed internet and accommodate the data-intensive services demanded by consumers and businesses. I am conscious that the withdrawal of copper wire networks is in line with the UK Government's commitment to nationwide broadband expansion, and it is a crucial component of the country's digital strategy, to ensure that remote and underserved areas have access to a reliable, high-speed internet.

Although that transition holds the promise of improved connectivity and technological advancement, it also raises valid concerns that warrant careful consideration and proactive measures. Upgrading the entire infrastructure from copper to fibre-optic cables not only requires substantial investment but it requires meticulous planning. There are cost implications and logistical complexities, and the need for widespread implementation raises concerns about the pace and scope of the transition.

In this country we did the digital TV transition very well. Led by industry, it worked exceptionally brilliantly. I should also point out, however, that in my constituency there are those who do not subscribe to internet or satellite TV. A substantial number of coastal communities only get access to 15 Freeview channels, rather than the

plethora that many others do, because they rely on a relay, rather than a direct, transmitter. All of a sudden, the service where people can pick up a phone and dial anywhere in the world is going to change. We should therefore be mindful of not having a worse service for our constituents who, for whatever reason, choose not to have broadband services, but still want to have that connection around the world.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has discussed, bridging the digital divide and preventing communities from being left behind is an important task, not only for Government but for Ofcom and the telecommunication companies. I am aware that making the transition is an industry-led initiative and not directly Government policy. As I have pointed out, I fully understand why not only BT but other internet companies have decided that that is the way forward, and I do think they have been listening. However, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, we have seen an increasing number of storms and longer power outages, and it is those lengthy power cuts that really worry people. Indeed, right now, the recommendation to vulnerable communities or vulnerable people is to make sure they have a back-up analogue phone that they can plug into the socket in case of those sorts of issues, particularly as more and more people use electronically charged phones. It is therefore concerning to see how quickly we are approaching the industry's self-imposed deadline on the transition.

I am conscious, and my right hon. Friend the Minister will know, how much mobile phone coverage has expanded since 2010—it is extraordinary. The number of transmitters has increased, and the Government have made it easier to put them up. I am not aware of the specific issue in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, but I can imagine. We talk a lot about how many places in the country have access, but I expect that there are several of us who represent those who do not have quite the same level of access, and we still want to see a fair deal for our constituents.

Can my right hon. Friend the Minister challenge Ofcom about its maps of coverage? I am conscious that Ofcom says parts of my constituency are covered by a variety of servers but, thinking out loud, the Deben peninsula, Sutton, Shottisham and areas like that suffered in the storms, were cut off and people could not do things such as phone for an ambulance and similar unless somebody was able to get into a tractor and drive through the floods to go somewhere where they could get a signal. It is those sorts of real-day issues that I know the Government are concerned about. That is why I hope their discussions with Ofcom and Openreach are ongoing, in order to think that through.

I appreciate that we will be discussing rural broadband later today, although I will be in the Treasury Committee so cannot join the debate. The same issue with Ofcom and access to a mobile signal is pertinent, with more and more people wanting to use the internet, so the same request will be made again. Indeed, there is a debate tomorrow about the merger of Vodafone and Three. I strongly say that that presents a real opportunity for significant investment in more transmitters around the country. I am concerned about the suggestion that Three being part of the Hutchison Whampoa empire is somehow dangerous to our country. Far from it—they are the same people who own Felixstowe port, Superdrug and Greene King and provide electricity for at least a

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

third of the country. As we move forward and think about our infrastructure, I know the Government continue to keep security uppermost. They took the action a few years ago when they decided to remove a certain supplier—Huawei—from an amount of the infrastructure in this country. Nevertheless, we need to tread with confidence as we move forward.

Can my right hon. Friend the Minister update us on what has happened elsewhere in Europe with the copper switch-off, which is under way in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and if we can learn lessons for those final communities that are quite hard to reach in that regard? It would be good to get some clarity. Different years have been given for when the switch-off will happen—the end of 2025 was one example, and more recently I have seen Openreach talking about 2027. It would be useful to get an update on exactly where we are on that. For what it is worth, I think we should even consider asking for it to be pushed back until 2030, but I accept that Ofcom issued guidance a few years ago. I do not know if that has been updated; it issued advice initially in 2018. However, I give credit to BT and its Digital Voice migration. It has listened: it paused the Digital Voice migration for a year, and in particular it looked at how it will support people with a particular telecare device, to which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred. People who have only landlines today are people of a certain age and customers who have no mobile signal, but that comes back to my earlier point: I am afraid that we cannot just trust the maps put out by Ofcom.

On the power situation referred to by the right hon. Gentleman, an hour is simply not enough. Okay, we might get something with four hours, but we need to work that through and consider how we could have community hubs or similar. Parts of Scotland are much bigger geographically, but the constituency I represent is about 300 square miles in size. Our district council is the largest by population, stretching from Felixstowe to Lowestoft, so as a rural part of Suffolk we are pretty extensive. I hope that some further work can be done there.

I appreciate that the number of people who do not have an internet connection is becoming lower and lower, but the percentages mean that that is still hundreds of thousands of people. The Government have made it a requirement that people can get an internet-based line without having to take a package, but we need to ensure that costs do not escalate so that that is prohibitive for people who still want the security of a landline.

I hoped and assumed to some extent that Ofcom had sorted this out a few years ago. Some of the issues the country has faced and the bodycheck caused by covid have knocked back some infrastructure projects and other transitions that we need to undertake, but it is important not just for BT and Openreach but for Ofcom and the Government to listen carefully on consumer protection and seek assurances that nobody will be left behind. It is not just about trying to get everybody on broadband; it is about ensuring that people have confidence in a lifeline when they pick up the phone if they need help or if they suffer the isolation of not being able to have a phone call. We must ensure that is guaranteed not only now, but for generations to come.

9.57 am

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate, because letters from BT about the switchover have already started landing in North Shropshire and, as one might imagine, a number of people are concerned about it.

We have discussed the topic at length. The right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) covered some of the points that I will make. The plans to remove copper wiring from landline telephone networks are problematic, mainly because of the contingency plans in place when there is a power cut. We all accept that analogue phone lines have reached the end of their serviceable lives: repairs are difficult and expensive, and the whole network is becoming difficult to maintain. We need to bring the telephone network into the 21st century, so moving to a digital system that offers better connection with higher sound quality seems like a good solution. However, as we have discussed, the problem with anything digital is that when we get into a rural area, we need a good plan B—and probably a plan C—for when things go wrong. We are all extremely concerned about the issue of power cuts, which are obviously not as bad as they are for an island community, but they still pose serious threats, even in places such as North Shropshire. In bad weather they occur frequently, and they regularly span longer than just a few hours. Storm Arwen in 2021, shortly before I became an MP, left some of my constituents without power for six days. It is an issue for all rural areas as well as those island communities.

As we have discussed, voice over internet technology requires a power connection. If people are cut off from a power source, they cannot contact anyone, including the emergency services. The official plan B is to have a battery back-up. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland pointed out, a battery back-up lasts only for a few hours, which is not long enough for a number of different events in an average winter, and certainly not long enough for some of the more extreme weather that we experience once every few years.

The other back-up plan is a mobile phone. Obviously, a solar-powered pack can be used to charge a mobile phone and keep it going through the worst power outages, but—and I think the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal covered this—lots of people in rural areas do not have a reliable mobile signal. Ofcom has said that 13% of the land area in North Shropshire is made up of partial notspots, so many residents do not have a choice of mobile provider if they want a signal at home. Ofcom also says that 3% of the UK cannot access a 4G signal at all.

I, too, have real concerns about the Ofcom maps. The lived experience of my constituents is that they often do not have any kind of signal indoors, even in places where Ofcom thinks they do, and that, if they do have a signal, it can be intermittent. For example, no one in my house received the emergency test signal that was sent to people's mobile phones last year, yet we are technically in a good 4G area with indoor coverage from a number of providers. Because my husband has a home phone and a personal phone, he has two different

providers, and we did not get an emergency test signal on either of them, so we know that those maps are unreliable.

To go slightly off topic, a mobile phone that functions at home but not at work is not a huge amount of use. There is an issue about the importance of being able to get a signal from all providers in all areas. I shall come on to that in a second.

Ofcom has said that landline providers have to continue to provide people with access to a telephone line even in the event of a power cut, but if people cannot prove that they do not have a mobile signal, how will that happen? I cannot prove to Ofcom that I do not have a mobile signal, because its maps say that I do. On occasion I do, but often I do not. I am worried about how residents in that situation will prove that they need an alternative back-up.

The shared rural network is supposed to address the problem of a poor mobile signal. It has promised to deliver a 4G signal from at least one mobile provider to 95% of the UK by 2025. The important thing is that we are talking about the 5% that is not included in that promise. It is supposed to be a partnership between mobile operators and the Government to fund masts so that they can be upgraded or built in areas that receive poor coverage. That is welcome: we want more investment in mast infrastructure. Having done some work on the issue, however, I am concerned about some of the things that I have been told by mobile operators. The three mobile operators that are not EE, which is BT's mobile operator, have told me that EE has offered them exorbitant rates to share mobile masts, so those masts have been essentially cut off from them. The three other network operators are upgrading their existing masts and in some instances building new ones. Those will have shared equipment on them, but they will not have EE's equipment.

The roll-out will continue to be patchy, and it will still cause people a number of issues about which network to choose and whether the service will function both at home and at work. It would be much more effective to have legislation that required the operators to share their equipment at a reasonable rate or which allowed customers to roam between providers, as they do for their emergency signal. At the moment, people cannot roam to make a call to a friend or relative, as they may well want to do during a power cut, but they can roam to call the emergency services. We need to look at that technology and expand it further.

Ofcom reports that only 45% of indoor premises receive a signal from all mobile operators but that 96% receive a signal from at least one. In my experience, that is not true, but still we are talking about the 4% of people who do not receive a signal indoors. If someone who has no signal has fallen over and needs to make a call in an emergency, they will not be helped.

Overall, the most important thing is that we need to address this mobile coverage problem. We need to bear in mind, if there is a big power outage in the area, that the mast carrying the mobile signal may well be out of power too, so it is not a fail-safe back-up to a copper line when there is a six-day power outage, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland described.

I would like to raise the issue of telecare devices, most of which historically have used copper wire technology. I have been reassured that there will be a proper roll-out and they will be upgraded as appropriate, but I wonder whether the Minister could provide us with any detail of how that is being tested, just to give some reassurance to my constituents who are concerned about whether they can continue to use those devices.

I want to touch on access to broadband. In North Shropshire, we are—I hope—lucky to be at the forefront of the Project Gigabit roll-out and, again, we are grateful for that. Project Gigabit plans to reach 9,000 of the 12,000 hard-to-reach properties in my constituency. Again, that is great, but it is the 3,000 properties that will not have a decent broadband service that we continue to be concerned about.

Rural communities are already disadvantaged regarding communication possibilities. We need to ensure that when we switch from the outdated copper wire technology, we have a robust back-up plan for those people who will be without power potentially for days on end. If someone cannot call an emergency service, they really are living in the dark ages compared with the rest of the country. Someone in my constituency might have to wait seven, 10 or 11 hours for an ambulance if they fall over and break their hip. That is assuming they have a functioning phone signal and call as soon as the problem occurs. If they cannot get in touch with anybody and have to attract the attention of a neighbour living many hundreds of yards away—just to summon help in the first place—they are in a pretty dire situation. I hope the Minister will be able to reassure us that we have properly thought-through plan B and plan C back-up plans to ensure that my constituents are safe should a big power cut occur.

10.7 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). The majority of people probably have no idea about this subject—certainly no idea of the implications for them. For me, this is a debate about resilience, about what we do when things do not work as they should and about back-up plans. When dealing with climate change, unexpected power outages and extreme weather, we need back-up plans. If we did a quick poll in the room of how many people have 10 litres of water, three days' supply of food and a torch with back-up batteries in their house, we would probably all fall short, but that is what we need. We also need a phone signal and to be able to contact people.

I will briefly digress to address the point made by the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) about the Vodafone-Three merger. She talked about the areas in which Three is already involved. When she mentioned it was the same people who are in charge of x, y, and z, she did not say they are the same people who have close links to the Chinese Community party. There is a real naivety to think that all is fine and that we can hand over critical infrastructure in this manner, but that debate takes place tomorrow.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) set out well the reasons why the switchover is happening and the advantages it will bring to do with better signal, clearer calls and lower energy use. That is fantastic, but we need to ensure that everything works as it should when the switchover takes place.

[Carol Monaghan]

With new telephone lines working via the internet, all landline users will first need a broadband line, which not everybody has. Traditional telephone lines are run largely by Openreach and Virgin, private sector organisations that have taken the decision to retire these networks. Communication providers such as BT, Sky and TalkTalk are moving their customers over to fibre lines by December 2025. In fact, I believe Virgin hopes to have its customers moved over before then. The Government have said this change is industry led, but in practice it is a bit more complicated. The complexity of the current broadband market means there are more than 600 providers with 600 different processes, each managing the change in their own way. That could leave the consumer vulnerable, and certainly in a position where information is not properly communicated to them.

Analogue lines, of course, have back-up power, so they can work without an independent power supply if a property is affected by a local power cut. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland talked about the issues with his rural island constituency. I appreciate that power outages are far more common there, but even in urban constituencies and in cities, we do have power outages; more than that, wi-fi goes down regularly. Over the past week, the wi-fi in my house went down six times—that I am aware of—and twice while I was in the middle of a meeting. That was really problematic, and it would certainly be problematic for a vulnerable person who has fallen over. Although I understand the specific reasons why the right hon. Member brought this debate, the issue is not specific to rural constituencies.

Currently, personal alarms and fall detectors operate over the analogue network. It is estimated that around 1.7 million people in the UK use such devices, and they will be at risk if we do not get this switchover right. How will a personal care device work on a digital line if there is a power cut or the wi-fi is down? Those are more common occurrences than the Minister might like to admit. Upgrading those devices to the digital network—changing them so they can operate—is also going to be extremely costly, considering the number of people using them.

The Government have said that the change is industry led, possibly to wash their hands of it. Local authorities, which are often concerned with the care of vulnerable individuals, have been given no financial support for this change. Where will the money to upgrade those devices come from? There is also a lack of information, particularly from service providers. Despite that, I do not believe there are any plans for a national awareness campaign, by either Government or Ofcom—maybe the Minister can tell me otherwise. That is something we need to consider.

On top of that, there is also the potential for this switchover to create opportunities for criminals to target vulnerable constituents. There may be a potential increase in criminality through the selling of devices at inflated prices, selling vulnerable individuals new broadband packages that they may not use when all they use is a phone line, or perhaps charging for unnecessary work in their properties. We all need to be aware of those possibilities.

In summary, what is it we need? We need clear information—a campaign from Government to let people know what is happening. The timescale for this switchover has to be stretched. December 2025 will come up on us very quickly. From what we have heard this morning, many things clearly have not been considered. We need a back-up plan for when the internet goes down, and not just for when there are power cuts, because the internet often goes down even without power cuts. We need to know what specific interventions will take place in rural areas. Finally, returning to my initial point on resilience, we need to think more carefully about how we all consider our own resilience. Do we have the means to cope with extreme weather? We will be getting more of it.

10.15 am

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is always a delight to see you in your seat, Mr Mundell, chairing our proceedings with such grace and elegance. It is a great delight to commend the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on getting this debate today. We have campaigned together on many issues over the years, not least on the death penalty around the world. I am always a bit worried about his constituency, because there seem to be so many murders in Shetland of late. I am sure it is good that the BBC is making so much programming in Shetland, but honestly, virtually everybody on the peninsula must have been subject to murder, involved in a murder, or interviewed by the police at some point—I do realise it is fictional.

Mr Carmichael: This is not known and not admitted, Mr Mundell. [Laughter.]

David Mundell (in the Chair): Plea noted.

Sir Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman made some very good points and I will come on to them in a moment.

It is good to have the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) here with us, who made some very important points. She referred to the debate tomorrow on the potential merger between Vodafone and Three. I will also not be there, because I shall be at Glenys Kinnock's funeral. The Minister will have a different shadow tomorrow; my place will be taken admirably by another Chris from the shadow Front Bench, also from south Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans). I somewhat disagree with the points that the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal made, but anyway, those will be elucidated tomorrow.

It was good to hear from the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who referred to notspots, which I think she said covered 13% of her constituency, and the fact that 3% of people in the UK have no 4G signal. We are also 51st in the world for 5G signal. We are all aware that there are quite a lot of issues in terms of mobile and internet connectivity that apply to large sections of the United Kingdom. Somehow, we have not really managed to seize this with the energy that some other countries have managed.

Carol Monaghan: I apologise to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), because I meant to mention her point about mobile signals indoors. I think any of us who have tried to have a mobile phone call on

the parliamentary estate will know that mobile signals indoors are temperamental at least. Older buildings can be difficult, because of the thickness of the walls. Modern buildings can make it difficult for mobile signals too, because of the amount of steel on the outside of them. Having a mobile signal outside does not necessarily mean there is a mobile signal inside.

Sir Chris Bryant: I will come on to that point about the difference between inside and outside, which certainly applies to homes in the Rhondda. The point was also made by the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal. I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) was saying that the signal on the parliamentary estate was temperamental or that the MPs were—maybe it is a bit of both. The hon. Lady made other good points about the potential for criminality. This is not a point that I have heard elsewhere. The Minister may want to refer to it later.

One of the biggest problems with this debate is that the vast majority of people in this country would have absolutely no idea what we are talking about. In fact, I would guess that of the 650 MPs, barely 10% would know what we are talking about. That is a potential problem, because if the public does not know what we are talking about, there is a danger for other people to exploit that lack of understanding and knowledge. Several Members have referred to the fact that this is primarily an industry-led, rather than Government-led, project. They are quite right, but the Government have a significant responsibility in this area. Towards the end of my speech, I will come on to a few things that I think the Government may want to look at.

There are real, legitimate concerns. PSTN—if 650 MPs were asked to say what that acronym stood for, my guess is that we would be lucky if 10 of them knew the answer—stands for public switched telephone network, and I only know that because I am reading it out.

The complete lack of public understanding of the issue is significant. The industry is extremely diverse, with roughly 650 providers in England alone, let alone the rest of the UK. As has already been referred to, BT has decided to delay its digital voice roll-out, and instead of a national roll-out by the end of December 2025 there will be a region-by-region roll-out, which adds a degree of complexity to any kind of national understanding of this issue. Indeed, I would argue that there is even less clarity about what is happening now than there was back in 2022.

As has already been said, some devices rely on PSTN. Security alarms are one. I would guess that quite a few MPs have security alarms. I wonder how many of those alarms are reliant on PSTN; I have no idea.

Helen Morgan: I will just highlight that point by drawing on personal experience. New security alarms do not rely on the copper network, for that reason, but they are reliant on a mobile signal, so if there is no mobile signal, they will not work.

Sir Chris Bryant: Indeed. That is a point I will come on to again later.

The hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to telecare devices, with 1.7 million people in the UK relying on them. I am not quite sure what percentage of those devices are still on PSTN, but

I would guess that it is a pretty high. One of the problems that plagues the debates on this issue is that we do not have reliable data and statistics, so the Government should try to ensure that we do.

A significant number of traffic lights rely on PSTN. There was a time in Russia when people in the Russian Federation thought that a red light meant that they should drive very fast, which was a bit of a problem. Then there was a problem because all the traffic lights in Russia went off at 10 o'clock at night, which led to other problems. I do not know whether the British Government know how many British traffic lights rely on PSTN, but maybe the Minister will be able to enlighten us later.

Then there is closed circuit television, or CCTV. There is a wide variety of different systems of CCTV up and down the country. Many of those systems will now have transitioned, but some have not.

I feel very old-fashioned in saying this, but fax machines are another thing. I saw a fax machine a couple of weeks ago in a hospital, and it is extraordinary that some of our public institutions still rely on fax machines because other forms of data interoperability simply do not exist.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) made it a mission to get rid of fax machines from the NHS, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman will agree that fax is still the single most secure way to communicate information, partly because of its ancient technology.

Sir Chris Bryant: Indeed. However, I would argue that relying on legacy systems is dangerous for our public institutions, because we have to pay a lot of money to keep and maintain them, and they do not have a great deal of resilience. Of course we also know that if someone sends a handwritten letter, that may be more reliable than some other forms of communication. Anyway, the point is well made that we still have fax machines. Therefore, there is a wide variety of areas where we need to take cognisance of the impending danger if we go too fast down the route that we are discussing this morning.

Ofcom has also identified a series of different vulnerabilities—people who are more vulnerable than others in relation to age, disability, physical and mental health, and income. One of my biggest concerns as shadow Minister with responsibility for digital is that 18% of poorer homes in the UK have no internet to home at all—18%. That is a problem for levelling up; it is a problem when it comes to diversifying the economy; it is a problem in rural areas; it is a problem in inner-city areas; and there are problems in relation to buildings where it is difficult to get wayleaves. A whole series of issues combine to create a real, long-term problem for some of the most vulnerable families in the country. Some 7% of Welsh adults have no internet to home at all, so relying on VoIP to deliver emergency services with PSTN gone is problematic.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has faced emergency situations in various storms, and I think this debate partly stems from that experience. Of course, the law requires phone services to take all necessary measures to ensure uninterrupted access to emergency organisations, including during a power cut. That remains the case for VoIP services, which is why Ofcom provided

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

guidance in 2018 on how service providers should do that. Virgin Media, for instance, will provide an emergency back-up line that relies on a battery-operated box in such circumstances. However, the way that all the service providers in the UK are meeting that responsibility remains unclear, which is why Ofcom started a monitoring programme in July 2022. It would be good to hear from Ofcom on how well that is proceeding.

In May 2022, the Electronic Communications Resilience and Response Group published a post-incident report after the storms in 2021-22. It was rather, I would say, blasé. It seemed to suggest that we could now cope better and that there would be greater resilience in future, but I think the points already made by several Members were very well made. In December 2022, Ofcom produced its “Connected Nations” report, which similarly suggested that we had learnt a lot of lessons from the storms, but I am not convinced that we are in a strong enough place.

I fully accept that, as a couple of hon. Members have said, there are significant advantages to transitioning. First, the copper wire is not going to last forever. Secondly, there is an affordability issue for the for the operators—keeping two systems going is more expensive. I would like every home in the land to have at least a superfast broadband connection. We were aware during covid in particular that many children were unable to do their homework because they basically relied on a mobile phone for their internet connection, and I do not think that will really work for the future.

Other countries have been much more assertive, aggressive and determined to transition. The Netherlands and Estonia have completed the process. Singapore completed it in 2020. Japan will complete it by next year. Spain had already done 80% by 2020, and Portugal had done 60% by 2020. By contrast, the UK managed only 2% by 2020. We are laggards in this. I am not going to excoriate the Minister for being slow and tardy—I see he is wagging his head in a sort of Eeyore way—but I am going to make this point to him: Estonia took three years to do it. Estonia is a much smaller country, so perhaps it was simpler to do it there. The Netherlands took 15 years. One could argue that we are going too fast to be able to ensure that we have met all the problems.

What should we do? First, I think we should pause this process now. We should take stock. The right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal made the good point that we should learn lessons from other countries. We should find out how Estonia managed to do it in three years, how Singapore managed to do it by 2020, and what resilience programming they have. How do they make sure that, if there is a power cut—in particular, one that lasts more than a couple of hours—how do they make sure that people are safe and protected? I do not want that pause to be endless; six months is enough, but I think we should take stock and the Government should come back to us with a clear plan of how we can move forward.

Secondly, we need to identify vulnerable customers and communities, because this does not play out equally in every part of the country. Thirdly—this point has been made by several hon. Members—we really need to improve mobile connectivity. I repeated that point at least 20 times as an MP, but in the words of Browning:

“Hark, the dominant’s persistence till it must be answered to!”

Ofcom says there is full connectivity in the town of Porth where I live in the Rhondda, both indoors and outdoors. That is a complete and utter fiction; I cannot get a mobile signal inside my house, other than through VoIP, and that is not just the case in my house, but in nearly every other house in Porth. Ofcom needs to go back to the drawing board and start again on providing accurate information on mobile connectivity.

We must also do more on enabling shared networks and shared masts. It took us far too long to get the electronic communications code through, and I understand that it still has not been fully implemented, though maybe the Government will be able to update us on that. I worry that it does not quite do the trick for enabling mobile connectivity in the rural areas we are talking about. In the Rhondda, sheep can be seen from virtually every house if one looks carefully enough, so we feel rural; though it is quite a dense community mostly living in the valley floor. We in the valleys community share with many other rural areas across the whole country the same anxieties about being able to develop economically, socially and culturally, and to take part in the full opportunities that a digital world offers when we cannot have reliable mobile connectivity.

Since I might not see you again in the Chair before Christmas, Mr Mundell, I wish you a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you, that is gratefully received. I call the Minister, and remind him that we want to leave a few minutes at the end for Mr Carmichael to wind up.

10.32 am

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): I share the pleasure of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), in seeing you in the Chair this morning, Mr Mundell. Let me start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate on a very important issue, and I am grateful to all those who have contributed and made some important points. The debate has ranged far and wide; we have encompassed the subject of the debate taking place this afternoon in this place, and indeed the debate in the Chamber tomorrow afternoon. This has been a good rehearsal of some of the issues.

This country is on a journey towards a digital economy. The Government have set an ambition that we should be one of the most technologically advanced economies in the world, and we are transitioning very rapidly away from the old analogue past through the roll-out of gigabit broadband. Indeed, I suspect that this afternoon the Government will be pressed to go further on that. We are making real progress, and we will report the latest figures for Project Gigabit on Friday morning. I was delighted to visit the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) not long ago, when we peered into a broadband cabinet in Orford.

As we move towards the most modern technology, we leave behind the infrastructure of the past, which includes the eventual closure of the analogue telephone network. The Opposition spokesman pointed out that it is perhaps not universally known as the PSTN, but it is a term that

people will become more familiar with. It represents ageing technology—the first automated exchange was invented in the late 19th century, and the analogue network as we know it has existed since the 1980s. It has done a great job for us, but it is not fit for purpose today. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain: spare parts are difficult to find, the number of outages is increasing and the engineers who work on it are retiring. Not moving away from that to a more modern, resilient network would in itself create risk. The question is how we accomplish the change in a way that is secure, efficient and protects those who still rely on the PSTN network for connectivity. It is vital for Government, industry and Ofcom to work together to make sure the transition is achieved successfully.

As has been recognised by several speakers, the process was decided and initiated by the telecoms industry. The Government did not ask it to do so, nor have they determined the timelines or parameters for the switch-off. However, as the hon. Member for Rhondda points out, the Government have a responsibility to ensure the protection of all citizens, so they and Ofcom are working together to monitor the progress of the migration.

We have a particular interest in the groups in society who rely on their landline the most and might find it difficult to migrate to a new technology. They will include elderly citizens, people with mental or physical impairments or those who suffer from other vulnerabilities. We looked for very strong assurances that the needs of those people would be recognised and protected during any migration that took place.

Despite the assurances that we were given by communications operators, we have recently become aware of serious incidents of telecare users finding that their devices have failed when trying to activate them. That is completely unacceptable. The safety of vulnerable people has to be our top priority. As soon as we learned of those incidents, the Secretary of State and I met the relevant communication provider and requested that it carry out an urgent investigation to identify all vulnerable customers and make sure that their devices are fully operable.

In addition, we have asked the companies to pause forced migrations from PSTN networks and have asked Ofcom what more it can do to monitor the migration process. We have invited all communications providers to attend a roundtable tomorrow to ask them to sign up to a charter of commitments to protect vulnerable consumers through the transition. That will cover the need to protect vulnerable consumers—particularly telecare users—as well as the need to go further than Ofcom guidance on power resilience for the most vulnerable consumers and to agree a cross-sector definition of vulnerability.

I have also had meetings in the last 24 hours with Ministers from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to discuss what more can be done to protect vulnerable consumers and to facilitate data sharing between local authorities, telecoms firms and telecare providers so that we can locate every single one of the people reliant on those devices.

Sir Chris Bryant: The Minister might want to speak to the devolved Administrations as well, because many of those responsibilities are devolved.

Sir John Whittingdale: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and we will do that. Existing telecare devices already in the system need to be digitally compatible, and we are talking urgently to the Department of Health and Social Care about that. I take his point that we need to make sure that all four nations of the UK receive the same information and can give the same assurances.

Consumers can feel confident about the migration only if they understand how the change will impact on them. They need to know what additional support is available to them. That is particularly important for vulnerable consumers. Although the PSTN network is due to be switched off in full by 2025, the approach to migrate customers off the network varies from one provider to another.

Turning to the issue that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland raised in his opening contribution, network resilience is of particular importance. Telecom is vital critical national infrastructure, and that is never more true than when it is providing a literal lifeline to vulnerable citizens. That is why we have always placed such emphasis on network security and resilience, and why we introduced the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021. We published the UK Government resilience framework in December 2022, and the Deputy Prime Minister recently issued the first update to it.

With the PSTN network switch-off, it is vital that operators continue to prioritise resilience and make special arrangements for their vulnerable customers. The power sector takes important action to protect its customers and to ensure that the correct support is given to the most vulnerable customers during power disruptions, including those who are disabled and reliant on electric power devices. Electricity distribution network operators are obliged to maintain a priority services register.

Separately, since 2018 Ofcom has issued guidance to operators to ensure the sector remains resilient to all risks that may affect services. It states that, in the event of a power outage, providers should have at least one telecoms solution available that enables access to emergency organisations for a minimum of one hour. The solution should be suitable for customers' needs and should be offered free of charge to those who are at risk. In line with that guidance, fixed-line providers offer back-up battery equipment for the required one-hour minimum, and in many cases battery back-up lasts much longer.

Several Members raised the concern that one hour is insufficient. Obviously, we face more violent weather events and potentially greater power outages, so we will keep that under review, and we are asking Ofcom to look at it again. We have never suffered a nationwide loss of power services, and major outages are still quite rare. If we experience a network outage, there are strong response mechanisms in place across all the operators to ensure services can be restored as quickly as possible. Where telecoms services have experienced disruptions, generally caused by severe weather, typically they resume immediately on power restoration.

Distribution network operators are also required to liaise with local authorities, strategic co-ordinating groups and local resilience forums and partnerships, to share information about vulnerable customers and provide welfare support by working together, but we recognise that we need to do more. That is why my right hon. Friend

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

the Secretary of State wrote to Ofcom last year to request a wider review of telecoms resilience, and to ask whether more can be done to improve the sector's power resilience. Ofcom has provided new resilience guidelines for communications providers on the measures they are expected to take in relation to the resilience of their networks, as part of their security duties under the 2021 Act. That includes specific measures for electrical power back-up required in fixed-line networks.

The Ofcom consultation on resilience guidance was published last week and is due to close on 1 March. It proposes updating the resilience guidance, including ensuring that networks are designed to avoid or reduce single points of failure; ensuring key infrastructure points have automatic failover functionality built in so that traffic is immediately diverted to another device or site when equipment fails; and setting out the processes, tools and training that should be considered to support the resilience requirements. Throughout the consultation, Ofcom is also inviting stakeholder input on the question of mobile resilience, asking what services consumers should be able to expect during a power outage and what a more cost-effective solution may look like.

It is important to recognise that power resilience is not just important in the context of the withdrawal of the copper network; it is essential to the functioning of all communications networks, including the mobile phone network. Comment has been made about the fact that mobile coverage is still not as great as we would like it to be. The wireless infrastructure strategy sets out a route to extending mobile coverage, and the shared rural network is helping to deliver that. I recognise the complaints that Ofcom's assessment of the current mobile network coverage does not match the everyday experience of most hon. Members—including myself, I might say. We have asked Ofcom to look at that urgently to try to improve the accuracy of existing mobile coverage statistics. We will continue to prioritise power resilience issues for fixed and mobile networks across the country, working closely with the industry and the power sector. The Government are continuing to work with Ofcom to understand what may be considered appropriate and proportionate as an outcome of the consultation.

It is important that we have telecoms networks that are fit for the modern age. It is right that the technology that underpins the network is updated both now and in future, so that it can keep pace with all the demand that we place on it—from the digital economy, to social connections and contacting the emergency services. It is

important that the network is fit for purpose, secure and resilient. In modernising the network, it is also important that communications providers work closely with their customers—especially the most vulnerable—to understand their needs.

It is right that the industry should seek to switch off the PSTN but, in doing so, companies should ensure that the transition is secure and efficient, and that they protect those who rely on the PSTN for their connectivity. As I have said, we remain extremely concerned that some of the understanding and assurance that we had about the protections being put in place appear not to have been fully delivered. For that reason, the Government are acting urgently to consult both Ofcom and all the communications providers to put in place absolute assurances, so that we can guarantee to the public that the transition will be conducted safely.

10.47 am

Mr Carmichael: I thank you for your chairship, Mr Mundell, and all those who have taken part in what has been an even wider-ranging debate than I had anticipated. I might have anticipated that discussion would stray into terms of mobile phone networks and the rest, but not that we would get as far as talking about fax machines and traffic lights. I think I can say that, of all the possible difficulties that will arise, the operation of traffic lights concerns people in Orkney and Shetland less than others.

I thank the Minister for his full and detailed response. This has turned out to be a more timely opportunity to ventilate the issues than we had anticipated. When he goes to his roundtable tomorrow, I hope that he will impress upon the operators to whom he is speaking that vulnerability is a question not just of age or medical condition; occasionally, it is also a consequence of geography. I hope that he will make the point that this transfer—inevitable as it may be—is not good enough for anyone until it is good enough for everyone. If we get that understood by the industry, I hope that eventually we will achieve the laudable ends that the Government and the operators themselves identify of a modern, fit-for-purpose communications network.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the withdrawal of copper wire telecommunications networks.

10.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Sexual Harassment of Surgeons and Other Medical Professionals

11 am

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will call Rosie Duffield to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will be no opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of sexual harassment of surgeons and other medical professionals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of sexual assault against surgeons, nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals and patients in clinical settings. In April, I used my Prime Minister's question to mention the report commissioned by the Women's Rights Network and written by my friend, the sociologist and criminologist Professor Jo Phoenix, entitled "When we are at our most vulnerable". The report revealed some truly shocking statistics about violent sexual assault, and everyday inappropriate and unwanted acts intruding into the work lives of professionals and disrupting the recovery of the most vulnerable and ill. How dare we call ourselves a civilised society if we turn a blind eye to this and do not do everything possible to support those women, and some men, who are brave enough to come forward, as well as those who do not feel that they can and suffer in silence?

Professor Phoenix found that more than 6,500 rapes and sexual assaults had been committed in hospitals in England and Wales over a period of nearly four years. Some were against children under 13, yet in a mere 265 cases—a minute 4.1%—was anyone known to have been charged. In total, 2,088 rapes and 4,451 sexual assaults—6,539 cases—were recorded by police forces from January 2019, and one in seven of those, or 266 a year, took place on hospital wards. As the researchers at the Women's Rights Network sent freedom of information requests to 43 police forces across the UK and 35 responded, the figures are, in truth, even higher and even more shocking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on what she does. Those of us who are here have a particular interest. A recent survey of 2,500 doctors by the British Medical Association found that 33% of female and 25% of male respondents had experienced unwanted physical contact in the workplace. Worse still, these are only the figures for those medical staff who felt confident enough to come forward, so unfortunately the figure is probably much larger. Does she agree that provision must be put in place in the NHS and other, private healthcare facilities to ensure that staff members feel not only safe and protected, but encouraged to come forward and discuss instances of sexual abuse and rape within the workplace? In other words, there must be somewhere to go, someone to talk to and someone to sort it out.

Rosie Duffield: Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Member so much for raising that important point, which is supported by all the work that the BMA has done, including the report that he mentioned.

The rape of a female child under 13 was included in those shocking statistics, alongside the rape of a female over 16 by multiple offenders in west midlands hospitals, three rapes of a female under 16 in Cambridgeshire, and six rapes of girls under 13 in Lancashire. It is important to note that although the FOI responses do not record the sex of the victims, national data shows that less than 5% of rape victims are men, so it is reasonable to assume that most victims are female. The investigation uncovered 13 rapes of males over the age of 16, however, including one incident involving multiple offenders, and the sexual assault of a male child under the age of 13 in a Cambridgeshire hospital.

We know that hospitals are, of course, monitored by many CCTV cameras, and individual wards usually have safe-door entry systems, which prompts the question of why only a tiny percentage of cases—4.1%—resulted in a charge or a summons. Indeed, five police forces did not issue a single summons or charge a single suspect for any of the 334 reported sexual assaults in their areas. Why not? The WRN report says:

"The damning figures are probably 'the tip of an iceberg of indifference' around the safety of NHS patients and staff",

as some forces gave inadequate information. For example, Police Scotland did not provide any figures, citing cost constraints, and of those forces in England and Wales that did respond, seven forces provided incomplete responses, five did not give information on the number of assaults that occurred on hospital wards, and three did not provide information about the number of people charged or summonsed.

As Heather Binning, founder of the Women's Rights Network, says:

"These statistics are jaw-dropping. We began this investigation because a number of members raised concerns about the safety of women and children on NHS wards, but we are horrified at what we have uncovered."

I am grateful to the WRN for highlighting this problem and shining a light on something that has gone almost completely unnoticed in this place before.

The BMA represents doctors and medical students across the UK. It also produced a briefing for today's debate, as we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It states:

"The BMA is deeply concerned by the overwhelming number of doctors who have experienced sexual harassment at work."

Its "Sexism in medicine" report of September 2021 found that 91% of women doctors in the UK have experienced sexism at work, with 42% feeling that they could not report it.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): The hon. Lady is highlighting a very important issue. She made a point about reporting, which is certainly an enormous challenge. The Women and Equalities Committee heard from Chelcie Jewitt of Surviving in Scrubs, who made the point that when doctors tried to report harassment, they were often told by the General Medical Council that it was a trust issue, yet the trust would say that it was a GMC issue. Does the hon. Lady think that goes some way to explaining why there is a lack of reporting and that, when there is reporting, it seems nothing gets done?

Rosie Duffield: Absolutely. I thank the right hon. Lady so much for raising the work that *Surviving in Scrubs* does. I know that its evidence was really important for her inquiry.

The survey found that doctors' experience of sexism and sexual harassment had prevented them from choosing certain specialities and had affected their career progression. Doctors say that the very structure of medical training creates a power dynamic, where perpetrators can have a significant impact on doctors' opportunities to progress. The scale and severity of sexual harassment in medicine was further highlighted by the working party on sexual misconduct in surgery survey, which found that a third—a third—of NHS female surgical staff had been sexually assaulted by colleagues in the past five years.

These shocking findings led the BMA to launch its "Ending Sexism in Medicine" pledge in March 2023, which over 60 organisations have signed. The pledge aims to help ensure

"a world where doctors and medical students can work in a safe environment free from discrimination, and where gender plays no role in career progression or how they are treated."

The pledge commits to ending sexual harassment in medicine and ensuring that structures are in place to enable reporting safely.

The BMA has called for the Government to implement legislation that includes a preventative duty on employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment taking place, including from third parties, and to support the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023, which places an obligation on employers to protect employees from sexual harassment. It stresses that all vital protections, policies at work, legislation and support for staff members must also be applied to students undergoing vocational training rather than just those classed as employees. As someone with a medical school in my constituency, I could not agree more.

I am also grateful to Tamzin Cuming, chair of the Women in Surgery forum at the Royal College of Surgeons, and to Professor Carrie Newlands, co-lead of the working party on sexual misconduct in surgery, for their report "Breaking the Silence". The foreword is written by Professor Dame Jane Dacre, who says:

"This report shows that we still have a long way to go in demonstrating the respect that our female colleagues deserve in the surgical workplace. The survey findings of sexual misconduct are eye-watering and upsetting. It is difficult to read some of the testimonies, and this work should galvanise all healthcare organisations to make sure the problem of sexual misconduct is eliminated."

It is an outstanding report that includes shocking data and statistics as well as chilling quotes from those affected. I urge anyone here to read it.

I cannot do justice to this work in such a short debate, but I want to read some of the quotes from those who took part:

"I watched a consultant fiddle with the hair of an industry representative, and kiss the back of her neck, at work. She was in a difficult position and did not want to report the incident."

Another says:

"He'd frequently rub himself against me repetitively during surgery, grunt and gasp in my ear, then leave the operating theatre before the operation was over. The scrub nurse used to help me close up. She once cried with me after surgery and reminded me that she was powerless to do anything, but that she cared."

Another states:

"The orthopaedic consultant, during an operation, discussed with his (male) trainee how they like blow jobs. It was my first day in theatre."

I apologise for the unparliamentary language.

Those accounts are just a small snapshot of some of the report's findings. It represents a lot of work and I hope that the authors' recommendations can be given serious consideration by health bodies and the Government, along with the important work of the GMC, which has produced updated guidance on good medical practice and professional standards, which I am afraid I have not had time to give justice to today.

Since entering Parliament, I have focused on women's health, our experiences of the NHS and maternity healthcare services. The pressures and enormous stress placed on our NHS professionals are well known, but these women who save lives, whether as a surgeon, nurse or a friendly reassuring receptionist, deserve to work in a safe and respectful environment, where they are given the dignity they deserve. Patients must feel and be safe at all times within a clinical setting. I am certain the Minister agrees, and I would be happy to work with him to ensure we get a much better place for all of those who need and love our NHS.

11.12 am

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) for raising this incredibly important issue. She has been a tireless voice for women in this place, on this and many other matters. Our health service holds a special place in all our hearts. It is appalling that NHS staff face sexual assault. The reports the hon. Lady talked about, "Breaking the Silence" and that from *Surviving in Scrubs*, make for incredibly difficult reading. I salute the authors for their courage and professionalism.

The first report highlights that up to two thirds of women and nearly a quarter of men had been the target of sexual harassment from colleagues in the past five years. It also states that a third of women in surgery have experienced sexual misconduct in their training, including sexual harassment, sexual assault and even rape. Sadly, there is other such published research about the alarming levels of unwanted sexual behaviour happening to NHS staff and patients, including an investigative report by the Women's Rights Network, which again the hon. Lady mentioned.

Let me be clear: that behaviour is disgusting and deplorable, and has absolutely no place in our hospitals. Staff who dedicate their lives to helping others need to be able to do their jobs without fear of any kind of abuse, let alone sexually motivated remarks, insults or attacks. NHS leaders have a duty of care towards their staff and patients. Ensuring staff are safe and treated with respect is a crucial part of creating safe and compassionate workplaces.

NHS organisations also have clear policies to deal with reports of harassment or bullying. We know that raising and reporting sexual harassment and misconduct is never easy, particularly when the perpetrators are in positions of authority or are patients. However, victims need to feel confident to raise such issues and be reassured that appropriate action will be taken by their employers.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the Minister for giving way, and welcome him to his new role, appreciating that he has only been in it a few weeks. I gently say to him that there is a real challenge in our NHS when 10% of women in one study reported unwanted sexual conduct in return for career opportunities. That is absolutely about power, and it is going to take a step change to break down those structures that enable such harassment to continue, behind a veil of silence, so that women are still afraid to speak out.

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who is the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, for her work in this area. I completely agree with her point; there needs to be a serious culture change. We would all recognise that over many years the NHS has been fantastic in treating patients. However, quite often the same clinicians, in many regards, have not been as compassionate when looking after each other.

The workplace culture that has developed in parts of the NHS need addressing. Even though I am new to my role, with only three weeks in post, as part of the NHS long-term workforce plan, I am looking at that culture and the staff leaver rates across a whole range of different parts of the profession. That is important because we must ensure that people have a safe and enjoyable working environment. At the moment, reports such as those detailed by the hon. Member for Canterbury show that in far too many trusts, employers are falling well short of providing that supportive environment, which is the least people should expect.

Turning to what has been happening, most NHS organisations now have trained staff to help colleagues raise concerns in this area. That includes a network of more than 1,000 local freedom to speak up guardians across all trusts, supported by an independent national guardian to help drive positive cultural change. We have also established a confidential helpline for staff who want to speak up but need guidance about what to do and where to turn. That, again, goes to the point made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North about the experience of people complaining but being passed from pillar to post between the GMC and trust. I hope that the confidential helpline will help make a difference.

NHS organisations must do everything they can to stamp out the unacceptable behaviours at all levels across the health and care system. In April, the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), convened an urgent meeting with NHS England to ensure that NHS organisations are doing more to tackle such behaviours. We have made some progress, although I acknowledge that there is much more to do.

This year, NHS England broadened and strengthened the remit of its domestic abuse and sexual violence programme, which was established in 2022, to address sexual harassment and misconduct on NHS premises. All trusts and integrated care boards were asked by NHS England to appoint an executive and operational lead for domestic abuse and sexual violence. Those leads are reviewing their policies, training and support systems to enhance support for staff and patients.

In September, NHS England launched the first ever NHS sexual safety charter across the healthcare system. There are now 200 signatories, including NHS employers and the Royal College of Surgeons. Signatories commit to taking a zero-tolerance approach to any inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviours in the workplace by implementing all 10 charter commitments by July 2024. The commitments include establishing clear reporting mechanisms, implementing training programmes and providing essential support for those involved in investigations. NHS England will use the new network of domestic abuse and sexual violence leads to share and promote good practice and develop practical solutions in implementing the new charter.

Data capture is also a key commitment in the charter and to gauge the charter's impact, the NHS staff survey now includes a question related specifically to sexual safety. That systematic approach reflects a commitment to transparency and accountability in creating a safer working environment. The Equality Act 2010 has also been amended this year to include a new duty on employers to take steps to prevent the sexual harassment of their employees. Implementation of the charter will assist NHS employers with meeting the duty when it comes into force next October.

The GMC is unable to consider complaints about registrants that relate to matters more than five years old unless it considers it to be in the public interest to do so, which has been raised during the debate. We are modernising the legislation that governs professional regulators, which includes removing the five-year rule as part of the reforms to regulatory legislation for doctors. It will allow the GMC greater discretion to consider whether a concern should be investigated. Introducing those changes remains a top priority for the Government.

I hope that these measures show that we are committed to addressing the problem with targeted action. However, I acknowledge that there is more to do, and I would be happy to work with the hon. Member for Canterbury and Members across the House to ensure that we get it right. We will not be satisfied until the number of staff facing sexual harassment is down to zero. There must be a collective effort across our health service to enact change. Strong and effective leadership is crucial, and it starts from the top. The Government, with NHS England driving this work, are calling upon all NHS boards to sign the sexual safety charter and ensure that their healthcare settings are safe places for our current and future workforce.

I will close by acknowledging the bravery of all those women and men who have come forward with their experiences of sexual harassment and misconduct in the healthcare workforce. That includes the testimonies in the report from *Surviving in Scrubs*, some of which the hon. Member for Canterbury read out. It takes incredible bravery and selflessness to come forward. Thanks to those brave women, and some men, we are getting ever closer to ending the scourge of sexual assault in our health service. I thank the hon. Member for putting a spotlight on the issue today. We must not tolerate it.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Broadband: Rural Communities

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of broadband for rural communities.

It is a pleasure to be here as the Member for West Dorset and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I welcome Members from across the House who are participating in the debate, and extend a warm welcome to my constituents in the Gallery.

“Inequality”, “isolation” and “exclusion” are the three terms most associated with the impacts of poor rural broadband. “Weak” and “ineffectual” are terms often associated with Ofcom, the regulator, which is meant to protect the interests of constituents, both urban and rural. “Ruthless”, “commercial”, “yield maximising” and “predatory organisations” are terms often associated with businesses—often very large businesses—that look to prioritise urban rather than rural areas through maximising revenue. The terms “rural isolation” and “digital poverty” are often ignored, yet they are incredible issues for those of us who represent rural constituencies, not least in the south-west.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. If we are serious about saying we are going to level up, does he agree that there is no reason why a community that is geographically isolated also needs to be digitally isolated?

Chris Loder: Yes, I entirely agree. For far too long the prioritisation has been to connect urban and more densely populated areas, rather than rural areas. We live in a country where we do not value people’s lives more in urban areas than in rural areas; it is important to have fairness across the board, including in terms of investment. Only last week in this very Chamber, I and other Members made the point that rural funding and investment—for rural councils, services or others—need to be prioritised much more. We do not want a turf war; we just want fairness across the board. At the moment, I am afraid to say, I am concerned that my constituents in West Dorset are not receiving that fairness.

I do not know whether colleagues here will appreciate or understand the term “rural notspots”, but they are a big issue. Rural notspots are areas where people are lucky if they can get a mobile signal and extremely lucky if they can get a broadband connection. Vodafone’s report, “Connecting the Countryside”, revealed that 4.8 million people in rural constituencies live in 5G notspots, and 100% of West Dorset is a 5G notspot or partial notspot. That has a huge impact on residents across my constituency and, I am sure, in neighbouring ones as well.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for calling this debate. He is absolutely right about notspots. We have notspots in the city of Hereford, but in Herefordshire we also have very isolated areas. Does he share my view that the problem is not just with Openreach and the enforcement of Ofcom, but that there is a specific problem related to the reliance on voice over internet protocol, as though that were a solution with batteries for people who find themselves isolated, as my constituents

were in Bacton and Abbeydore recently? What long-term solution will we have to address that issue, alongside all the ones my hon. Friend has already memorably raised?

Chris Loder: I wholly agree. In a moment, I intend to talk about the impact of the digital phone switchover, because it appears to be complete madness that we are continuing to progress with that when there are vast swathes of rural Britain—not just rural West Dorset, but other areas, including, I am sure, my right hon. Friend’s constituency—where the decent or functional connectivity that is needed to achieve that switchover is lacking.

On many previous occasions, I have stressed that the statistics provided by organisations such as Ofcom, which is meant to be the regulator, simply do not represent the lived experiences of many thousands of my own constituents, and colleagues from across the House will probably express a similar view. It is totally unacceptable that Ofcom states that every area in and around the village of Stoke Abbott has either good or okay data coverage. Well, I am afraid that the reality is quite the opposite, as anyone who visited would see, and many other villages and parishes have the same issue. It is bordering on a scandal that enormous mobile phone operators can publish data saying that they provide a signal or a connection, and that is backed up by Ofcom, when the reality is that people living in those parishes—although it can also be the case outside, not just inside the home—cannot get a signal at all. Around 75% of the community I surveyed about the issue ranked their coverage in the worst possible terms. Stoke Abbott in my constituency has 0% gigabit capability and a widespread lack of 4G, and I mentioned the 5G notspots earlier.

I want to use this opportunity to bring to the attention of the House e-petition 636502, which is on the funding of fixed wireless broadband for poorly connected areas. Having been elected to this House four years ago, almost to the day, I have become very well aware that when it comes to petitions, it is those with the largest number of signatories that get the biggest hearing. E-petition 636502 has received 1,232 signatures. On the face of it, that may not be a huge number but, my goodness, those 1,232 people are the most affected by the inability of any part of the sector to provide them with the most basic level of connectivity, forcing them into a totally unacceptable level of rural isolation and indeed rural poverty.

We know that there is a huge difference to the economy and people’s wellbeing where there is a fixed broadband connection; we also know that 98% of people in urban areas have a fixed broadband connection compared with just 83% of people in rural areas, and that fixed broadband connection correlates to economic activity. In constituencies such as my own, a third of the population are over 65. That is an unusually high age demographic, meaning that there are many older people who are not familiar with—in some cases, they are unable to become familiar with—the technology required to achieve some of the things that the Government and others might like to see in the evolution of communications; I have already mentioned the digital phone switchover, but I am also talking about basic services. We are seeing record numbers of bank branches closing in market towns. Elderly people are being put in a situation in which they are fearful of using technology because they

may not necessarily have the skills to pick up whether a particular correspondence or email is spam; they fear the consequences of doing the wrong thing, often feel that they are between a rock and a hard place, and are not sure what to do.

Some 97% of the businesses in West Dorset are small or micro-sized. Our economy is very rural. Those small businesses need better connectivity than they have. It is really concerning that an attempted change through the digital phone switchover, which has been postponed once, although I understand that BT is going to progress with that. I find it incredible that organisations such as the Local Government Association estimate that 1.7 million people who access technology-enabled care and support will be put at risk because of a potential lack of connection once the analogue lines are switched to digital. How can any moral organisation consider doing that when we are presented with such statistics? I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will take particular note of this point, because it is a massive concern for Members such as myself who represent vastly rural constituencies with a considerable number of older people; we have many concerns about their care in that situation.

The problem is not so strongly felt in urban areas, but it is important to talk about the extent of the roll-out of improvement across the board. Part of the yield-prioritised approach of many larger businesses is that they look to roll out schemes, in line with Government incentive schemes, that will benefit as many houses as possible in the shortest possible time. That is all well and good, but when an area of the country—perhaps an urban one—that has, say, 100 megabits per second speed is looking to improve still further to gigabit speed, and there are places with barely a 2 megabit per second speed that are still being left behind, something is going quite wrong.

In September 2022, gigabit coverage was 47% in predominantly rural areas versus 79% in urban areas. My constituency and, I am sure, those of neighbouring Members of Parliament will be experiencing the same thing. The Government have set very clear targets, which I appreciate because they are helpful to give guidance to the industry about the Government's wish and intention. The Government targets of 85% and 99% gigabit availability by 2025 and 2030 respectively sound good, and I appreciate them, but it is really important that the Government hear this message loud and clear: it is no longer acceptable to me that the 15% and 1% respectively are the same 15% and 1% who lost out in previous schemes. Those people are being pushed further and further back in the wider connectivity race than they should be. That is why I called out earlier the pretty ruthless, commercial and yield-maximising approach of some of the largest companies in this space; that approach needs to be challenged, and I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister will consider how we can ensure much better fairness in this area.

West Dorset serves as a particularly good example. The Minister will know that if a provider signs up to one of the various different Government schemes—whether it is the voucher scheme or, for example, a community fibre partnership—that blocks the capacity or capability of a competitor to say, “Actually, we would like to go there.” That business can hold on to the area and get its claws into it for a prolonged period. It appears almost anti-competitive that, as happened in the Bridport area

of my constituency, Jurassic Fibre, with the best of intentions, formerly did lots of very good work and was then taken over by AllPoints Fibre, and now the engineering work and the whole approach to making that happen has been put on hold, ad infinitum in many areas. The company feels as though it is okay to put that on hold while it considers the consequences of its reorganisation and takeover. Well, that is not acceptable. When there are other businesses and companies that believe they could provide that service to local people much more quickly, and possibly more efficiently, it is anti-competitive to allow that sort of behaviour.

I could run through so many parishes by way of example, but if there is one thing that I really would like the Minister to come back on and/or action, it is this approach by some providers that, in effect, land grab and say that they will make improvements and meet the Government's intentions—whether through a voucher scheme or otherwise—but then fail to deliver and block others from showing an interest in doing so. Indeed, the whole bidding process for providing the next level of improvements is hugely affected by this as well, which is a great concern to me. I hope the Government will take action, understand that those organisations that have committed to do something have not delivered, and remove the primacy they have to prevent others from doing so.

I would like to summarise my remarks, because I know that many other colleagues would like to speak in this debate, and I appreciate the time that I have had so far. Overall, I would like the Government to note that, for the last four years that I have been in this place, one of my priorities has been to ensure that we make substantial improvements to address rural isolation and rural connectivity. I know full well that the Government have indeed made a lot of progress in that area, and a lot of my constituents have felt those improvements. But it is also fair to say that the most rural villages and parishes still continue to be left out, just because they might have only 40 or 50 homes, or maybe even 100. That is not acceptable and not part of what we believe is right, in the spirit of fairness across the country for all our constituents.

I warmly encourage my colleagues here to contribute to the debate with their own experiences. I am sure that many colleagues present, especially those representing rural areas, will have very similar stories to mine. That is why it is so important that we have this debate and allow the Government to hear this feedback, I think for the second time today—I understand that there was the copper cabling debate earlier, which I am sorry I was not able to be at, because of other business that I had to attend to in the House. I hope that we will see real, significant improvements to how we support the most rurally isolated people in our society today.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to be called first from the Opposition side. I would say it is unique; it may not be all that unique, but that is by the way. I thank the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for leading the debate so well. He set the scene well for his constituency; I will mirror what he said for my own, and others will do the same shortly. I am aware of what the hon. Gentleman has done to improve mobile and broadband

[*Jim Shannon*]

connectivity for his constituents. Most of us here share the concern that some cannot access the same technological advances as others. This is very much a UK-wide issue, so it is great to be here to give a Northern Ireland perspective, as well as that of my constituents.

As the Minister will know, back in 2017 we had a deal with the Conservative party, through a confidence and supply motion, to deliver some £150 million of broadband across Northern Ireland. That secured the delivery of broadband to almost 90,000 rural premises across Northern Ireland. While others, namely Sinn Féin, postured and said that we did not need to do that, public money was spent on high-speed broadband for rural dwellers, and the intervention has been the most transformative investment for our rural economy since the electricity network was extended. We should never underestimate the importance of what happened at that time.

One of the most startling statistics of the past five years has been the fact that Northern Ireland, at 82% full-fibre broadband, is already well ahead of England at 67%, Scotland at 60% and Wales at 49%. The Republic of Ireland was way behind us at 40%. Maintaining current rates of progress until 2025 will see Northern Ireland becoming the first country in these islands in which availability reaches 99% of our premises. That is some of the good news. In my constituency of Strangford, we have had 5,000 homes upgraded, which is a massive boost for my constituency. It underlines the importance of what we did, so I publicly thank the Minister and our Government for the partnership we had at that time.

To update hon. Members on where we are now, in June 2023 the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland launched a public review aimed at improving broadband infrastructure, predominantly in rural areas, to catch up that 18% who do not have it yet. Many constituents who have been in touch with my office have been able to avail themselves of the scheme, but others are still unable to resolve the issue.

The public review is part of the planned implementation of Project Gigabit in Northern Ireland. Project Gigabit in the UK is the Government's flagship £5 billion programme to enable hard-to-reach communities to access lightning-fast gigabit-capable broadband. It is a commendable project by the Government here, and one that I welcome because I see the benefits; I am sure we will see more benefits shortly. In addition, members of the public, businesses, groups, organisations, telecoms infrastructure providers were able to avail themselves of the scheme, but thus far I am aware of a few instances where businesses are struggling to regain better connection.

I will give an example. I spoke to the Minister beforehand about this and gave him a letter along these lines just last week: I am currently dealing with an issue for a constituent whose business is on a rural road in Saintfield, a village in my constituency. I have sent numerous emails to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. I handed the case to the Minister through the Whip. Indeed, I have spoken to the Minister.

On this rural road, cables, fittings and nodes have been secured to permit the extension of sufficient broadband to this area. It is frustrating to have all that stuff in place when all we need to do is make that last connection, and then that business will be up and running. The work

was halted by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and my constituents have received little or no communication on the improvement of their broadband. I am hopeful that the Minister will help to resolve the issue for my constituents, and I know my hope and confidence in him will not be misplaced, but the damage and the hassle for local businesses are extremely destructive to people's livelihoods.

Another example of where we need to improve relates to card payments and the sending of digital invoices and receipts. Cards are often not charged and there are delays in the processing of payments, which poses an inconvenience for customers and business owners. When broadband is poor, emails with digital receipts will not send properly and online orders cannot be made efficiently. That creates more issues for local businesses, given that we encourage people to invest in them daily. I look again to the Minister, who always responds positively and grasps the issues that we put to him. I am confident that his answers will reinforce my faith in him. I ask him to look at the cases I have mentioned, and I would be grateful if he expedited any work on them for the betterment of my constituents' businesses.

Many farmers in my constituency—others will probably say this as well—keep track of livestock through online apps. Given that there is so much rural theft, that is to be encouraged, and I encourage it in my constituency. To ensure that the agricultural industry can thrive, we must ensure that rural connectivity is made a priority. Doing so will benefit the local economy, which agriculture plays such an important role in making successful. Like the constituency of the hon. Member for West Dorset, my constituency of Strangford has seen many large high-street bank closures in the past couple of months. In the past couple of years, 11 banks have closed in my constituency, which has meant a huge shift to online banking.

I am conscious that others wish to speak; I want to give them equal time to contribute, so I will conclude. For rural constituents, online and telephone banking are more or less their main ways of accessing banking services. If decisions are being taken to close banks, we must ensure that consideration is given to having the best possible broadband and mobile signal. I am confident that we can achieve that, and I look forward to it. Again, I ask the Minister to chase up the constituency case that I mentioned and to keep in contact with my office. He has already given me that commitment, and I am quite sure that that will happen.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Thank you. That was just the amount of time that I had in mind: seven minutes. I call Selaine Saxby.

2.56 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) and congratulate him on securing today's important debate.

On the doorsteps of North Devon, getting broadband done was second only to getting Brexit done when I was elected back in 2019. On my arrival here, I rapidly took over the chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on broadband and digital communication. I was determined to find some positive news for the Minister about rural connectivity in North Devon. When I was

elected, 90.3% of my constituents could access superfast broadband and 3.9% could access gigabit-capable. We have come a long way: the figures are now 53.8% gigabit-capable and 94.2% superfast.

That sounds fabulous, and it is an immense improvement to have got to that point. However, being a mathematician at heart, I had a bit of a play around with the numbers at the weekend. My fear is that 5% of my constituents still do not even get superfast broadband. There are still over 1,640 constituency properties—not people—that are below the universal service obligation. There is a real concern about the digital divide, which I have spoken about at many recent events. Some people are completely cut off. Yes, the letters complaining about rural connectivity have stopped, but that is probably because people do not know that there is no connection because they are unable to get online. I am deeply concerned about what will happen with the remaining 5%.

I know what the plan is. In the time that I have been in Parliament, Connecting Devon and Somerset has connected over 2,000 properties. That does not sound like many, but the engineers on the ground—I have had the pleasure of meeting them with Building Digital UK—say that the build in my constituency is the hardest they have ever delivered. When we talk about rural connectivity, we need to understand that until we get 5G and the satellite system sorted, we will not be sending fibre down every little farm track. We must look very differently at the final 5% and how we will connect those people.

I thank the Openreach team and the community of Mortehoe. The little village of Mortehoe in my constituency has undertaken a fibre community partnership. It was combined with work with National Grid, because—to cut a very long story short—in the end they could not actually do the fibre community partnership. It means that gigabit-capable broadband is about to be switched on and that all the overhead cables, right the way through the village, can be taken down in this area of outstanding natural beauty, so that Mortehoe has both a stunning view and gigabit-capable broadband. That is a testament to the work of that community.

I highlight that community because one of my concerns about the plans for the future of North Devon is that, because we are going into what is called the Project Gigabit type C contract procurement round, which will not complete until next spring, we can no longer access fibre community partnerships. Communities that have managed to deliver gigabit-capable in conjunction with Openreach, Airband and other operators cannot have a fibre community partnership until that procurement round has finished. I would dearly like to see that issue addressed.

I am very grateful to Openreach for connecting the village of Westleigh. I am the guinea pig in Westleigh: I am living the dream of connecting to gigabit-capable after an engineer was sent last Friday. I talk about the digital divide, and I am really concerned about how complicated connecting is. Hon. Members might think that it is straightforward once the fibre is in the property, but I was sent a cable—no instructions, just a cable—to try to connect myself to the outside world. I asked how to connect the cable, and I was sent a hub. I decided that I would do nothing, and the engineer very kindly came

and sent back the hub because I did not need it and they knew how to plug in the cable. The joy of having an actual engineer in my house is that I could talk to them about what is going on.

I know that this is the wrong debate—I, too, was tied up on other parliamentary business this morning—but I would like to flag the issue of phone lines being switched off. I know people do not necessarily believe my version of events, but the engineer who was sat in my house on Friday explained that when they go round to houses to fix the landline, they ask where the broadband hub is, and they are often told by the elderly resident that they do not have broadband. They then find that there is a pile of hubs in brown boxes in the hallway that have never been opened. People do not understand the technology that is being sent to them. It is hard to explain to communities that have never had broadband that they now do not have a phone either, and that they will get this brand-new technology and a phone at the same time. We need to understand that unfortunately, unlike the Department, which is hugely high-tech and does really exciting things, most of our constituents who have not had access to this technology have a lot of catching up to do.

I am utterly delighted with gigabit. The speed is fantastic and there is no buffering when I catch up on important world events such as who got through on “Strictly”—we keep up with the big issues of the day—but I still cannot make a phone call in the kitchen because my phone relies on the wi-fi and the only way to get it through a cottage wall is with these bouncy discs, which did not come with the cable and would double the amount that I have to pay for my brand-new, super-duper gigabit-capable. I feel that that is wrong, because they will not alter how much I use the connection, so there should be a fixed price.

We need to make connecting easier. I urge all my constituents to check what has gone past their house, because 53.8% of properties in North Devon can now access gigabit-capable, but take-up is a fraction of that. It is a bit complicated, as I discovered, but in the longer term it is well worth giving it a go.

I want to put on the record my thanks for all the work that has been done in my constituency, which I know is hard to get to. I really am worried about the final 5%, and I think that not enough is being done to look at satellite, radio, 5G and the other technologies that remote rural constituencies need in order not to fall further behind. Many are already not one or two but three technologies behind, and we need to help them to get online. People also need the skills to access the services that we all rely on in this technological age.

3.3 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

The internet has plainly revolutionised the way we live our lives and the world we inhabit, but the trouble is that it is increasingly a tale of two halves: those people who have fast, superfast or ultrafast broadband in urban areas, and those of us who live in rural areas, who go without. In huge swathes of the countryside, people find it hard even to get a mobile phone signal, so this is exacerbating a problem that we have already

[Richard Foord]

I would like to give the House some examples of situations that I have encountered in Devon. In Northleigh, a small village outside Honiton, fewer than half the residents can access full-fibre broadband. One constituent, a surgeon, has written to tell me that because of the stuttering delivery of the Project Gigabit vouchers, he has wi-fi so bad that he is unable to download crucial scans the day before an appointment. The Government say that they are trying to wrestle with the waiting list of 7.7 million operations that is bringing this country's economy almost to a standstill. If that is the case, addressing wi-fi has to be one of the places where we start.

The 900 residents of Kilmington have had a dreadful experience. They often use the village hall, so they tried to get a business broadband service for it. When they got in touch with various internet service providers—I have all the correspondence here—they were not informed about the universal service obligation and the funding to which it entitled them.

Meanwhile, the parishioners of All Saints, near Axminster, have taken it upon themselves to appoint a broadband champion. So great is the issue for people in the village that they feel that that is necessary to give the matter some status and authority.

Those are just three examples, but I could give many more from my part of Devon. The south-west in general has dreadful download speeds. The UK average is 111 megabits per second. In the south-west, we have an average speed of about 99 megabits per second, but in my corner of Devon it is more like 57 megabits per second, which is half the national average. Even some of the towns in and around my patch, including Axminster, Seaton and Sidmouth, have some of the worst speeds in the country and are in the bottom 10% for download speeds. The contrast with the urban areas is stark.

Openreach has written excitedly to constituents in Tiverton extolling the virtue of ultrafast fibre to the premises, which it claims will have download speeds of more than 1,000 megabits per second. Yet Devon homes and businesses should not hold their breath, as there is a target of 25 million by 2027. We heard from the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) that it will be difficult to reach that extra 5% and that perhaps those people living in rural properties in those places should simply wait for 5G. I am sorry, but I do not feel that we should accept that. If there is a universal service obligation, we should, as a country, make sure that that is rolled out everywhere. It is not just affecting people's social cohesion or their feeling of connection to others—

Selaine Saxby: Could I correct that statement? I did not say that people should just wait; I said that we should be looking at how we can connect them. Like the hon. Gentleman, my Devon neighbour, I agree that there is a need to speed up, but I encourage him to speak to Connecting Devon and Somerset to better understand the work that has already gone on and which premises are affected. It has detailed stats available and will be able to update him.

Richard Foord: I am grateful for that clarification. The hon. Member mentions Connecting Devon and Somerset; I have heard from constituents about how

CDS did not draw down funding from Project Gigabit and has missed out on substantial sums of money that it could otherwise have garnered.

Chris Loder: Will the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, join me in welcoming the Government policy to set aside £8 million to help those who are in the most difficult positions—down country lanes and so on—with the satellite options? Does he think that that is a good move that will help his constituents, as it will help mine?

Richard Foord: The simple answer is yes—I welcome any and all interventions that support our rural constituents to get them broadband—but the reality of what our constituents are feeling and finding on the ground is very different. We can talk about any sum of money we like, but the reality is that the pledges that have been made, including in the 2019 Conservative manifesto, are not living up to the reality for our constituents. The Conservative Government have been promising for years that we will see a mass roll-out of gigabit broadband of at least 85% by 2025, yet rural areas are once again left lagging. It is very much true for Devon, and it is very much true for the west country: we are being taken for granted.

3.9 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for securing this incredibly important debate. Like others, getting better broadband for my constituents in has been a key focus of my work since 2019. During covid it became clear how isolated some of my constituents could become.

I want to raise awareness of a couple of issues in particular, which are still holding us back. I am afraid I am not as positive as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) about Openreach. The communities of Kilmeston, Bramdean and Cheriton had a gigabit voucher approved by Building Digital UK more than a year ago but, since then, Openreach has delayed things.

First, Openreach told constituents that BDUK was the hold-up on approving the gigabit programme vouchers. When I contacted BDUK, it turned out it had not been given all the information it had requested. I had to ask BDUK to extend the deadline for the previous scheme to get the vouchers approved, and it did so. I am grateful to BDUK for all its hard work and for responding so quickly to my questions.

Since then, Openreach has dithered about installing the fibre. Again, constituents were told SSE was the blocker. I met SSE and it turned out that every other telecoms provider agrees nationwide licences with SSE for its poles to carry cables, but Openreach has not. Openreach has agreed to pay for the licence for this project but there is apparently a delay in getting the payment made to SSE. That nonsense had been dragging on for months, and I understand the sheer exasperation of my constituents.

There are a couple of senior public servants who were given fast broadband very quickly. That is fine but, while doing that, Openreach bypassed many other residents with equally important jobs: the director of NHS emergency services; a consultant orthopaedic spinal surgeon; three GPs; a CEO responsible for vehicle fleet support for 12 police forces, two first-aid services and two ambulance

trusts; a project manager for a national mobile telephone company; project manager for SSE, ironically; a senior TV news correspondent; the editor of a national sports newspaper; and many more, which I will not list now.

I complained about this to the CEO of Openreach and I got diverted to the MPs' complaints department. Does he know how his company is performing in rural areas? I will keep battling on to break this logjam, but perhaps it would be useful for Ofcom to look into how different infrastructure owners work together in practice. Although we have guidelines, it seems more can be done to facilitate getting cables installed.

A second problem relates to constituents who have been abandoned completely by another company. The company, now branded as Trooli but originally Call Flow, has told residents of Woodlands in my constituency that it is discontinuing its services. That has come out of the blue, with minimal information supplied. They are being told to switch to 4G; the trouble is there is no 4G in that area. Although Trooli says it is within its rights to do this, surely it is unacceptable that a company that has had public money to set up its network can simply walk away from it, when there is no viable replacement.

Chris Loder: Does my hon. Friend agree that some of these unscrupulous providers, who suggest they are going to do things but then backtrack and fail to deliver, should be properly held to account, and that we should find ways to ensure that Ofcom does that?

Mrs Drummond: Absolutely, and I hope Ofcom is listening to the debate. It is disgraceful that public money is being used and wasted. Hampshire County Council supported the installation and has done everything it can to help me across the constituency. This is not any fault of the council, and I am grateful for its support. Trooli's behaviour has been appalling, and I would welcome the Minister's advice on how I can put this right. I will also ask Ofcom to look at the matter.

This community will be included in the procurement scheme, with CityFibre hooking it up in future. However, the community cannot be left without provision in the meantime, though I hope it will be prioritised for the future work. The Government-funded Hampshire procurement is fantastic news for Meon Valley. The technology is evolving with 5G on the way. It is vital that we use every means of getting better broadband into our communities. I will keep pushing Government and the private sector on this issue, because businesses, families and schools depend on being able to work at high speed. It is very frustrating for everyone when it takes so long to put in.

3.14 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Dowd. I give huge thanks to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for securing this important debate and for making an important and valuable introduction. I pretty much agree with everything everybody has said so far. I want to endorse what is being said.

The reality is that rural communities are not able to access equal coverage—not only broadband, but other forms of modern connectivity. That puts us and our residents at a significant disadvantage. If we think about health, for example, to live in a rural community

is to put oneself at greater risk of not being able to access telemedicine. If we think about our general wellbeing, to be more isolated is a dangerous thing. Last week in this place we discussed isolation and loneliness and the impact on the mental health of people of all ages, particularly older people. To be cut off and not able to access modern communications—broadband and other forms of digital communication—is both dangerous and unfair.

When it comes to education in the lakes and the dales, the Eden valley and Westmorland are beautiful and isolated places with schools as small as a dozen or so children in some cases, and high schools with fewer than 200 children. Those young people have to do their homework. They have to be able to access technology at home to be able to research, study and complete assignments on time. That goes for people studying in our area who are at the University of Cumbria, or who are studying elsewhere around the country but living at home in and around the lakes and the dales.

I think about the business community: one in four people of working age in our communities in Westmorland work for themselves. We have a hugely disproportionately high number of people who are self-employed or working for themselves in other ways—freelancing, and so on. It is important not only that people have access to high-quality broadband and other forms of connectivity, but that the access is symmetrical: upload speeds should be as accessible as good download speeds. To say nothing of entertainment, frankly the people of Westmorland and Lonsdale have as much right to be able to witness the indifferent and erratic form of Blackburn Rovers via their television screens as anybody else in the country—hurrah for the three points we scraped last night. To be serious, we are now in a world where it is taken for granted that we have that sort of access. In communities like those of pretty much all of us here today, that is not the case. We are gathered here because we believe that and it is our experience locally.

I have a couple of related non-broadband points that others have also raised. According to Vodafone, my communities are in the bottom 2% for mobile connectivity, so broadband is not the only issue. Others have talked about Digital Voice. I was in the debate this morning led so admirably by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). Only a week and a half ago, much of Cumbria was completely snowed in and blocked. We had all sorts of impacts when it came to electricity being down. If your electricity is down, so is your router—you ain't got no broadband; your digital access has gone. Maintaining that copper backstop is a lifesaver. We are used to extreme weather in my neck of the woods and we toughed it out, but there were people who were not vulnerable at the beginning of that experience but became vulnerable by the end of it, simply because so much depends on digital access. When it is wiped out, people are seriously vulnerable.

Let me say something about Project Gigabit. It is absolutely right that rural communities as a whole are left behind when it comes to connectivity of all kinds, and this Government need to bear a significant amount of responsibility for the failure to tackle that. One broadly positive thing that they are doing is Project Gigabit. I do not want to say that there is anything wrong with what the project is doing; I am concerned about some of what it is not doing. There are 61,000

[*Tim Farron*]

properties in Cumbria within the scope of Project Gigabit. We know that at least 1,000 of those will not get connected within that in-scope area. Those are the very difficult-to-reach places.

Many people in and around the communities of Sedbergh—Sedbergh town itself, and the communities just beyond it—are now deeply concerned that they will be among the properties that are in scope, but not connected, which seems wrong. To go back to what I said about symmetrical access, we also know that the access and connectivity given to many homes connected by Project Gigabit might mean very high download speeds, but low upload speeds, which is a huge problem for people who are studying or in business.

I want to highlight again some of those people who are likely to be in scope but not connected. Hill farmers will almost certainly be among that group, and they have seen a 41% decrease in their income over the last three years under this Government. The very people who have no money to pay for the connection themselves will be in that tiny fraction, but that is still a significant number of people who will be outside Project Gigabit.

In my last minute, I want to talk about those properties that will be in what is called “deferred scope”. They are not being connected via Project Gigabit now, but they may be in the future—the next two, three or four years. I was at a meeting in Murton village hall on that very snowed-in weekend with the communities of Murton, Hilton, Ormside, Warcop and the surrounding areas, which are places in the “deferred scope”.

Were the Government to be flexible and allow the return of the voucher scheme, a wonderful community interest company, which I mentioned here before, called B4RN—Broadband for the Rural North—will be able to provide £33 a month access, with gigabit upload and download for absolutely everybody and with 100% of properties within scope. All it takes is for the Minister to agree to the ask that I have made of the Secretary of State in the last few days: that the Government would, through BDUK, re-offer the vouchers for those communities and be flexible, so that those communities are connected to the best speed at the best connection as quickly as possible.

There are so many pressures facing rural communities—house prices, the loss of housing stock as second homes and Airbnbs take over, a decline in school numbers, and therefore often a decline in communities themselves. We need to tackle all those things separately, but hyper-fast broadband for all parts of rural communities is one way to fight back against the isolation and deprivation in so many of our communities.

3.22 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd, and to speak in this vital debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing it.

In the modern world, access to the internet is of the utmost importance, yet I worry that those in the hardest-to-reach areas are being left behind. The digital divide has stark impacts on rural communities and on their education and access to services. I have spoken previously about the impacts of the loss of in-person services on

rural communities, yet if the online methods of accessing these services are inaccessible, many of my most vulnerable constituents will miss out.

For example, from March 2024, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services will no longer be available in post offices, which will disproportionately affect rural communities. Many bank branches, as we have heard already today, will close across my constituency, leaving customers having to travel further to access banking services or to rely on their broadband connectivity at home, which is rather lacking.

In Somerton and Frome, 4.6% of people—over five times the national average—have broadband speeds below the legal universal service obligation. Nearly a quarter of Somerton and Frome is in a 5G notspot, and 39 postcode areas in my constituency are in a 3G notspot. Many constituents struggle to access services online given their sluggish broadband speeds. Although I welcome some of the Government’s actions to improve rural broadband and mobile connectivity in rural communities, we need to go further to help those in the hardest-to-reach areas.

In Berkley Marsh, just outside of Frome, one constituent faces the very real prospect of having no internet provision next year. They are dependent on wireless broadband from Voneus and a BT landline, with the latter switching off next year. They will be left with broadband speeds of 250 kbps. Another internet provider wanted to supply fibre to their home, but they are being frustrated by other providers. That highlights the plight of those in hard-to-reach areas. It will affect businesses, residents and consumers alike.

Langport and Long Sutton in my constituency are in the worst 10% of areas in the UK for superfast broadband availability. Businesses in Langport suffer from poor internet speeds and struggle to use new and efficient digital solutions. Somerton and Frome has hundreds of agricultural businesses, many of which suffer from woeful broadband speeds, inadequate for them to carry out the multitude of necessary online tasks. The Government estimate that there will be fewer than 100,000 very hard-to-reach premises, but their delivery costs are likely to be above the limits of commercial investment cases, the gap funding approach to Project Gigabit, and the broadband universal service obligation’s reasonable cost threshold. This makes these premises commercially unattractive, which has been heard already today.

Digital isolation has a debilitating impact on our communities. It stifles growth and often means that vibrant rural businesses move away or simply do not locate to the area in the first place.

Chris Loder: Would the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, agree that the universal service obligation is often used by some providers as an excuse for not actually having to carry out their commitments? Would she also agree that it appears there is almost some sort of cartel-like behaviour going on with mobile providers and broadband providers? Indeed, we shall be exploring some of these things in a debate in the House tomorrow, which I think is about Vodafone and others. Our constituents are paying the price and not getting what the universal service obligation says they should.

Sarah Dyke: Clearly, given many of the comments heard today, I would agree with the hon. Gentleman. We need to put more focus on the very hard-to-reach

places, particularly in rural areas, to reduce the digital divide and ensure that no one is left behind. I hope the Government are listening to rural areas, and I look forward to seeing progress happen in Somerton and Frome.

3.27 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who I know to be an outstanding parliamentarian and a Conservative for whom I have some measure of affection. I will go no further than that.

This is a really important issue. I have no need, much less wish, to cause any more pain to the rural English MPs who have turned up here today to cite the very real challenges faced by their constituents in accessing what is essentially a vital utility like any other in the world that we live in today. However, I want to highlight what the Scottish Government have done, first to demonstrate how outstanding the Scottish Government are, but secondly to demonstrate how much it costs to supplement the woeful service levels of the UK Government. It is the UK Government, not the Scottish Government, who are responsible for broadband in Scotland.

Nevertheless, we in Scotland are not prepared to sit by and watch our communities and enterprise suffer while waiting for Westminster to act. That is why the Scottish National party-ruled Scottish Government's reaching 100% superfast broadband commitment will ensure that everyone who wants superfast broadband has access to it, extending full-fibre broadband across some of the hardest-to-reach rural communities in Scotland. As I mentioned, this is reserved to the Westminster Government, but the Scottish Government committed to enabling access to superfast broadband—speeds of at least 30 Mbps—to every home and business by 2021, now upgraded to a new commitment to make the connections 30 times faster than originally stated. Connections will be delivered on a rolling basis under R100—reaching 100%—contracts, which are expected to be completed in 2028. Around 99% of the connections being delivered by the Scottish Government through R100 contracts are full-fibre capable and able to deliver speeds of up to 1000 Mbps.

That commitment is being delivered via three strands. First, there is £600 million in R100 contracts, delivered through a partnership with the UK Government. One would think that the Government responsible for delivering that would put in the bigger element, but no: the Scottish Government are putting in £550 million and the UK Government are putting in slightly less than £50 million. I say to the hon. Member for West Dorset, whose pain I feel after his intervention on the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord): £8 million to ensure that hard-to-reach properties are supported to achieve such connectivity is chicken feed. It will not even look at it; we need to invest vastly bigger sums. So that is the scale of the inaction and the challenge that is commensurate with that inaction.

The R100 Scottish broadband voucher scheme will help those that want access to the R100 principal scheme. The voucher helps people connect to superfast broadband in northern Scotland. Those not covered by R100 can apply for a one-off £5,000 voucher to help them set up a permanent suitable connection for themselves. Above that, a £400 interim voucher is available to those for whom it is known that R100 will benefit them in time, but not yet.

To date the Scottish Government have invested £1 billion of public funding to transform Scotland's digital connectivity through the Digital Scotland superfast broadband and reaching 100% programmes, and improving mobile connectivity through the Scottish 4G infill programme. That is not our responsibility. I say that again because it is so important.

The Scottish Government's Digital Scotland superfast broadband programmes have already connected about 1 million properties across Scotland to faster broadband. It should not be viewed as a cost; it should be viewed by the UK Government as an investment, because it is viewed in Scotland as such. We believe, and can demonstrate, that every £1 invested in the Digital Scotland connectivity programme delivers £12 to the Scottish economy. That same R100 programme has also delivered full subsea cables. The hon. Member for West Dorset and colleagues from the south-west and north-west have demonstrated that their topography and geography is particularly challenging, but so is that of the Orkney and Shetland islands. The roll-out of superfast broadband is taking place there as well.

There is lots of disdain for Openreach, but in response to the investment that the Scottish Government have put in, Openreach is building full fibre faster and further now and reaching around 60,000 new premises every week—equivalent to a town the size of Livingston in West Lothian. That means passing another home or business with ultrafast gigabit-capable broadband every 10 seconds.

It is important to realise that I am here as the SNP's spokesperson, but also as somebody who represents a rural constituency. Although larger towns and villages are benefiting, it is not the case in my glens. It is not the case in Glen Doll, Glen Prosen or Glen Isla that the digital speeds are being realised, so it is absolutely essential that the UK Government regulations and legislation support the Scottish Government's ambition to be a truly digital nation.

I rarely get a response from a Minister in Westminster Hall, so I am hopeful that the Minister will break that cycle this afternoon. I should be grateful to know what the Scottish Government will receive from the UK Government's £5 billion earmarked for investment in gigabit-capable infrastructure, because the Scottish Government continue to urge the UK Government to extend the gigabit networks to Scotland's rural communities where the challenges remain manifest. As I say again, perhaps for the sixth time, telecoms is an entirely reserved matter.

Economic growth in Scotland's islands and rural locations is being curtailed by the slowest broadband speeds in the UK. That does not help rural communities in the south-west or north-west, but it is a challenge that the UK Government must step up to.

3.34 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is universally acknowledged that you are the snappiest dresser in the House, Mr Dowd, so it is great to see you in your place here today. I feel very odd—in the past few weeks, I have been to both the cinema and the theatre with the Minister and I am now in a debate with him for the second time today. There is to be another debate today, though I cannot be there. I do feel as if I am spending more time

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

with the Minister than is good for my marriage. I do not think he will break with any precedent by answering any questions today, but we will try.

I commend the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on securing this debate. This is the second time we have debated this precise issue, but it is important to keep on fighting the battle. He may have caught the Minister and me smiling or laughing a bit because the hon. Gentleman referred to Ofcom and network coverage issues and both I and the Minister made the same point during the earlier debate—that, quite often, Ofcom’s version of reality is so different from the experience of ordinary people that it really is time that Ofcom and the providers looked much more carefully at how they present what they purport to be evidence of coverage.

Likewise, the Minister will no doubt say—he announced it this morning—that he is putting the PSTN switchover on pause, which is a good idea. He referred to several other matters where the Government are taking action because there are very legitimate concerns about how the switchover will affect the provision of quite a lot of services. Indeed, following this morning’s debate, the Minister will be delighted to know that I have tabled questions to ask him how many traffic lights in the UK depend on PSTN. I look forward to hearing his answers.

The hon. Member for West Dorset referred to Stoke Abbott, which was thus described in 1906:

“as pretty a village as any in Dorset.”

I was delighted to be in Bridport a few weeks ago with his predecessor, Oliver Letwin, who has a slightly different view of the present Government from him, I think.

It is always good to have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We missed him this morning; I believe he was at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He made an important point about livestock: most farmers must have some kind of digital connectivity simply to do their job. They cannot pretend to be Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdene from “*Far from the Madding Crowd*”; to make a living in agriculture, one must have a modern farm.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) is absolutely doughty on these issues. I feel as if I have lived in her kitchen now, because this is the second time I have heard the stories about her hubs and her platelets or whatever it is that she had to have installed. She was determined to find some positive news, but mostly came out with negative news. There are real problems for anyone who wants to be able to deliver. As she herself said, no one will lay fibre 5 miles down a lane to a single house, so other options must be available. She referred to satellite. Obviously, we want to see much greater technical innovation in this field so that no one is left out.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) complained about the Government’s lackadaisical attitude. I have heard him make some of his speech before, but there is no danger in repetition—that is the only way one ever gets anything done in politics, so I commend him for that.

The hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) is a wonderful swimmer, as I know because I recruited her to the parliamentary swimming team, and she had a list of people who had been kind of given preferential treatment. If someone in a community needs to have

more than superfast broadband in order to do their job but the whole community does not get the same, that can be a problem.

Mrs Drummond: Let me just qualify that: only two public servants, who I did not mention, got fast broadband. The ones I mentioned did not get fast broadband. I was explaining that they were equally important. I did not mention the ones who got fast broadband for obvious reasons—I think they are quite embarrassed about getting fast broadband before their neighbours. There are huge numbers of very important people who also need it.

Sir Chris Bryant: If I got anything faster than anyone else on my street, I think my neighbours would lynch me.

Dave Doogan: It would be a good excuse.

Sir Chris Bryant: No, it is not a good excuse and that is not a very good argument to make.

I concur with the point made by the hon. Member for Meon Valley about the head of Openreach. It is important that major corporations, which broadly speaking have not far off a monopoly position in the UK, respond to Members of Parliament as swiftly and directly as possible and do not simply pass the buck. The hon. Lady also made a very good point about the need for better co-operation between all the different operators in this field, because now, with all the “old-nets”—I fully support competition within the market—there is a danger, which I will discuss a little later, that if there is not co-operation there will be a complete and utter muddle.

I think I have heard some of the speech by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) before, too, and again I commend him for repetition; it is not something ever to complain about in politics. He made two really important points. The first was that being isolated is a dangerous place to be in the modern world. If we think about an elderly person who relies on mobile connectivity to connect to her relatives, who might be on the other side of the world, or to healthcare providers, that is evident, and the point is extremely well made. He also made a point about hill farmers. Funnily enough, when I had a farm in the Rhondda, which was on a hill, I had the best connectivity I have ever had, but that was purely and simply because the mast was almost immediately opposite my house.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) made a very important point about Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency or DVLA services no longer being available in post offices. Soon, my constituency will no longer have a bank at all—no bank whatsoever. Of course lots of people are using digital banking services today, but sometimes it is necessary for someone to go physically to a bank, to prove their identity and so on. Banks will need to go a considerable further distance to make some things available online that currently people cannot do online; because of the distances involved in travelling in rural areas, the present situation is simply problematic. However, even if that happens, people need full access to a broadband connection; otherwise, they are simply unable to continue their business.

I think that Vintage Ghetto is the hon. Lady’s business, or perhaps one of her businesses; I do not know. Vintage Ghetto has some very fine things online, if anybody wants to go shopping before Christmas. However, I simply

note that it will be difficult for people to pursue that kind of business, which many people in rural areas now do, without having a really strong broadband connection.

Finally, there was the contribution by the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan). I would have laid a bet that he would refer to what the Scottish Government have done and condemn the Westminster Government for not doing what the Scottish Government have done. I could point out that the Welsh Government have often intervened in the same way in Wales to address some of the problems that we have in rural areas. However, the truth is that we need a whole-UK answer to all these issues, and I will give some of the reasons why in a moment.

Broadband is not just important in rural areas but absolutely vital—for building or growing a business; for running a farm or, for that matter, diversifying an agricultural business, for instance by allowing tourism; for doing homework or, for that matter, doing university study; for providing healthcare and local services; and, frankly, for growing up, by allowing children to talk to their friends online, play a video game or download a film.

Members have talked a lot about the haves and the have-nots in this field. Members may not be aware that the phrase “haves and have-nots” originally comes from “Don Quixote”. It is when Sancho Panza says:

“There are two kinds of people in this world, my grandmother used to say—the haves and the have-nots. And she stuck to the haves. And today, Señor Don Quixote, people are more interested in having than in knowing. An ass covered with gold makes a better impression than a horse with a packsaddle.”

I quote that extract because one of my concerns about the way that we are developing in relation to broadband and digital connectivity in this country is that we get a bit too focused on the “having” rather than on the “using”. Indeed, my biggest concern as an MP who represents one of the poorest constituencies not only in the UK but in Europe, is the affordability issue.

I have raised this issue in a previous debate and I know that the Minister has similar concerns. There are social tariffs. They are almost unknown to most of the people who might be able to take them up. One local council—maybe several councils now, but certainly Sunderland City Council wrote to everybody in its area about social tariffs. The council had the information on who qualifies for universal credit and who therefore qualifies for a social tariff, so it wrote to everybody concerned and that drove up the take-up of social tariffs. However, when 18% of poorer homes in the country—in my patch, I suspect the percentage is even higher—do not have any internet to home at all, even when superfast broadband or gigabit capability is available, that is going to be a long-term problem for levelling up, for all the reasons that the hon. Member for West Dorset gave earlier. It is not levelling up if people simply cannot afford to take something up.

Secondly, as several Members have said, many people are not taking up better connectivity, either because it is too expensive or because they simply do not understand what the benefit might be to them. When we and the industry bang on about gigabit-capable, megabits per second, superfast or fast broadband and all the rest of it, that is not a sell to an ordinary household. People want to know what they will be able to do that they could not do previously and therefore why they need it.

There is a real marketing problem across the whole of the UK that we need to address if we really are to drive up take-up, otherwise the danger is that all the companies will be making massive investments but getting no return. That is when the whole situation may get into trouble.

I worry about the exclusion of certain areas and categories of people. I have asked the Minister this before and I ask him again: how are we doing on new contracts for Project Gigabit? When I asked him the last time we met, he said that more were going to be let in the next few months. It would be interesting to know precisely how that is going.

My other concern is this: competition is a really good thing, but not if it turns every street into the wild west. In just the last few weeks, in my own patch—particularly in Tonypany, CF40—lots of different companies have been digging up the roads again and again. People are sick of it. It is happening not just in Kingston upon Hull but in lots of different places in the country. I worry that the system, through Ofcom’s powers, is not strong enough to ensure that there is proper co-operation. One complaint I had said:

“You will have seen road closures without relevant permissions being granted, poor reinstatement of pavements, mud-laden streets, poor communications with residents and tardy workmanship.”

I am fully in favour of companies such as Ogi rolling out gigabit-capable broadband in my patch, but I also want to see rational co-operation between the different organisations.

Finally, the Minister will know that the Government’s digital strategy is now more than a decade old. In fact, the online version has references to websites and programmes that no longer exist, so I think it is time for a new Government digital strategy. After the Government responded to the House of Lords digital exclusion report, Baroness Stowell, who is a Conservative Member of the House of Lords, said that the failure to come up with a new Government digital strategy

“suggests a reluctance to dedicate political attention and departmental resource to this matter”,

and the Communications and Digital Committee in the House of Lords said:

“The Government’s contention that digital exclusion is a priority is not credible.”

I therefore hope that the Government will announce today that they will start consultation on a new Government digital strategy.

I will end with some questions. I have asked these questions before, but the Minister did not answer them. Have I run out of time?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): *indicates assent.*

Sir Chris Bryant: I have run out of time. I asked them last time: perhaps the Minister will answer them this time.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for his contribution, particularly the opening part.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. The fact that we have

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

had such strong attendance is, I think, an indication of the importance that Members from across the country attach to this issue.

Obviously, I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for securing the debate. As he knows, I was born and grew up in his constituency, so I am very familiar both with the beauty of West Dorset and with its extremely rural nature—not just that of West Dorset but of Somerton and Frome and of Tiverton and Honiton, both of which I know well from my childhood.

I think we all recognise how ultrafast broadband at the very least, if not gigabit, is becoming an essential of modern life. That applies right across the UK, whether you live in a built-up urban area or a rural community, and the Government are committed to delivering gigabit broadband across the whole of the UK.

That is being done very rapidly by the commercial sector, but the Government recognise that it is necessary to supplement that with public support in order to extend coverage to areas that are not commercially viable. That is why we pledged to achieve 85% gigabit coverage of the UK by 2025 and nationwide coverage by 2030. Already today, more than 79% of premises can access gigabit-capable networks, up from 6% in January 2019. When I took up my position in May, I think we were at 76%, so the figures are still rising every day. Obviously, as we seek to hit the target, it becomes harder, because we are dealing with harder-to-reach premises, but the UK is building gigabit networks faster than any EU country.

The commercial roll-out is key. We are doing what we can to make it easy and attractive for firms to build their networks in the UK. There was reference to Openreach having a near-monopoly. Openreach is obviously the major supplier, but there is also Virgin Media O2, which is the other major fibre network provider, alongside over 100 out-net providers that are investing over £40 billion to roll out gigabit-capable broadband right across the UK. We regard that as the fastest and best value for the taxpayer, because it means that we can focus Government funding on the harder-to-reach areas.

I think my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset mentioned cases in which some companies had accepted contracts and then failed to deliver on the terms that they had agreed. We monitor the performance of every supplier, and if companies fail to deliver contracts, the contracts will be terminated and we will seek alternatives. We have tried to ensure that Project Gigabit is designed to deliver coverage in all areas of the UK, rather than leaving the hardest-to-reach areas until last. That adds to the coverage that is already being delivered through the superfast programme.

Our funding has already enabled gigabit connections to over 900,000 premises, and we forecast the figure to be over 1 million by the end of March next year. Of those premises, over 700,000 were classified as sub-superfast, so the vast majority of our investment is going into the communities that need it most. In the last year, we have delivered gigabit-capable broadband to over 160,000 premises, 90% of which are classified as rural. We have already announced 15 Project Gigabit contracts in places such as Cornwall, Cumbria, Norfolk, Suffolk, Oxfordshire and Northumberland, and a further

24 local and regional procurements are under way—plus our cross-regional approach, which includes areas across England and Wales.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) raised the important issue of the public switched telephone network, which, as he mentioned, we also debated this morning. As we move to full-fibre broadband, the old copper network becomes unviable and is being retired. The Government were clear from the start that we would allow migration from copper to voice over internet protocol on full fibre only as long as we were absolutely sure that those customers who relied on copper—particularly the most vulnerable and especially those with, for instance, telecare devices—were properly protected. Unfortunately, there have been a couple of incidents in which telecare customers have found that their devices have not worked, which is completely unacceptable. That is why, as the hon. Gentleman indicated, we said this morning that we are pausing the migration. We are holding a roundtable tomorrow with all communication providers to get absolute guarantees that they will migrate their customers only if they can be certain that the most vulnerable are properly protected.

Let me turn to the constituencies of hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset will be aware that, according to the latest statistics, 97% of premises in West Dorset have access to superfast speeds. That is in line with the national average, but I accept that, in terms of future-proofing, we are looking to extend gigabit coverage, which still stands at only 45% in West Dorset. Given that it was only 4% in 2019, we are making good progress. West Dorset is included in Project Gigabit's Dorset and South Somerset regional procurement, which we launched in May, and we are looking at reviewing bids from suppliers. It is our hope to award a contract for that in the spring, and we estimate that under that contract several thousand premises in West Dorset are set to benefit.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly recognised the extraordinary progress that has been made in Northern Ireland. With 94% gigabit coverage, it is ahead of all the other nations of the UK. Beyond that, we have Project Stratum, which is investing £170 million to reach another 85,000 premises with gigabit broadband. The hon. Gentleman raised some specific points, and I know that he has written to me on them. I will respond to him with a detailed answer to the questions that he raises.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) has been very active in pursuing me and Government. She will be aware that in North Devon at the moment there is roughly 95% superfast coverage and 54% gigabit coverage, but there are still premises in her constituency that are without. She will be aware that we are looking at the cross-regional procurement contract covering West and North Devon, which should ensure that certainly a large number of the 2,500 premises that do not have adequate broadband will be covered. For the hardest-to-reach premises, we are looking at alternatives—such as, for instance, satellite provision.

The situation in Tiverton and Honiton has been raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) not just in this debate, but in the past. Again, I am conscious that there are patches in his constituency that have not been reached. We think that

230 premises do not have a broadband speed of 10 megabits per second or indoor 4G coverage, and those are obviously ones that we are concentrating on, but in the particular case of the village of Northleigh, the voucher scheme there has now been given the go-ahead.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.20 pm

On resuming—

Sir John Whittingdale: I shall endeavour not to delay the House for too much longer, because I am aware that debates are backing up—like a queue of buses or something.

I want to address one or two points that other Members raised in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) raised a particular issue in her constituency. Again, 72.7% are currently able to receive gigabit broadband in her constituency. A small number of premises are definitely lacking both decent broadband and mobile coverage, and obviously they will be our priority. We will take away the point she raised about Trooli, and BDUK will be in touch with her, once it has looked into that.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has indeed raised that particular issue before, and I will endeavour to ensure that we get specific answers for him. Equally, a small number of premises in the constituency of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke)—again, a constituency I know very well—are also currently outside. The vast majority in each of these cases will, we hope, be covered by either the commercial sector or Project Gigabit, although there will still be some hardest-to-reach premises, for which we will look at the alternatives.

I want to touch on the position in Scotland, to respond to the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan)—who I do not think is back with us yet—and put it on the record that, while R100 is administered by the Scottish Government, Project Gigabit, although funded from the UK Government, is delivered through the Scottish Government. It has taken longer than we would have liked. However, I am in touch with my opposite number in the Scottish Government and can tell the House that, of the £5 billion that the Government are putting into Project Gigabit, an estimated £450 million is to go to the Scottish Government, and we currently have a market engagement exercise under way.

Hon. Members have also rightly touched on the importance of mobile coverage and the efforts made to extend 4G coverage. As the hon. Member for Rhondda observed, the complaint that has been heard—that Ofcom's estimate of the existing extent of mobile coverage does not match people's actual experience—is one that we are very much aware of. We have raised it with Ofcom, and we very much wish to improve the accuracy of the existing statistics.

The hon. Gentleman, speaking for the Opposition, raised three issues, on which I agree with him completely. I would like to make it clear that we are disappointed that the take-up of social tariffs has not been greater, and we are working particularly with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to try to draw attention to their availability.

Sir Chris Bryant: One thing that I have suggested to Ministers in that Department is that DWP could simply include a reference to social tariffs in any letter to anyone in receipt of universal credit or any other benefits.

Sir John Whittingdale: I think that is a perfectly sensible suggestion. Indeed, it is one that I hope the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), might already be pursuing; if not, I will draw it to her attention.

The wider issue of take-up is terribly important because, to get expressions of interest and bids from the out-net to obtain contracts under Project Gigabit will depend on being able to attract customers to take that up when it becomes available, and we are looking at other ways in which we can promote take-up.

Finally, the hon. Member for Rhondda raised an issue that features quite a lot in my postbag, which is telegraph poles. I understand the frustration of people who may have existing broadband suppliers but then see another competitor wishing to install telegraph poles. We are talking to Ofcom and local authorities about that. I hope that I have managed to address most of the points raised. It is always a pleasure debating the hon. Gentleman. I suspect this will be the last time I shall do so in my present capacity—

Sir Chris Bryant: No!

Sir John Whittingdale: I am very touched. That is because my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) will be returning after Christmas.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Kettering Bingo Hall: Community Ownership Fund

4.26 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I ask colleagues to move out as quickly and as silently as possible. I will call Philip Hollobone to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Community Ownership Fund and the former bingo hall in Kettering.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank Mr Speaker for his special permission to hold the debate, and I welcome the Minister to his place to hear the remarks I will make on behalf of my local constituents in Kettering. It is a huge privilege to be the Member of Parliament for Kettering, and the subject I wish to raise today is among the most important I have ever had the opportunity to raise in front of a Government Minister. That is because I speak on behalf of my local residents, who are all behind the bid being made by Beccy Hurrell and Lindsey Atkins of the Beccy Hurrell Voice & Arts Axis Hub Community Interest Company. I fully support, 100%, their excellent community ownership fund bid for £2 million, to revive for community use the former Gala Bingo hall building, which is located right at the heart of Kettering town centre. If the bid is successful, it would be transformative for the heart of Kettering.

The 25,000-square-foot building on Kettering High Street opened in 1936 and was once the home of a 2,000-seat theatre and cinema, orchestra pit and restaurant. It has been empty and, sadly, unloved for more than five years. In 2018, when it closed, Tony Smith, the well-known Kettering historian, said the closure of the Gala Bingo hall would

“end another chapter in the history of this unique High Street building. It began as the Regal Cinema, built on the site of Goosey & Sons’ drapery store and officially opened by Earl Spencer on Boxing Day, 1936. The £70,000 super-cinema had 2,000 luxury seats, its frontage dominated by a central tower with a neon halo visible for miles”

on its art deco frontage. He went on:

“Sunday night stage shows in the 1940s featured the legendary Flanagan & Alan, the Crazy Gang, and Vera Lynn. In 1948”

—after the war—

“the Regal was taken over by Granada Theatres and in the 1960s The Who and The Rolling Stones were among the top bands to perform there. The Gala bingo club took over the building after the Granada closed in 1974.”

It ran it until the bingo hall itself closed in 2018.

Sadly, since then, in June 2019, local police found 2,000 cannabis plants inside the empty building, potentially worth almost £3 million—£1 million more than we are asking from the Government to help redevelop the site. The Kettering Town Centre Partnership then had it listed as an asset of community value, giving local groups the chance to put together a bid if it ever went on the market. Earlier this year, its owners notified the council of their intention to sell it, and the BHVA Axis Hub CIC applied to trigger the moratorium. The company

is hoping to buy the former bingo hall through the separate CIC structure and then lock it in as an asset for the local community.

Beccy Hurrell and Lindsey Atkins are quite simply remarkable individuals; I am not sure I have ever come across people with more enthusiasm, entrepreneurial spirit or dedication to a cause. Their laudable ambition is to transform the site into a safe, affordable and dynamic space for the local community—for local businesses, aspiring musicians, students, start-ups and families. They want to create a community hub packed with theatre space, performance spaces, a music studio, rehearsal rooms, hot desks, spaces for community groups, crafting areas and a café. Were Beccy and Lindsey’s bid to be successful, it would be simply transformative for Kettering town centre.

I said that Beccy and Lindsey are remarkable. Indeed, they have recently won a number of prestigious local awards. They were crowned the health and wellbeing business of the year at the North Northamptonshire Business Network business awards, recognising their dedication to promoting wellbeing through the arts. They were also named small business of the year at the Northamptonshire business awards, so they are extremely good at what they do.

There is huge local support for this initiative. Beccy and Lindsey engaged with local media to get the message out about their plans for the site, and there was an article in the *Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph* in February this year. Following that, the newspaper emailed Beccy and Lindsey back and said:

“Just wanted to let you know about the incredible reaction from people yesterday to the story about your plans for the bingo hall. I know you’ve seen a lot of the comments but just wanted to put into context how popular the plans have been! The Facebook post itself reached 116,000 people, it got 1,000 likes and to date 13,000 people have read the story online, with that figure still rising.”

That reaction was in the first 24 hours after the article was published. The newspaper went on to say:

“That’s pretty unprecedented for a story like this—usually those sorts of figures we only see on negative stories/court cases. I hope you’ve also received lots of feedback/comments from people. We quite often do stories about things where people go ‘oh that’s a nice idea’ but then don’t support it, but there’s a genuine buzz about this.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I hope that the campaign to restore and keep the bingo hall will be successful. I am mindful that the hon. Gentleman has laid out the history. Are there any famous people from Kettering who could be called upon to be philanthropic and give money to help him and others achieve the goal?

Mr Hollobone: That is a very constructive suggestion. I hope that from media coverage generated by this debate, such individuals might well come forward. One of the main ideas about the £2 million funding bid is that it will get the initiative under way and then attract other investment, whether from individuals or the private sector. It is seedcorn capital to get the project up and running. The idea is for it to be self-financing quite quickly so that it is not a further drain on local or national taxpayers, but the £2 million is needed to get the building up and running again. Hopefully, it will start things off. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that constructive suggestion.

As the Minister will know, the aims of the community ownership fund are to support community groups so that they can take ownership of important local assets at risk of being lost, empower their improvement and run them sustainably for the long-term benefit of the community. Beccy and Lindsey's bid meets all those aims: I doubt whether the Minister will have received many bids of a higher quality. Indeed, Beccy and Lindsey have submitted a 196-page business plan to the Department. I have never seen a higher-quality bid for anything.

Kettering is a priority 1 candidate for levelling-up interventions. A successful community ownership fund award for this bid would deliver not just one but all five of the Government's ambitions for community ownership fund schemes. Those five aims are to: increase feelings of pride in, and improve perceptions of, the local area as a place to live—tick; improve social trust, cohesion, and a sense of belonging—tick; increase local participation in community life, arts, culture, or sport—tick; improve local economic outcomes, including creating jobs, volunteering opportunities, and improving employability and skills levels in the local community—tick; and, lastly, improve social and wellbeing outcomes, including having a positive impact on the physical and mental health of local people, and reducing loneliness and social isolation—tick. I know that in his new role the Minister will be paying close and diligent personal attention to all the bids before him. I hope that the strength of the application will convince him that it is fully worthy of Government support through the community ownership fund.

The mission of the BHVA Axis Hub is to be the nexus where creativity, enterprise and community all intersect. Importantly, the site is right in the middle of Kettering town centre. Recently, the town centre was blighted by having an asylum hotel at the Royal Hotel, just a few doors away from the Gala Bingo site. Fortunately, that has now been closed down. The hub would be transformative for Kettering town centre and fulfil the Government's levelling-up objectives were the £2 million to be allocated.

The mission of the BHVA Axis Hub is, first, about unified collaboration—to bridge the gap between creative minds, businesses, third-sector organisations, Government agencies and local communities, ensuring that everyone finds their sanctuary. Secondly, it is about health and wellbeing—to facilitate easier and anonymous access to services, reducing the daunting thresholds that many face. Alongside that, it will foster an environment where health services are more community-centric, eliminating the need for distant health visits. Kettering General Hospital has shown an interest in outsourcing space in the new venue.

Thirdly, the hub is about professional support. It would be a haven for those working remotely, start-ups, established local businesses and other third-sector organisations to connect, collaborate and innovate. Fourthly, it is about educational outreach. It would provide comprehensive programmes for young people not in education, employment or training, facilitating their transition into education or employment. There would be partnerships with local schools and education institutions to provide apprenticeships and vocational training.

Finally, the hub is about artistic empowerment. There is a huge local creative arts scene in Kettering. Beccy and Lindsey hope to establish a state-of-the-art gig venue/theatre that not only showcases local talent but educates

budding artists on the intricacies of gig management, theatre production, stage management, lighting and sound. It would be the launchpad for grassroots musicians and theatre artists to realise their dreams.

As I said in response to the hon. Member for Strangford, Beccy and Lindsey are looking for seedcorn capital to get this innovative venture under way. Their aim is to achieve self-sustainability within two years of operation, ensuring that the hub is financially stable. On the back of the Government's investment, they would be able to secure funding and partnerships from local businesses, other Government agencies and third-sector organisations to provide resources and services to the community from this central town-centre site. They would be able to diversify revenue streams, tapping into rentals, events, gigs, local productions, workshops and collaborative projects. The social objectives of this bid are also impressive. They aim to increase access to services by 30% in the first year of operation, with a focus on bringing services closer to the heart of the community.

Beccy and Lindsey would launch a comprehensive programme for local young people not in education, employment or training, and for socially isolated individuals. It would target at least 200 participants in the first year, and aims for a 70% success rate in transitioning them into education or employment. Beccy and Lindsey aim to create a vibrant community of at least 100 regular remote workers within the first year; this would foster collaboration and reduce isolation. They wish to establish partnerships with a minimum of 10 local businesses and third-sector organisations in the first year, to provide resources, support and services. They aim to launch the gig venue, which would have the capacity to host a minimum of 20 grassroots events in the first year, and to establish training workshops on gig and theatre management, targeting up to 100 participants.

The social outcomes from these endeavours would be impressive: a reduction in the number of individuals feeling isolated or disconnected in the local community; enhanced accessibility of vital services; improved overall community wellbeing; and the creation of employment, educational and volunteering opportunities, leading to personal and community growth. The initiative would also amplify the voices of local grassroots musicians and creative artists, enriching the already rich cultural tapestry of the Kettering community.

I hope the Minister will agree that the bid is impressive. In year one, 2024-25, Beccy and Lindsey aim to secure the Gala Bingo hall site; initiate immediate remedial works, including the removal of the remaining asbestos; and engage with community stakeholders on the final designs, to ensure they meet the diverse needs of the local community and, importantly, protect the delightful art deco frontage. In year two, 2025-26, they would want to celebrate the successful launch of the building's front section, which would be fully equipped to serve as Kettering's premier co-working and event destination, with expanded staffing and operational capabilities, so that it can integrate community-centric events and initiatives. In year three, 2026-27, they wish to commence and expedite the rebuild of the back of this massive building in the heart of Kettering, keeping sustainability, accessibility and community needs at the forefront of design and execution. They would aim to launch pilot programmes, tailored towards education, skills training and community health, and strengthen ties with key local businesses, educational institutions and civic bodies.

[Mr Hollobone]

In year four, 2027-28, with a significant portion of the building revamped, Beccy and Lindsey would aim to streamline operational processes, ensuring a seamless blend of co-working spaces, event areas and community-focused sections. In year five, 2028-29, they would realise the full potential of the site. The entire building will be humming with activity, following the completion of the refit and rebuild.

The site would become north Northamptonshire's premier hub for work, creativity, collaboration and culture, and that would deepen the societal impact of the project. Programmes would be expanded, and partnerships improved, for maximum community outreach and enrichment. I do not know of any local organisation that is not supporting this bid, but one of the most important, from the perspective of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, is North Northamptonshire Council, which is fully behind this project. NNC fully endorses and supports the vision of creating a hub on the former Gala Bingo hall site. The vision, values and priorities of the council align very closely with what the initiative submitted by Beccy and Lindsey looks to achieve. Importantly, from a growth and regeneration perspective, it would lead the drive for regeneration of Kettering High Street, and would reach out much more widely to the broader North Northamptonshire community.

There are key local wards that DLUHC has identified for levelling up in its "Levelling Up the United Kingdom" White Paper. NNC's vision is of a place where everyone has the best opportunities and quality of life, and the hub initiative clearly demonstrates an opportunity and displays the characteristics to help achieve the council's aims and objective. The council's six key commitments are: "Active, fulfilled lives" for local people, as well as:

"Better, brighter futures... Safe and thriving places... Green, sustainable environment... Connected communities... Modern public services."

All six of those aims would be delivered by these axis hub proposals.

Importantly, another central Government initiative is family hubs. NNC is one of 75 councils that have been given funding to put family hubs into practice. The one in Wellingborough is already open, but in the Kettering area, NNC is looking to open up another one in the next period of time. The venue we are discussing would be ideal for such a family hub investment.

Also, the hub would help with other council and Government programmes for children's centres, community wellbeing forums and local area partnerships. It would help the local business community, help with the relocation of NHS services to the heart of Kettering town centre, which would improve access for those who find it difficult to get to their GP surgery or to the hospital, and foment better Workplace-style projects.

I hope that I have given a flavour of how important the bid is to people in Kettering, how important it is to me, and how much it would benefit not only Kettering High Street but the town of Kettering as a whole, and indeed wider North Northamptonshire. I genuinely struggle to imagine that the Minister could have seen any bid among all those submitted to him in recent months that is of higher quality than the one that Beccy and Lindsey have prepared. I urge him, and plead with him; £2 million

is not a huge amount of money, compared with the billions that the Government spend every year, but putting £2 million into the old Gala Bingo hall site in Kettering would be transformative for the area.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): For everyone's attention, this debate will conclude at 16.56.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): It is a pleasure, Mr Dowd, to see you in the Chair, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for securing this important debate.

We are all too aware of local communities losing beloved assets that foster a sense of community pride and empower communities. That is why, in July 2021, the UK Government launched the £150 million community ownership fund, which forms part of the UK Government's levelling-up agenda. It supports ambition and builds opportunity through targeted support for places where community assets can make the most difference. The fund helps to safeguard the small but much-loved local assets on which we cannot possibly put a price.

Since the launch of the fund, I am very proud to say that we have awarded £49.3 million to 195 projects across the UK, with £35 million allocated to 131 projects across England, £6.2 million allocated to 28 projects in Scotland, £4 million allocated to 18 projects in Wales and £4.1 million allocated to 18 projects in Northern Ireland.

The community ownership fund has been one of my favourite funds to work with since I became a Minister in the Department, because we get to give the cash directly to the community groups that can really make a difference, as we have heard from my hon. Friend. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the historical Keighley & Worth Valley Railway. The restoration effort there is not only preserving a piece of history—the railway had a starring role in "The Railway Children"—but enhancing transport infrastructure, supporting local economies and ensuring the wellbeing of more than 250,000 passengers who use this tourist railway line annually. We were able to give the railway funding in the last round of funding from the community ownership fund.

I have even had the pleasure of making it all the way up to the Western Isles, where I visited Laxdale hall. It is using its £300,000 community ownership funding to fully renovate its community space, which it will use to host community sales, supporting local businesses and encouraging social inclusion.

We have made positive changes to the fund for future bidding rounds. We have announced changes in round 3, including allowing applications from parish councils, an extension of the funding cap for all assets, and a match funding reduction for all bids, bringing the requirement down from 50% to 20%. Incorporated voluntary and community organisations, and parish, town and community councils, can make the case for up to £2 million in capital match funding to help a community owned asset that would be at risk of being lost without community intervention. Bidding for round 3, window 2, closed on 11 October 2023, and successful bids will be announced later this month. Once a window closes, all applications are assessed against the assessment framework, which is publicly available on gov.uk. To ensure fairness

and protect public money, all bids go through the same thorough assessment and due diligence process before receiving funding.

One of the fantastic things about the community ownership fund is that unsuccessful applicants are welcome to reflect on the feedback they receive, and to apply again in one of our next funding rounds. That is why this is one of the best funds in Government. Unsuccessful applicants are provided with feedback on where their application failed against the assessment criteria, as set out on gov.uk. This feedback signposts to the relevant sections of the guidance document, which applicants can use to strengthen their bid. On top of that, development support is now available to applicants via the My Community website. Our development support provider offers initial support and advice to all interested applicants up to the expression of interest stage, after which certain applicants will be able to access in-depth support for the development of their application and business case. That may also include access to small revenue grants to secure specialist support.

The current round of funding opened a week ago today and will run until the end of January. I encourage all hon. Members to engage with community groups and to encourage them to apply, or at least submit an expression of interest as soon as possible. As I have already said, unsuccessful projects can apply to the fund again in this round. My hon. Friend said that the Gala Bingo hall used to be the Granada theatre, and had brilliant acts, such as the Rolling Stones. In the words of the Rolling Stones, I tell my hon. Friend:

“You can’t always get what you want

But if you try sometimes, well, you just might find

You get what you need”.

I hope that that response gives him some satisfaction.

I have heard today about the many merits of the Kettering bingo hall bid, and the impact that the proposal would have on the local community in Kettering. I wish Beccy, Lindsey and the BHVA access hub the very best of luck in this next round of the community ownership fund. As I have said, my door remains open for further discussions with my hon. Friend and any other interested parties on how we can seek to improve bids in future rounds if they are not successful this time around.

Question put and agreed to.

4.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Military Action in Iraq: Declassified Documents

4.56 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of UK military action in Iraq and declassified documents from 1998.

By way of introduction, I pay tribute to *Declassified UK*, and in particular its co-founder and editor, the journalist and author Mark Curtis, who has provided an invaluable public service by shining a light on declassified British documents from 1998 at the National Archives. The documents, which run to over 900 pages, reveal what actually went on behind the scenes when the UK Government decided to take military action in December 1998 in what became known as Operation Desert Fox: the four-day bombing campaign in Iraq from 16 to 19 December 1998 by the United States and British militaries. This is important in and of itself, but also because it was the precursor to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Before I turn to the key findings from the declassified documents, let me recap the human cost of military action in Iraq. This House will forever remember the sacrifice of the 179 British servicemen and women, as well as the 23 British civilians, who lost their life during the conflict in Iraq. Yesterday, I joined the War Widows Association for its Christmas gathering; I pay tribute to its secretary, my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituent Sue Raw, and to the amazing women and men who have lost a loved one during a conflict, or as a result of the lasting consequences of conflict.

In addition, there is also the horrific human cost of the war in Iraq. A research study published in *The Lancet* in 2006 estimated that more than 655,000 Iraqis had died as a consequence of recent wars. In November 2006, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 1.8 million Iraqis had been displaced to neighbouring countries, and 1.6 million were displaced internally. As recently as March 2023, the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University estimated that 1.1 million Iraqis are still displaced internally or live as refugees abroad. According to an April 2014 report in *The Guardian*, the war cost the British taxpayer £9.6 billion. Doubts over the legality of the invasion of Iraq have done irreparable reputational damage to the western world, including the United Kingdom, throughout the middle east and among Muslim populations both at home and abroad.

I turn to the key findings from the declassified documents in relation to discussions involving, and advice given by, the then Foreign Office legal adviser, the Solicitor General, the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Attorney General, the Deputy Secretary for Defence and Overseas Affairs.

On 12 February 1998, the Foreign Office’s legal adviser, Sir Franklin Berman, wrote to his Department’s senior civil servant. He said that

“the only valid claim to employ force (in this case) is under the authority of the Security Council...my view is that a new resolution in suitable terms is a *sine qua non*.”

He added:

“The Ministerial Code requires Ministers to comply with the law, including international law...I cannot believe that Ministers would wish to order British servicemen into action unless their legal advisers were able to assure them that it was legally justifiable.”

[Neale Hanvey]

The then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was again told of the Foreign Office view two days later, on 14 February, in a meeting with the then Solicitor General for England and Wales, now Lord Falconer. Referring to the UK's invasion of Egypt over Suez, Lord Falconer told Tony Blair that in the Foreign Office

"some lawyers argued very strongly that it would be the first time since 1956 that the UK had used force without the backing of the Security Council resolution".

Lord Falconer stated that some lawyers

"might feel strongly enough to resign",

as they might be expected to implement decisions

"that they believed were incompatible with international law".

Five days later, on 19 February, Prime Minister Tony Blair, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and the then Defence Secretary, now Lord Robertson, attended a briefing by Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Charles Guthrie and Air Marshal John Day on

"targeting plans for operations against Iraq".

The minutes note that the Chief of the Defence Staff

"mentioned that he was worried about the legal side; he hoped this could be sorted quickly".

The minutes then state: "The prime minister"—Tony Blair—

"noted that the legal advice was that securing another"

Security Council resolution "was preferable." They added:

"The prime minister concluded that...he did not want to have everything depending on securing a further Resolution".

What on earth did he mean by "everything"? What exactly had he committed to? We know that Tony Blair had been told by then—in a communication entitled "The Legal Use of Force", from Michael Pakenham, deputy secretary for defence and overseas affairs, to John Holmes, principal private secretary to the Prime Minister—that a further resolution was essential, not preferable. Tony Blair's statement in the minutes of the meeting with the Chief of the Defence Staff implies that he would be prepared to use military force without such a resolution. That is unlawful, yet that is exactly what happened as events transpired.

One note in the bundle of papers, which is undated but likely to be from February 1998, appears to be from officials in advance of a meeting between Tony Blair and Attorney General John Morris. This note suggests that Tony Blair pressed Morris to legally justify the use of force. The "Speaking Notes for the Prime Minister: Iraq—The Legal Position" reference Morris's memo of 14 November 1997 and say that it "helpfully indicated" there could be "exceptional circumstances" in which the use of force could be justified without a Security Council statement. The note then says:

"I trust that you can confirm now that my description of what would constitute 'exceptional circumstances' is correct".

However, Morris's memo clearly states the following:

"Such a situation has not yet arisen; and even in such extreme circumstances, the UK could expect to be questioned closely about the legal basis for its resort to military force. The Government would need to have the strongest factual grounds for such action."

This advice from Attorney General John Morris makes it clear that a Security Council statement was "an essential precondition" to using force.

In July 1998, Michael Pakenham, deputy secretary for defence and overseas affairs, wrote a confidential note entitled "The Legal Use of Force". That was sent to John Holmes, principal private secretary to the Prime Minister. In it, he said that the Foreign Office legal team were continuing to advise that

"the bottom line remains that in most foreseeable circumstances, a Resolution of the UN Security Council is required before the use of such force can be authorised".

He added that

"acting against UN principles or without"

UN Security Council resolutions

"may in the short term meet...immediate need but is in the long term wholly contrary to our interests".

The communication also states:

"the advice given by the FCO legal team, and closely followed by the Law Officers, is that there are certain fundamental rules which any Government must follow, and tests they must meet, before authorising the use of force by our Armed Services. Without such tests being met, there would be a very real risk of members of the Armed Services being subject to criminal prosecution."

In summary, the then Foreign Office legal advisers stated that the

"only valid claim to employ force"

was under the authority of the United Nations Security Council. The Solicitor General warned Tony Blair that there were lawyers who might resign rather than have to implement decisions "incompatible with international law". It is absolutely clear that neither the Foreign Office's legal adviser nor the Solicitor General was willing to advise that military action was legally justifiable.

We have evidence of the then UK Prime Minister pressing the then Attorney General to provide a legal justification for military action. If that was not concerning enough, we also had the Chief of the Defence Staff stating that he was worried about the legal side. Crucially, the deputy director for defence and overseas affairs offered absolute clarity that

"the bottom line remains that"

a UN Security Council resolution is required before the use of force can be authorised. In fact, the communication sent to Downing Street makes it clear that the Prime Minister's office was told that that was essential.

On 14 November 1998, Tony Blair authorised the strike on Iraq, but UK and US forces were stood down at the last minute, when Saddam Hussein agreed to permit weapons inspections. Just before Iraq's climbdown, Tony Blair held a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, the Defence Secretary, now Lord Robertson, and the Chief of the Defence Staff, Charles Guthrie, in which he affirmed:

"The time had now come for military action to be taken against Iraq."

According to the minutes of that meeting, there was no consideration of legality, except that it was agreed to justify the use of force

"not because he [Saddam] was in technical breach of UN Resolutions but because he posed a real and imminent threat to peace and security in the region".

As Declassified UK has stated:

"This was a de facto acknowledgement that the threshold demanded by Britain's legal advisers—new Security Council authorisation—had not been met."

On 16 December 1998, the US and UK struck Iraq in a wave of air attacks. Almost 100 sites were attacked by US and British aircraft and cruise missiles from US navy ships and B-52 bombers. General Peter de la Billière, a former head of the SAS who commanded British forces in the 1991 Gulf war, questioned the political impact of the bombing campaign.

It is clear from the declassified documents that Tony Blair misled Parliament. When he announced military action to Parliament on 17 December 1998, he said:

“I have no doubt that we have the proper legal authority, as it is contained in successive Security Council resolution documents.”—*[Official Report, 17 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 110.]*

But that was clearly misleading, as he had been consistently advised—by the Solicitor General, the Attorney General, the Foreign Office legal adviser and the deputy secretary for defence and overseas affairs—that further UN authorisation was required for the use of force. Thus, British officials justified their action by claiming that other UN resolutions previously passed in 1998 revived the authorisation to use force provided in resolution 678, a remnant of the Gulf war, passed eight years earlier in 1990.

Since the other resolutions did not explicitly authorise the use of force, the UK argument was a spurious one. Of the 15-member Security Council in 1998, only three members supported the action: the US, Japan and Portugal. Five years later in 2003, the UK and US relied on the same resolution, 678, to justify their subsequent invasion when they again failed to secure a further Security Council resolution for the use of force.

These files from 1998 suggest that Tony Blair was motivated more by maintaining relations with the US than by upholding international law—something of which he was again culpable in 2003. On the same day, President Clinton told Tony Blair during a phone call that military action against Iraq might have to be used. Blair replied, saying that he agreed and that Mr Clinton “could count on our support throughout”.

That commitment of support was not underpinned by international law.

On the point about Saddam Hussein being unwilling to co-operate, Tony Blair said:

“we would have to enforce our will”,

adding,

“even if there were some differences between us on the legal front”.

According to Declassified UK,

“Blair was intimating to the US president he was prepared to override British legal concerns”

and obligations.

On 14 February 1998, as Washington and London were close to striking Iraq, Blair told Solicitor General Lord Falconer:

“it was inconceivable that we would refuse the Americans the use of the base at Diego Garcia. At the very least this had to be legally possible.”

So far, the Government have not declassified all files relating to this period. They have kept secret several of the Iraq files from the Prime Minister’s office, which cover the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999. Can the Minister explain why these documents have not been put in the public domain and when we can expect publication? The files do not appear to contain the minutes of the

meeting between Prime Minister Tony Blair and Attorney General John Morris. Can the Solicitor General confirm whether that is the case and whether the minutes will be published in full, and if so, when?

These declassified documents show that Tony Blair was determined to take military action against Saddam Hussein in 1998, against explicit advice and in the absence of sound legal arguments or justification. They show that Tony Blair dismissed legal objections to his 1998 bombing campaign. That was the direct precursor to his stance on the invasion of Iraq five years later in 2003, which was also deemed illegal by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, when he said of the war in September 2004:

“From our point of view and from the charter point of view it was illegal.”

Indeed, it was the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw who privately warned Tony Blair in 2002 that an invasion of Iraq was legally dubious, stating that

“regime change per se is no justification for military action”,

and that

“the weight of legal advice here is that a fresh...mandate may well be required”

from the UN. Those words chime with, and are foretold in, the declassified documents that I have highlighted.

I want to place on record my appreciation to parliamentarians who have raised similar concerns in the past, including former Labour MP Dennis Canavan, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and the SNP’s Margaret Ewing and Jim Sillars. I recall that Margaret Ewing questioned the Prime Minister directly in the House at the time, and in 2016 Jim Sillars called for a retrospective Iraq war crimes Act to be passed by the Scottish Parliament. It was the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) who stated:

“The second Iraq war was started to liberate the Iraqi people. Instead, it shattered their country. It was intended to stabilise the middle east. Instead, it destabilised the middle east.”—*[Official Report, 14 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 530.]*

He deserves credit, as does my own party leader, the right hon. Alex Salmond. Mr Salmond was right when he said:

“Through the long debates on Iraq, many of us suspected that the Prime Minister had given commitments to the American President which were unrevealed to this House and to the public. The Chilcot report outlined these in spades. The famous phrase

‘I will be with you, whatever’

will go down in infamy in terms of giving a commitment.”—*[Official Report, 30 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 1531-1532.]*

In both instances—in 1998 and in 2003—we know that Tony Blair received legal advice warning that military action was illegal; and, in both instances, he ignored that legal advice and went on to authorise the deployment of British service personnel. Blair pressed officials, in particular the Attorney General, to provide legal justification for the use of force. He received none, but he did it anyway.

Blair misled Parliament by claiming that a legal basis for military force without a UN Security Council resolution existed, when in fact it did not. The consequences have been devastating for Iraqis, for the region and for military personnel and their families. Lives lost in the theatre of war are well understood, but the lives wrecked by the trauma of conflict are less easily quantified, yet every bit as real. I heard such stories yesterday when speaking

[*Neale Hanvey*]

to the war widows. Such loss and devastation is met with great courage by those affected, but every person's loss should surely be based on a lawful instruction.

How can it be that a Prime Minister who prosecuted two wars against lawful advice and instruction has been rewarded with a knighthood? It is an insult to every single life lost; it should be withdrawn forthwith and a path to full justice secured. Governments should not lie to go to war, and the truth must now be told.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I intend to call the Opposition spokesperson no later than 5.40 pm. Hon. Members should bear that in mind when making interventions.

5.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (*Neale Hanvey*) for setting the scene so well. I also thank him—I spoke to him beforehand—for his focus, quite clearly, on the truth of the matter and the sacrifice of those who gave their lives. Some of their families, I understand, are in the Gallery today. I convey my sincere sympathies and thoughts to those who lost loved ones and live with the pain of that loss. The hon. Gentleman said that incredibly well in his contribution, and I thank him for that. I know that others will focus on that as well.

As we are all well aware, in April 2023, *Declassified UK*, a media organisation that focuses on the work of the British military and intelligence agencies, published an article about classified documents that are now declassified. It said, and indeed suggests, that the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was informed that military action was unlawful without UN authorisation, but proceeded with Operation Desert Fox in Iraq in 1998 none the less. I well remember at that time that we had been dealing with the fallout of the troubles, and I did not relish the thought of war, yet I was also mindful that evil triumphs where good men do nothing. I declare an interest as a former soldier: for the record, I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Artillery for some 14 and a half years. I enjoyed the service, but I should put that on the record as I speak about these things.

I have not had a chance to read the reports in their entirety, but I have read a number of articles on the issue, and it is clear that things were withheld from the public. In Northern Ireland, there is a circumstance that we are all too familiar with. The taste left in people's mouths when they see the difference between their lived memory of a timeline, which I and others lived through, and the events and facts behind the scenes is not a good taste. The declassified British documents in the National Archives appear to show that Blair was already set on taking military action against Saddam Hussein's regime throughout 1998, in the absence of legal arguments to justify it. I find that difficult to grasp, yet I know that sometimes open information is not the same as intelligence passed on. I am loth to comment too deeply on the matter, as I am also aware that documentation does not accurately cover what I lived through in Northern Ireland either.

I will state clearly that opinions on whether Blair's Government took the right steps in 1998 on the right information do not alter the irrefutable fact that our armed forces acted with dignity, and our pride in them

and their actions must be clear. We cannot allow those who have sought to undermine our armed forces for so many years to grasp these documents as part of their war on the honour and integrity of our armed forces personnel.

Forgive me, Mr Dowd, but I omitted to welcome the Minister to his place. He has been in post the past week or thereabouts, perhaps less, and I want to wish him well. He has been a good friend of mine—of us all, by the way—over the years. I very much look forward to what he will say. I also look forward to the contribution of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (*Karl Turner*), because he is a man I have known for a long time and I value his contributions.

To go back to the subject, the presence of our military, our armed forces, was called for by their Government. Their conduct was regimented and measured, and their names must retain our sincere thanks and appreciation. I believe that that must be clear in this debate, regardless of anyone's opinion of Blair's decisions and the documentation. If anyone feels that what we now know about the intelligence should call into question the need for the war, we should remember that the presence of the armed forces is not something that can ever be questioned or ever be in doubt. I know that hon. Members all agree with me when I say that.

The deaths of those young men and women were not in vain. The actions they took and the position that our Government put them in lives with them to this very day and they were right and proper. We remain proud of their contributions and actions. History must never forget. It reminds us all of their contribution, their service and their sacrifice. Again, I commend the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath for securing the debate, and to those in the Public Gallery who lost loved ones, my sincere commiserations.

5.21 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (*Neale Hanvey*) for securing this debate, because we do not often have debates on things that are historical. It is normal for Parliament to focus on the present day and things that are current, but it is helpful sometimes to look back in history and to learn lessons from our recent past. It is excellent that this information has been extracted from the National Archives, which he and others have reported on.

I congratulate the new Solicitor General on his post. I met the hon. Member for Witney (*Robert Courts*) shortly before he became Chair of the Defence Committee. He did an excellent job in that role, but his services are now obviously required by Government instead.

Today, I will draw specifically on some of the things that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath talked about in relation to Operation Desert Fox in 1998. I will also make reference to the invasion of Iraq by the US, UK and others in 2003. Finally, I will ask one or two questions about the role of Parliament in a declaration of war, or in the commitment of UK armed forces to going to war.

We have already heard a great deal about how the Prime Minister in 1998 operated with knowledge of what was legal, but perhaps decided to park that, or in

large part he put it aside and decided to press on with Operation Desert Fox none the less—hence the four days of bombing of Iraq. Alongside the international law issue, however, it was fascinating to hear from the reporting of that time and from this newly released material what was being said to the Prime Minister from a pragmatic perspective. It was not just legal advice that he was receiving; he was also receiving advice about UK interests. For example, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee at the time, Sir Michael Pakenham, told the Prime Minister that to engage in military action would be “acting against UN principles” and

“in the long term wholly contrary to our interests”.

Given that the material that has come out of the archive is largely about legal advice, it is fascinating to read that Robin Cook—the Foreign Secretary of the day—and other legal advisers were suggesting that there would have been a serious problem unless the UK acted with further UN Security Council resolution mandates, and that we might instead have sought to get a new Security Council resolution stating that Iraq was in material breach of previous UN Security Council resolutions.

I was also very interested to hear from the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath about those fascinating insights of how the Chief of the Defence Staff at that time was saying to the Prime Minister that we really did need legal support for military action if it was to go ahead. That does not surprise me, because Sir Charles Guthrie was an excellent CDS. I had the privilege of having a conversation with him at a bar while he was still serving. Just prior to that, he had written a book, “The Just War Tradition: Ethics in Modern Warfare”. This dealt partly with *jus in bello*—just war theory as it applies to the conduct of war, which we have been talking about a lot in the House in recent weeks, in relation to Israel-Gaza. He also wrote about *jus ad bellum*—how wars are initiated. He clearly knew a lot about international law.

Lastly, I would like to talk about the light these revelations cast on the relationship between Parliament, the Executive and the judiciary. Until 2003, it was customary for our armed forces to be committed to war by royal prerogative. Indeed, it is the sovereign decision of the Executive to commit our armed forces to war. On 18 March 2003, something changed. There was not just a debate in Parliament, but a vote on the invasion of Iraq. People will recall that on that day, there was a very large majority vote by MPs in favour of the UK joining military action in Iraq. In opening, Tony Blair offered, “it is right that the House debate this issue and pass judgment.”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 760.]

Clearly, he said those words knowing full well that he had the support of many on his own Benches and on the Conservative Benches. As a footnote, I add that Tony Blair referred that day to the Liberal Democrats as unified “in opportunism and error.” He said that because we were indeed, as a party, unified in opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

The point is that this was a case of Parliament getting an opportunity to have its say on the commitment of UK armed forces to war in Iraq. I raise that because the documents we are discussing today reveal that the Executive were going beyond legal advice and beyond even the advice of really expert opinion, such as the Chair of JIC, and the CDS. They were making an executive

decision that essentially came down to the view of the Prime Minister. It is troubling that so much authority was ultimately vested in that individual. What we can take from that period is that, in future, the legislature ought to have greater scrutiny of decisions to commit our armed forces to war. Finally, when the Minister stands to his feet, I would be interested in hearing his reflections on how UK armed forces will be committed to war in the future.

5.29 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Like others, I pay tribute to my party leader at Westminster and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey), for a forensic examination, and I pay tribute to Declassified UK for the information it has provided. It is appropriate that we should be debating this, because it is something we must never, ever forget. It is ironic—I noticed this on social media—that today is the anniversary of Saddam Hussein being discovered in hiding and the dishevelled despot being brought out. I have a moral objection to the death penalty, but like everybody else, I shed no tears for Saddam Hussein. He was a deeply evil man, although it would have been better had he been brought to trial at the International Criminal Court, according to normal rules, than simply hanged.

The consequences of the Iraq war, as was said by my hon. Friend, live with us and reverberate with us to this day. We were taken into war on a false prospectus. We were taken in on deceit and, indeed, on lies. It is important that that be brought to account. The world is a far less safe place from that war. Millions have died, not simply in that country but around the world. A refugee crisis that we now see and live with was kicked off and has continued. Perhaps also more worryingly, the moral authority of western democracies has been lost and we can trace that back to the war in Iraq. I will go on to comment on that.

I have some sympathy for the Minister because he is having to deal with the sins of a different Administration. However, as has been mentioned by others, the Tories were joined at the hip with Labour in the war and have to take account for the consequences, even if the principal villain was Tony Blair.

There were rebels and people’s names have been mentioned. Indeed, there were two in particular who we should thank for their actions. Robin Cook has been mentioned as deeply principled. I knew Robin Cook and stood against him. I disagreed with his position on the constitutional status of Scotland, but nobody should forget not just the courage he had but the convictions he retained. In speaking out against the Iraq war, we should never forget him and it is a tragedy that he is not here with us today.

Equally, Charles Kennedy spoke out against the Iraq war. He was decried for it, but it was principled. I recall marching with Charles Kennedy in Glasgow, when more than 100,000 people in Scotland marched, as they did in London and other cities, not simply across the UK but across the world, to say, “This is not in our name.” Yet Tony Blair took us to war despite the objection of principled people such as Cook and Kennedy and despite the millions marching across the United Kingdom. We live with the consequences today.

[Kenny MacAskill]

Where is the accountability? Yes, we have had Chilcot and yes, we have had some matters put out there, but nobody has been held to account. We were told it was weapons of mass destruction. We were told we were only minutes away from doom and gloom and, indeed, it was portrayed as the death of democracy and almost the death of humanity. That was shown to be a lie. That same lie was perpetrated by the United States about going into Afghanistan, when it said it was all about 9/11 even though it was quite clear that if they were going to deal with the perpetrators of 9/11 they should be addressing Saudi Arabia. As with Khashoggi, people turned a blind eye to an ally or, indeed, as with the United Kingdom, one that is viewed as bankrolling the armaments industry.

That was formed on a strategic lie and done for access to oil and for wider geopolitical positions. The problem is that we have to live with that today and the consequences reverberate. As is often mentioned in political debates, that brings back Santayana's words about those who cannot learn from history being doomed to repeat it. Repeating it we have been and repeating it we are.

We have seen the disaster that has befallen Ukraine, but we worry and wonder why 85% of the globe has not signed up for sanctions against Russia. I believe there should be sanctions against Russia. I condemned Putin for the invasion, even if I think that some of the actions that have been taken have been wrong and I do not support the actions of the United States. Let us remember that, at the end of the day, the rest of the world does not see this with the same eyes as us. They are saying, "Where is your moral authority when you were prepared to go into Iraq but now you condemn Putin?" We are paying the price for Blair's folly.

Equally, I have to say that I remember that there was criticism, and rightly so, of the Wagner Group. But what was the precursor of Wagner? The precursor of Wagner was Blackwater. Let us remember that, after Iraq, we privatised war. We saw war privatised and we saw private militias that made a lot of money for individuals basically come in and take over something that would previously have been dealt with by a military that represented the state. Before Wagner came on the scene, it was Blackwater, and that affected us. It was not just a corporation in the United States. I met young Scottish soldiers who told me about colleagues of theirs who were deliberately failing drug tests, because it was better to go and get paid £100,000, as they got for going to be militia or contractors. Let us remember that, when we talk about contractors in places like Iraq, they were not bricklayers or scaffolders; they were soldiers carrying out private work for what America and the UK carried out. That was the precursor. As I said, it started with what Blair did, then it reverberated out, and now it lives with us and we have to face those consequences.

And now we have Gaza. We see western democracies again failing to speak out: we see the UK abstain and the United States object. And people wonder why countries such as South Africa and Brazil look at the western world and say, "Who are you to lecture us? Who are you to go on about Putin? Who are you to go on about the sins of Saddam Hussein, when you are prepared to turn a blind eye to what you are doing by funding and supporting the Israel Defence Forces?" All of that

comes back, and that is why there has to be honesty and accountability—because the UK's action in Iraq has fundamentally damaged not just the United Kingdom but western democracy. We were lied to as a people. The objections of the people, who were vociferous—people marched in their hundreds of thousands—were literally ignored by Executive diktat. That must not be allowed to be repeated. That is why we need to get these documents out there and why those who perpetrated this sin—because it was a mortal sin—must be held to account.

5.37 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. It is also a great pleasure to welcome to his place the new Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). We are both relatively new to our roles, although I have had the benefit of this being, I think, my second tour in this particular circuit. I am sure that the tone of our debate will remain as thoughtful and constructive as that which was maintained by the previous occupants of our roles—just as it has been today—and I look forward to those debates in the weeks and months ahead.

I commend the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) on his determination in securing this debate. I know that he has previously made attempts at securing urgent questions on this important issue, and no one can doubt the sincerity of the concerns that have led the hon. Gentleman to pursuing this matter and securing this debate. Whether or not we reach the same conclusions, I applaud and commend him for his persistence in raising this issue.

The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath argues, powerfully, that there is a through line from the discussions that took place within Tony Blair's Government in 1998 over the decision to carry out airstrikes against military assets in Iraq, without authorisation from the United Nations, and the decision, five years later, to take military action against Saddam Hussein. The contention is that that decision in 1998 paved the way for the decision in 2003 and that, despite the 12 volumes and more than 2.5 million words of the Chilcot report, we cannot fully understand the process that led to the 2003 decision until the 1998 decision is subject to the same level of scrutiny, including the release of all outstanding papers on the issue.

Let me say that I understand the point that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath is making. As I have said already, I do not doubt the sincerity of the concerns that lie behind his campaign on this matter. It is worth saying, however, that there is another, more immediate throughline from the decision taken in respect of Iraq in 1998, which was the decision taken by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton just a year later in respect of the intervention in Kosovo.

There again, a UN resolution in favour of action could not be achieved because of the permanent Russian veto; there again, as we will surely discover when the relevant papers are released, there were debates both inside and outside Government about the legality of acting without the cover of a UN resolution; and there again, the judgment ultimately made by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and other NATO allies was that the air strikes they authorised against military assets were justified because of the civilian lives at threat if those assets were left intact.

People may disagree with the air strikes in Iraq in 1998. They may even disagree with the air strikes in Kosovo in 1999. But it is important to recognise that what was going on in that era was not some specific obsession with the regime change of Saddam Hussein, which would lead to the tragedy of the Iraq war in 2003, but a constant debate about whether the world could afford to wait for action from the United Nations following the tragedies of Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica in Bosnia in 1995.

I hear what the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath is saying, but while he may maintain that the willingness to set aside legal concerns over the 1998 action was the precursor to what happened in Iraq in 2003, we must also remember that if that same willingness to act had not been present in 1999, we would still be talking today about how the world stood by and allowed the genocidal destruction of the Kosovan people.

Neale Hanvey: Will the hon. Member give way?

Karl Turner: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because I want the Minister to have the full opportunity to respond to him.

The final point I want to make relates specifically to the issue of which documents have been published in relation to the 1998 action and which are still being withheld from publication. I have no knowledge of how those decisions were arrived at, but I would urge a bit of caution before we leap to any conclusions or encourage any theories that already exist out there about what the still-unpublished papers may or may not contain. In my experience, when officials—in whichever Department it is—sit down and sort through these documents, and decide what to publish and what to withhold, they are always rather more concerned with what precedents will be set for the future and whether there are any security implications for individuals still alive in the present, and rather less concerned with what revelations will emerge about the past.

Personally, I am in favour of maximum transparency wherever possible. I am also in favour of Government Departments being clear about the broad reasons for their decisions when they feel obliged to hold material back from publication. If there are any more concrete reasons that can be provided today as to why the particular papers at issue have not so far been published, then I would welcome that too. That is not because I think there is any great mystery being covered up, but precisely because I think the opposite is true and the Government could dispel a lot of unnecessary and ill-founded speculation if they were clearer about the broad reasons why some material is withheld. If that were to be one positive outcome from this debate, I would welcome it. Another would be to recognise that what motivated much of the action during that period in history was not the desire for regime change in Baghdad, but a compulsion that many leaders rightly felt not to repeat the grave mistakes of Bosnia and Rwanda.

Finally, I offer my sincere commiserations to the loved ones of those military personnel and civilians who lost their lives in these terrible and tragic conflicts.

5.45 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Courts): It is a great honour and pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this evening, Mr Dowd. I thank hon. Members and right hon. Members who have been kind enough to

welcome me to my role. I look forward to working with them on this issue and many others, and to serving the House in this role. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and I know each other well from maritime matters already, and I am confident that we will have, as ever, the constructive relationship that the House would expect.

May I start by also extending my commiserations to all those who have been affected—families, friends, British personnel and civilians? We deal with enormously sensitive and tragic historic matters here, and while we will talk about some of the detail of disclosure matters and decisions that were taken, we should never lose sight of the fact that, at the beginning and end of the story, are people whose lives have been irrecoverably changed, and in some cases ended. I know that the House will join me in recognising that.

The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) secured this debate to discuss the declassification of documents arising from UK military action in Iraq in 1998, and indeed the action itself. He has opened a number of matters before us regarding the merits of that action. Of course, I have to start by saying at the outset that these are historic matters that have been subject to exhaustive and detailed examination in other places, as he will know and to which I refer him. These were matters for many Administrations ago, and not ones that this Government can comment on in the merits. Today, I would like to deal with some of the issues around the disclosure of the documents, which are things that I, as Solicitor General, can comment on. I hope to be able to offer some constructive comments there, and then invite the hon. Gentleman to assist me in some other areas.

I would like to deal with some of the process of the declassification of historic records and to discuss the convention relating to Law Officer advice, which is relatively understood but departed from in some circumstances, such as the ones that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. I will also mention some of the changes that have been made post Chilcot. Of course, Chilcot's terms of reference did not include the area that the hon. Gentleman specifically refers to today; none the less, coming afterwards there were some changes in the way that Parliament and Government approach those matters, and I will address some of them today.

In relation to UK military action in Iraq in 1998, certain documents, including advice from Law Officers, have been declassified and released to the National Archives. I understand that the hon. Member has shared a link with the Department, which covered some documents that he wanted to discuss today. My understanding is that those particular documents have in fact now been declassified and are now open for public review—I think that is the case and I am grateful to him for confirming it. The catalogue goes through an updated process, and I think that is the position with those documents now.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to comment on why some specific documents were not available. I apologise that I am not able to give him the answer to that right now, but if he were to write to me and draw my attention to the specific documents he referred to, I will be able to give him an answer and either point him to where they are or give him an explanation of why I cannot. Of course, it is for the Cabinet Office, rather than the Attorney General's Office, to take a view on

[*The Solicitor General*]

whether documents should be disclosed, and whether in full or with redactions for any reason. I make that request and offer at the outset; I hope to be able to give him some assistance.

I will make some comments on the framework for disclosure, which may be of assistance. The Public Records Act 1958 placed Government Departments under an obligation to identify public records with historic value and to make arrangements for their permanent preservation. It imposed a duty to open these records after the passage of 50 years. That 50-year rule was reduced to 30 years by the Public Records Act 1967 and further reduced to 20 years by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. Departments may retain records, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 placed a duty on Departments to justify whether records transferred to the National Archives should remain closed to the public. However, the general rule is that material that is 20 years old becomes public records.

There have been a number of bespoke bodies responsible for the physical housing of this material, but since 2008 it has been the National Archives. As I have mentioned, there is a framework based on the exemptions for disclosure. That is contained in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and determines whether material transferred to the National Archives should be open to the public.

There are several exemptions that are not time-limited. Those include: national security; defence; international relations, or information provided in confidence by other states or international organisations or courts; the economy; criminal investigations; parliamentary privilege; health and safety; and environmental information. A number of those exemptions will require the Department that owns the information to carry out a balancing exercise as to whether it is in the public interest to disclose that material. That requires consultation across Whitehall and other bodies, and the outcome of that test is subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is advised by the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives.

There is a separate scheme—the security and intelligence instrument—which is approved by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and which governs information relating to the security and intelligence agencies. That information is retained in the relevant Departments, and information retained by way of the instrument has to be re-reviewed every 10 years. Regardless of how retentions or disclosures are made, anyone is able to challenge such disclosures or retentions by submitting a freedom of information request to the National Archives for closed material or to the originating Department for retained material. I hope that has been helpful to the House with regard to the procedure for the disclosure of such records and gives an overview of the position.

The second point that I would like to spend a minute or two on is the Law Officers' convention; I know that the House will be familiar with it, but it is worth rehearsing in a little bit of detail. Some of the aspects that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath has been speaking about do indeed refer to legal advice that was given at the time, or even to the advice of the Law Officers. In this case, some of that material, as he knows, is available in the National Archives.

As a general rule, there are clear and well-understood reasons for not disclosing legal advice, and there are specific considerations around advice that is given to the Government by Law Officers. They may not be relevant to the context or background of this debate—which is about a historic matter and in any event that advice has been published—but, simply for completeness, it is usual practice that advice given by Law Officers and the advice that has been sought, or indeed the fact that advice has been sought, is not disclosed. That is the Law Officers' convention and that is reflected in the ministerial code. The fact that Law Officers have or have not advised must not be disclosed outside Government without their authority.

It is only in narrow circumstances that that convention has been waived, and that has been with the consent of the Law Officers. As the hon. Gentleman knows, perhaps the clearest example was the legal basis for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I know that the House will understand that the very clear reason for the convention is that, as with any client-lawyer relationship, it is to enable the Government to seek legal advice in private without fear of adverse inferences being drawn from the content of the advice or indeed from the fact that advice has been sought in the first place. It means that the Government are not discouraged from seeking advice in certain cases, or pressured to seek advice in inappropriate cases, and it protects that relationship, as with any client-lawyer relationship.

The third point that I will spend a few moments talking about, before I leave some time for the hon. Gentleman to respond, is on Chilcot. There have been a number of changes after Chilcot, which of course was a major inquiry after the 2003 invasion. Operation Desert Fox is outside the scope of the Chilcot terms of reference, but the report does cover the use of military force by the UK and US in Iraq in 1998, including documentary evidence and witness testimony, so some matters can be dealt with in there. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not go into the details that were discovered in terms of the merits, but there have been a number of changes since. There is a Chilcot checklist to support decision making, the National Security Council was established to help with the decision-making process, and Law Officers have to be consulted in good time. There are a number of ways in which the situation has changed since the time he talked about.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) asked me about the Cabinet manual. A convention has developed that before troops are committed, the Commons is given the opportunity to debate the matter, which the Government have acknowledged in the past. Although the general convention remains as it is, there has been some amendment of points since then.

I apologise for running over slightly, Mr Dowd. I want to leave the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath some time to respond, but I hope I have dealt with the questions he wanted me to; he can of course come back to me if not.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman has 30 seconds if he wishes.

5.55 pm

Neale Hanvey: Thank you, Mr Dowd, for your assiduous chairmanship. I thank all Members for their contributions. They have been very reflective and quite helpful. I want

to pick up on a few points that were made. First, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his sincerity and passion, and his comments on the bravery of service personnel—

5.56 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order.

Written Statements

Wednesday 13 December 2023

DEFENCE

Information Commissioner's Office Investigation

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): I would like to update the House on the announcement made today, 13 December 2023, by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The announcement follows an investigation by the ICO into an Afghan relocation and resettlement policy scheme data incident involving group emails sent in September 2021. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) has fully co-operated in the ICO's investigations.

On 21 September, the then Secretary of State stated before the House how disappointing it was. While this mistake was the result of human error during a pressured time in the aftermath of the Operation Pitting airlift, it should not have occurred, and better data handling processes needed to be in place.

I take compliance with the Data Protection Act extremely seriously and we are committed to learning from these incidents. To support those who were impacted, the MOD will establish a financial compensation scheme to enable all directly affected individuals to receive compensation in respect of any damage that may have been caused. Work is well under way on designing the scheme and further details will be shared as soon as is reasonably practicable.

The Defence Afghan relocation and resettlement team have worked hard to improve information management practice while continuing to deliver a challenging programme at pace. Process improvements include a new case management system which significantly reduces the need to send mass emails. We have recruited information management specialists into the team and will continue to grow this capability to meet the demands of holding vast quantities of personal data. Training has been delivered to all members of the team and through frequent mandatory training we will ensure that staff are continuously improving their knowledge and practices concerning information security and data protection, and a significant programme of work is being delivered to safeguard best practice in these areas.

Despite this setback, we have continued to deliver the ARAP programme and make good on the commitments we made to those brave Afghans who served alongside us in support of the UK mission in Afghanistan. At the time of writing, my Department has relocated over 13,600 eligible persons and family members to the UK under the ARAP scheme. We will continue to honour our commitment to relocate all eligible Afghans and their families to the UK.

[HCWS118]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Vaccination and Immunisation Services

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): In 2019 the Government's manifesto committed to continue to promote the uptake of vaccines via a national vaccination strategy. I am pleased to announce that on Wednesday 13 December NHS England published that strategy.

Vaccination saves lives and protects people's health. It ranks second only to clean water as the most effective public health intervention to prevent disease. Through vaccination, diseases that were previously common are now rare, and millions of people each year are protected from severe illness and death.

Building on the success of our world-leading NHS covid-19 vaccination programme, which has delivered over 150 million vaccinations to date, and learning from many decades of successful immunisation delivery, NHS England, in collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency and other partners, has developed a strategic direction for the delivery of vaccination services, focused on improving uptake and coverage of all vaccinations across the whole population while reducing disparities of uptake in under-served communities. To do so, the strategy aims to:

- Simplify and streamline access to vaccinations, including extending online booking capability;

- improve access for people who are currently under-served by offering vaccination through community-based, targeted approaches; and
- deliver vaccination through flexible, integrated, neighbourhood teams that can deliver other preventative interventions alongside vaccination.

The strategy proposes that integrated care boards have the responsibility and flexibility to deliver these aims through local vaccination delivery networks that are tailored to the needs of local people. These local networks will be underpinned by timely, accurate data flows and responsive vaccine supply chains. Local systems will have a robust plan for managing disease outbreaks and surge responses, collaboratively developed with partners including local government, and setting out clear roles and responsibilities.

In developing this strategy, NHS England has sought the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including service users via a public survey, GPs, community pharmacy, NHS trusts and directors of public health. Stakeholder input has been invaluable in developing an ambitious plan for the future of vaccination delivery, as well as describing what should be retained, improved and adapted from the current approach to ensure that it meets everyone's needs.

The strategy supports NHS England's ambition to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040, with England among the first places in the world to set this ambition within the next two decades, by making it as easy as possible for people to get the lifesaving human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and increasing cervical screening uptake.

A copy of the strategy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS122]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Serious and Organised Crime Strategy

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): As Home Secretary, my first priority is to keep the public safe. Today I have published a new and updated serious and organised crime strategy. The strategy has been laid before Parliament as a Command Paper (CP 992) and copies are available in the Vote Office and on www.gov.uk.

Serious and organised crime is a major threat to the national security and prosperity of the United Kingdom. It costs lives, blights communities, hampers economic growth, causes financial loss to individuals, businesses and the state, and corrodes the global reputation of the UK and its institutions.

Since the publication of the previous strategy in 2018, we have invested in strengthening the National Crime Agency (NCA) and policing capabilities, built new comprehensive plans and strategies for dealing with illegal drugs, economic crime, fraud, child sexual abuse and other types of crime, and introduced new powers for law enforcement agencies to respond to the threat posed by organised criminal groups. However, it was a five-year strategy and it is right that we now update our response to reflect changing threats and emerging challenges.

This new strategy sets out our mission to reduce serious and organised crime in the UK by disrupting and dismantling the organised crime groups operating in and against the UK through a comprehensive and end-to-end response to ensure there is no place for serious and organised criminals to hide. The strategy aims to reduce serious and organised crime in the UK through five lines of action:

In-country: We will disrupt and dismantle organised crime groups operating in and against the UK. We will also build resilience in local communities, deter and divert individuals, design out crime and raise barriers online.

UK Border: Strengthening the UK border, including disrupting the exploitative business model of the criminal groups involved in organised immigration crime.

International: Relentless disruption at source of international organised criminals operating against the UK; improving international information and intelligence sharing; and reducing the global drivers.

Technology and capabilities: Ensuring the best intelligence and data collection, analysis and investigative capabilities are in place to identify and disrupt organised criminals.

Multi-agency response: Ensuring all public and private sector partners are working together as effectively as possible with the right capacity, skills, structures and tasking processes.

To support delivery of the new strategy, we are bringing forward legislation in the Criminal Justice Bill, introducing new criminal offences for the possession, importing, manufacturing, adapting, supply and intending to supply specific articles for use in serious crime—vehicle concealments, templates used to print 3D firearm components and pill presses. We will also strengthen serious crime prevention orders to make it easier for police and other law enforcement agencies to place restrictions on suspected offenders.

We will strengthen the UK border and enhance disruptive activity against the organised immigration crime groups who enable people to enter the UK illegally, increasingly through dangerous small boat crossings in the channel.

This includes doubling our funding to increase the multi-agency intelligence and investigative response in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

We will continue to roll out “Clear, Hold, Build”, the local policing and partnership response to serious and organised crime, expanding it to every territorial police force by spring 2024 to reduce crime and build community resilience in hotspot areas in a sustainable way.

The Government are also introducing new measures to support closer collaboration between the NCA and the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) to tackle serious and complex fraud and corruption. We will amend the Crime and Courts Act 2013 to allow the director general of the NCA to direct the director of the SFO on matters relating to the investigation of suspected incidents of serious or complex fraud, bribery and corruption, in the same way that the NCA has power to direct the police in relation to serious and organised crime.

The new strategy will refocus efforts in response to new and emerging challenges, including the growth in online crime and the exploitative business model of people smugglers. It brings together extensive work across Government, ensuring all capabilities available to the UK intelligence community, the NCA, policing and at the border are fully focused on disrupting and dismantling organised criminals.

[HCWS120]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government: Statutory Interventions

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): All hon. Members will recognise the critical role local councils play in providing essential statutory services to their residents and being accountable to the communities they serve. Where councils do not meet the high standards that we set for local government, it is right that Government intervene in order to protect the interests of residents. Today I am updating the House on three statutory interventions: Woking Borough Council, Nottingham City Council and Liverpool City Council.

Woking Borough Council

In May 2023, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), intervened in Woking Borough Council, using his powers from the Local Government Act 1999 (the 1999 Act), following evidence of extensive best value failure in the external assurance review relating to the exceptional level of financial and commercial risk to which the council had exposed itself, the quality of its strategic financial decision making and concerns over its commercial dealings. As part of this, the three reviewers were appointed as commissioners, given powers over a broad range of council functions and tasked with overseeing the improvement. The Secretary of State committed to consider the skills and experiences required to support Woking on its improvement journey within six months, following the receipt of two reports from the commissioners.

In those first six months, the council has worked collaboratively and co-operatively with the commissioners. That being said, the situation remains grave. The commissioners’ first report, published on 19 October,

made it clear that the scale of the challenge at the council “should not be underestimated”. In their second report, published today, the commissioners continue to paint a stark picture of the challenges, noting that the council

“remains in an extremely vulnerable position due to its overhanging debt and historical lack of rigour in its commercial activity.”

Overall, the council has made some limited progress on areas of focus identified by the commissioners in their first report, but there remains a significant deficit in the council’s capacity and capability in some corporate functions.

This second report comes at a key point for the council’s improvement: the coming months will require the council to manage the converging pressures of setting a balanced budget, preparing for local elections and undergoing the required transformation. In the short term, tough decisions need to be made, requiring clear leadership across the council, and a steady hand at the wheel. Following the resignation of the council chief executive, Julie Fisher, the Secretary of State has decided to increase the capacity of the commissioner team by appointing a managing director commissioner, Richard Carr. Mr Carr has more than 25 years of experience and will be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the council and will provide strategic direction and leadership, until such time as a permanent appointment to the post of chief executive can be made. This appointment will increase the council’s capacity to deliver vital improvements and provide stability over the rough road ahead.

Having served as lead commissioner for six months, Jim Taylor has decided to step down from his role for personal reasons. I wish to thank Mr Taylor for the clear leadership and real dedication to his roles as both lead reviewer and commissioner at Woking. He will continue in his role as commissioner at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council. The Secretary of State is appointing Sir Tony Redmond as lead commissioner. Sir Tony is a respected figure with a long career in local government and is currently chair of the Nottingham City Council improvement and assurance board. He will focus on finding longer-term solutions for Woking and promote a clear strategic direction for the council. The next phase of improvement is critical and we are grateful to Sir Tony for bringing his expertise and experience to lead that change. We will keep the intervention under review to determine whether further changes are needed given the challenging weeks and months ahead.

Nottingham City Council

Nottingham City Council has been in intervention since the improvement and assurance board (“the board”), chaired by Sir Tony and made up of independent experts, was first appointed in January 2021. The intervention was escalated in September 2022 by the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), with the issuing of statutory directions compelling the council to follow the advice of the board and to increase the momentum with which the necessary improvements were to be made. While the council has made efforts to address the recommendations issued by the board in February this year, the board’s latest assessment, as presented in its two latest progress reports, is that the council is still not acting at the required pace to make the necessary improvements. Weaknesses in

finance and transformation, along with an underlying culture of poor governance, continue to manifest themselves. On 29 November 2023, the council issued a section 114 notice due to its inability to balance the budget for 2023-24. The precarious nature of the council’s finances, and its effect on overall transformation, together with outstanding governance issues, are causes of serious concern.

In the light of this evidence, the Secretary of State is satisfied that Nottingham City Council is continuing to fail to comply with its best value duty and he agrees with the board that improvements are not being made quickly enough. He is minded to escalate the current intervention arrangements in order to secure compliance with that duty and to ensure that the necessary improvements are made for the benefit of the local community. To that end, and in line with procedures laid down in the Local Government Act 1999, officials in my Department have today written to the council seeking representations on the board’s reports and on the proposed intervention package.

I want to place on record that the Secretary of State recognises the rigour with which Sir Tony and his fellow board members approach their work in supporting the council to address the many challenges it faces. Indeed, without their sustained efforts to date, the current situation would be even more challenging. However, a change in approach is now required to secure the necessary improvements rapidly; there are still many difficult and pressing decisions ahead and the scale of the challenge cannot be underestimated.

The Secretary of State is minded to appoint commissioners to exercise certain and limited functions as required, for two years. The proposed move to the commissioner model of intervention represents a significant change to ensure that public trust in the council is restored, particularly as the council has been working with the board since it was first appointed in January 2021. The commissioner team, if appointed, would consist of three appointments: a lead commissioner; a commissioner for finance; and a commissioner for transformation. I am announcing the proposed commissioner team structure to provide clarity to the council around the most pressing priorities, to make it clear that there can be no slippage in making the necessary improvements, and to enable representations to be made before the final decisions.

Our proposal is for the council, under the oversight of the commissioners, to reappraise its improvement plan within the first three months of the intervention and report on the delivery of that plan to the Secretary of State every six months.

The Secretary of State is proposing to direct the transfer to commissioners all functions associated with:

- the governance, scrutiny and transparency of strategic decision making by the authority;
- the financial governance and scrutiny of strategic financial decision making by the authority;
- the strategic financial management of the authority;
- the authority’s operating model and redesign of the authority’s services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability;
- the development, oversight and operation of an enhanced performance management framework for officers holding senior positions;

the appointment and dismissal of persons to positions, the holders of which are to be designated as statutory officers, and the designation of them as statutory officers; and

defining the officer structure for the senior positions, to determine the recruitment processes and then to recruit the relevant staff.

I hope it will not be necessary for the commissioners to use these powers, but they must be empowered to do so if they consider that required improvement and reforms are not being delivered.

I am inviting representations from the council on the board reports and the Secretary of State's proposals by 2 January 2024. We want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Nottingham, to make their views on the Secretary of State's proposals known. The Secretary of State will consider carefully all representations and any other evidence received, before deciding whether to change the intervention, as he is minded currently to do, to make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act and appoint commissioners. Our expectation is that the council will continue to work with the board to make the necessary improvements until a final decision is made. We will update the House in due course.

Liverpool City Council

On 10 June 2021 the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), updated the House that he was intervening in Liverpool City Council and had appointed a team of four commissioners and given them oversight of the council's highways, regeneration and property management functions together with the associated audit and governance arrangements. Their appointment runs to June 2024. This followed a best value inspection, which concluded that the authority had failed to comply with its best value duty over a number of years. On 8 November 2022, the current Secretary of State confirmed that he was expanding the intervention and issuing further directions to appoint a finance commissioner and give commissioners finance, governance and recruitment functions.

On 6 October 2023, the commissioners submitted their fourth report. Since the last report, there has been a change in leadership at political and officer levels. The new leadership team have shown strength and grip as they continue to make improvements, and commissioners believe they are well placed to deal with challenges. Having carefully considered that report, I am announcing that the Secretary of State is minded to make a number of changes to the intervention.

First, the Secretary of State is proposing to reduce the scope of the intervention and return certain functions to the council by March 2024. This would be part of a planned and phased transition towards the end of the intervention. The Secretary of State is therefore minded to amend the current directions so commissioners no longer exercise the following functions:

All executive functions associated with highways in March 2024; The requirement from section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, to make arrangements for the proper administration of the authority's financial affairs, and all functions associated with the strategic financial management of the authority, by March 2024, to include:

the power to amend budgets where commissioners consider that those budgets constitute a risk to the authority's ability to fulfil its best value duty; and

providing advice and challenge to the authority in the setting of annual budget and a robust medium-term financial strategy for the authority.

All functions in relation to the appointment, organisation and performance of persons to positions the holders of which are not designated as statutory officers, and the designation of those persons for tiers one to three as soon as practicable.

Secondly, the Secretary of State is minded to issue further directions to the council, either to support the proposed return of powers or to address concerns raised by commissioners in their report. The Secretary of State is therefore minded to direct the council to undertake a range of actions to the satisfaction of commissioners, including:

allow commissioners to provide advice and challenge to the authority on strategic decisions related to its finance function, including the setting of annual budgets and medium-term financial strategy;

continue to take steps to rebuild trust with residents, and in particular to improve FOI performance, report writing and systems to record delegated decisions;

have completed a review of the strategic risk management and implement a strengthened mechanism based on its recommendations; progress significantly the implementation of the corporate landlord model, commence the stock condition surveys to better understand the asset base, develop comprehensive asset management plans and produce a revised structure for the property directorate;

continue to establish and implement a cultural change programme that embeds a customer focus, performance management culture, systems and reporting across the organisation.

While I welcome the commissioners' comments that the political and officer leadership of the council have made strong progress since May 2023 and there is early evidence of improvement, there remains a lot to do. The new leadership have not yet had the time to demonstrate their leadership of continuous improvement or their ability to resolutely make necessary difficult decisions. In order to provide enough evidence of a well-set trajectory, more time is needed to observe the impact of this new leadership as they drive improvement. The commissioners currently consider a form of statutory intervention is likely to be recommended beyond the current end date of June 2024. Their next report, in March 2024, will be vital to support my decision on how to proceed. I will update the House at that time.

I am now inviting representations from the council on the report and the Secretary of State's proposals, also by 2 January 2024. We want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Liverpool, to make their views on the Secretary of State's proposals known. Should the Secretary of State decide to act along the lines described here, he will make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act. I will update the House in due course.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge the work of the dedicated staff who deliver the important services of councils in today's announcement on which local residents depend, many of whom have strived to deliver those services over recent years despite the financial, leadership and governance challenges faced by their respective authorities. I also want to thank the commissioners for all they do. They all play a vital role in each council's recovery. I will deposit in the House Library copies of those reports I have referred to, which are also being published on www.gov.uk today.

Planning: Local Energy Efficiency Standards

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State (Baroness Penn) has made the following written ministerial statement:

As a Government, we continue to make progress towards the net zero goal set out in legislation in 2019, including by improving the energy efficiency of homes and moving to cleaner technologies and sources of power within the homes and building sector.

There has been a long-standing debate within planning about both the best method and body to set energy efficiency and environmental standards. For a number of years, the plans of some local authorities have sought to go further than national standards in terms of such efficiency for new-build properties. Equally, there is a legitimate consideration for the Government to want to strike the best balance between making progress on improving the efficiency and performance of homes while still wanting to ensure housing is built in sufficient numbers to support those who wish to own or rent their own home.

In 2015, in reference to an un-commenced provision in the Deregulation Act 2015 which amended the Planning and Energy Act 2008, a written ministerial statement—HC Deb, 25 March 2015, vol 584, cols 131-138WS—stated that until that amendment was commenced, local plan policies exceeding minimum energy efficiency standards should not go beyond level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Homes. Since then, the introduction of the 2021 Part L uplift to the Building Regulations set national minimum energy efficiency standards that are higher than those referenced in the 2015 WMS rendering it effectively moot. A further change to energy efficiency building regulations is planned for 2025 meaning that homes built to that standard will be net zero ready and should need no significant work to ensure that they have zero carbon emissions as the grid continues to decarbonise. Compared to varied local standards, these nationally applied standards provide much-needed clarity and consistency for businesses, large and small, to invest and prepare to build net-zero ready homes.

The improvement in standards already in force, alongside the ones which are due in 2025, demonstrates the Government's commitment to ensuring new properties have a much lower impact on the environment in the future. In this context, the Government do not expect plan-makers to set local energy efficiency standards for buildings that go beyond current or planned buildings regulations. The proliferation of multiple, local standards by local authority area can add further costs to building new homes by adding complexity and undermining economies of scale. Any planning policies that propose local energy efficiency standards for buildings that go beyond current or planned buildings regulation should be rejected at examination if they do not have a well-reasoned and robustly costed rationale that ensures:

That development remains viable, and the impact on housing supply and affordability is considered in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework;

The additional requirement is expressed as a percentage uplift of a dwelling's target emissions rate, calculated using a specified version of the standard assessment procedure;

Where plan policies go beyond current or planned building regulations, those policies should be applied flexibly to decisions on planning applications and appeals where the applicant can demonstrate that meeting the higher standards is not technically feasible, in relation to the availability of appropriate local energy infrastructure—for example adequate existing and planned grid connections—and access to adequate supply chains;

To be sound, local plans must be consistent with national policy—enabling the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework and other statements of national planning policy, including this one;

The Secretary of State will closely monitor the implementation of the policy set out in this WMS and has intervention powers provided by Parliament that may be used in respect to policies in plans or development management decisions, in line with the relevant criteria for such intervention powers;

The above supersedes the section of the 25 March 2015 WMS entitled “Housing standards: streamlining the system”, sub-paragraph “Plan making” in respect of energy efficiency requirements and standards only. Planning practice guidance will also be updated to reflect this statement.

[HCWS123]

Future Homes and Buildings Standards

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This Government understand that we must act quickly to reduce the carbon emitted by new buildings while delivering the good quality homes that are needed by communities across the country. That is why we are today launching a technical consultation on the future homes and buildings standards.

Set to be introduced in 2025, the new standards will play an important role in delivering on our commitment to reach net zero by 2050. These standards build on the increase in energy efficiency standards for new homes and non-domestic buildings introduced in 2021. The proposed changes would deliver zero-carbon ready new homes and non-domestic buildings, meaning no further work would be necessary to ensure they have zero carbon emissions once the electricity grid has decarbonised. Furthermore, the proposed changes would ensure that new homes have lower bills than typical existing homes, making it cheaper for occupants to heat their homes. The Government are mindful of the additional burdens being placed on, and the viability of, development and welcome views on this as part of the consultation process. The consultation also seeks views on introducing higher energy efficiency standards for new homes created through conversions—material change of use—and asks whether overheating standards, introduced in 2021, should be amended.

Following analysis of consultation responses, we will legislate for the future homes and buildings standards by amending the Building Regulations in 2024.

The consultation will run until 6 March 2024 and the consultation documents can be found online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-future-homes-and-buildings-standards-2023-consultation>.

[HCWS119]

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