

**Thursday  
19 May 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 19 May 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 19 May 2022*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### SESSIONAL RETURNS

*Ordered,*

That there be laid before this House Returns for Session 2021-22 of information and statistics relating to:

- (1) Business of the House.
- (2) Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question, Allocation of Time and Programming of Bills;
- (3) Sittings of the House;
- (4) Private Bills and Private Business;
- (5) Public Bills;
- (6) Delegated Legislation and Legislative Reform Orders;
- (7) European Legislation, etc;
- (8) Grand Committees and the Regional Affairs Committee;
- (9) Panel of Chairs;
- (10) Select Committees.—(*The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Union Connectivity Review

1. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans he has to implement the Union connectivity review's recommendations on rail transport. [900100]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked me to pass on his apologies; he is absent from oral questions as he is attending the International Transport Forum annual summit, the world's largest gathering of Transport Ministers, where the UK is assuming the presidency. We are carefully considering the recommendations of Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review and intend to respond later this year.

**Christian Matheson:** Mr Speaker, if you want to go from anywhere in Scotland or northern England by train to anywhere in north Wales, chances are you will have to go through Chester. Will the Minister please hurry up with the consideration and get us a positive decision on the electrification of the line from Crewe to Chester, and on the remodelling of Chester station to increase capacity for signalling and passengers?

**Wendy Morton:** The hon. Gentleman is nothing if not passionate about the city of Chester and the region. I am very conscious that the strategic outline business case for improvements in and around Chester station was submitted, and that the document has been reviewed. My understanding is that work is still ongoing.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the Minister agree with me that the biggest impediment to rail connectivity between Scotland and England is the ongoing dispute between the rail unions and TransPennine Express, which has caused huge disruption to my constituents who use Lockerbie station. Is there anything the Minister can do to bring to an end these unwarranted cancellations and disruptions to services, particularly at the weekend?

**Wendy Morton:** I am very conscious of the disruption, which is really disappointing because of the distress it causes to passengers. It is important to recognise that from the start of the pandemic, the Government earmarked more than £16 billion for taxpayer-funded life support for passenger services. We absolutely urge the unions to work with TPE to identify ways of restoring rest-day working.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): According to a written answer I received yesterday, the now publicly owned ScotRail pays the highest track access charges of any train operator; they are more than double the next highest figure and make up nearly a quarter of the entire total. The charges have increased by over 320% in the last five years. Does the Minister accept that those punitive charges reduce the Scottish Government's capacity to boost even further the substantive investments made in transport decarbonisation, and will she commit to rebating ScotRail and the taxpayers of Scotland for those unjustifiable and exorbitant charges?

**Wendy Morton:** These are charges that all train operating companies pay, right across the country. I will not get into the detail of how they are worked out, but let us be absolutely honest: this Government are making a massive investment in the railways. That includes the £96 billion in the integrated rail plan. I know, Mr Speaker, that you are very keen to see investment and improvements in Chorley. No doubt we will have a conversation about that in future.

#### P&O Ferries: Staff Rosters

2. **John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Whether he has made a recent assessment of the potential safety implications of roster patterns worked by seafarers employed on P&O Ferries' vessels. [900101]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** Responsibility for ensuring roster patterns comply with international hours of work requirements lies with the owner-operators and flag state. It is for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, as the port state, to verify that those requirements are being met.

**John McDonnell:** May I rapidly explain to the Minister why I tabled this question? On the intensive Dover to Calais route, P&O wants agency crew to work over 230 round trips before a period of rest. The experienced

local crew it replaced worked 18 round trips before a rest period. This is where P&O is cutting its wage bill; it is not just doing it through minimum wage avoidance. Will he take steps to ensure that the legislation announced last week will cover roster patterns, so that the remaining major employers of British seafarers, such as DFDS and Stena, which have reasonable roster programmes, are not undercut by the likes of P&O, both on pay and maritime safety?

**Robert Courts:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. If there are concerns that the MCA is made aware of, those will of course be investigated. With regards to the action we would take, the legislation announced is relatively narrow in scope and deals with the minimum wage aspect. However, the point the right hon. Gentleman rightly raises is being considered as part of the fair ferries national framework agreement being developed by the Department in conjunction with the UK Chamber of Shipping, operators and the unions.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What P&O did—and it was willing to admit this—was break the law. It refused to allow the usual consultation rights, and Parliament needs to do something to fix that. Surely the Government need to be in a position to take the likes of P&O on and get an injunction, so that consultation rights are left intact. Will the Minister speak to other Ministers across Government to ensure that this rather large hole gets filled?

**Robert Courts:** Yes. My hon. Friend raises a very good point. There is a package of nine measures that we are taking to tackle the disgraceful behaviour of P&O, which the House is united in condemning. Conversations will go on between ourselves and other Departments, particularly the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which holds responsibility for the area of legislation my hon. Friend mentioned.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): As the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), said, P&O brazenly broke the law, and it has faced no consequences for that action. Last week, the chief executive officer, whom the Transport Secretary said is not fit to be in charge of P&O, was promoted to the board. P&O is laughing in the faces of this Parliament and the public, and the Government are frankly letting the company get away with it. When will they get tough and seek a court order banning the entire board from office?

**Robert Courts:** It is obvious nonsense that the Government are not acting. There are nine actions that we are taking to tackle the utterly disgraceful behaviour of P&O. The hon. Lady should be absolutely clear that P&O is responsible for this situation, not the Government; we are taking action. It is also worth remembering the model that Irish Ferries introduced in 2004, because the Labour Government did nothing, and she has done nothing. This Government are the ones who are taking action now.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am back again, Mr Speaker, and I completely agree with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). The Government

have unveiled plans to allow ports to surcharge or block ferry companies such as P&O if they do not comply with national minimum wage legislation. I welcome anything that makes life harder for the likes of P&O, but why are the Government ducking their responsibility to amend and enforce employment law, and instead palming it off to the private sector? Is it not time that maritime employment law was devolved to Holyrood, and that a Government committed to taking action against the likes of P&O? Is it not time that that Government were given the power to get on with the job?

**Robert Courts:** As I have explained, the Government are committed to taking action. We have nine points that we are addressing, and ports are being asked to act because they are the area where we have control and where we can enforce national minimum wage legislation. That is a critical plank of the action we are taking—it is not everything, but it is one of the most important things. We will continue to talk to colleagues across Government about any other steps we might take on employment legislation more generally.

### Local Transport

3. **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local transport services. [900102]

5. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local transport services. [900104]

8. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local transport services. [900107]

10. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local transport services in Yorkshire. [900109]

15. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local transport services. [900116]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** Driving improvements to local transport services is vital to levelling up. That is why we have committed £5 billion this Parliament to do that.

**Mark Eastwood:** Reductions in rural bus services in the Dewsbury constituency continue to be a major problem, particularly in villages without nearby rail access such as Grange Moor, Flockton and Emley, leaving many local people unable to access GP surgeries and local amenities. Does my hon. Friend agree that private bus companies and the West Yorkshire Mayor need to look at ways of improving and increasing bus services across rural areas, rather than just focusing on major towns and cities?

**Trudy Harrison:** That is totally right. That should absolutely be the focus. The Government are determined that great bus services should be available to everyone, everywhere. We have recently announced that we will provide funding to improve bus services in a wide range of areas, and I am delighted with the £70 million that is being made available to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

**Danny Kruger:** Rural transport networks are the arteries of our towns and villages—they bring life to our communities. However, the answer is not just big buses running the same routes on the same timetable every day; it is also partly about demand-responsive transport. The good news is that Wilshire Council recently won a £1.3 million grant from the Government to invest in demand-responsive transport in the Vale of Pewsey. May I thank the Minister for that award and ask what more the Government are doing to foment the revolution in demand-responsive transport?

**Trudy Harrison:** I am grateful for the appreciation and, most importantly, his championship of rural communities and the solution that demand-responsive services represent. We recognise that they can really improve the availability of local transport. Our national bus strategy encourages local authorities to consider demand-responsive transport as one of the tools available for improving local bus service provision. As my hon. Friend says, we have provided £20 million from the rural mobility fund to areas across the country to trial demand-responsive transport solutions in rural and suburban areas. I am delighted, and will follow the progress that my hon. Friend is so keen to achieve.

**Peter Aldous:** Despite submitting an innovative proposal, Suffolk County Council was not successful in its bid for its bus service plan. It is disappointing that it first heard of this decision through the media, and it is yet to receive a full explanation of why its bid was not accepted. Will my hon. Friend meet the county council and Suffolk MPs to agree a strategy that will ensure that Suffolk has a fully comprehensive and properly integrated bus service?

**Trudy Harrison:** We were really pleased to receive the bus service improvement plans from all the local transport authorities. On 4 April my Department sent a letter to those areas that were unsuccessful setting out our continued support, advice on enhanced partnerships, and many other ways that we will continue to improve the provision of local bus services. I will certainly ensure that the Minister responsible in the other place holds the meeting that my hon. Friend asks for.

**Jason McCartney:** I am going to raise the issue of local bus services as well. What plans are being put in place to make local bus services across Colne Valley more reliable, more regular, more affordable and more environmentally friendly?

**Trudy Harrison:** My hon. Friend is a doughty champion, and he has set out exactly what our national bus strategy wants to achieve. I am thrilled at the ambition that I am hearing from across the House—and, indeed, the country—for better bus services. That is what we want to achieve. I feel the disappointment, but as was set out in the letter of 4 April to the unsuccessful areas, this is not the end of the road—far from it. We will continue the support. Perhaps my hon. Friend would like to join the meeting with the Minister in the other place, as we Bus Back Better, particularly in his community.

**Harriett Baldwin:** Given the growing popularity of the Worcestershire Parkway station, which is at the intersection of the North Cotswold line and the Cross Country line, will the Minister ask her colleague's officials

to look again at the compelling strategic outline business case for doubling the North Cotswold line between Oxford and Worcester?

**Trudy Harrison:** The £500 million restoring your railway fund is supporting more than 45 schemes in England and Wales by providing funding and advice. In answer to her question, it would probably be most appropriate for her to have a meeting with the relevant Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton).

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** The Government's help to local bus companies and help for light rail during covid has been appreciated, but already bus companies in Sheffield are starting to make cuts, particularly First. The Government have said that, come October, all covid support will end, and South Yorkshire received no funding whatever under the BSIP. Does the Minister understand that in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, come October, we are not going to get London-style services? Many parts are going to get no bus services whatever.

**Trudy Harrison:** I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman recognises the support that has been provided for local services during the pandemic. It was not an insignificant amount; indeed, it was £2 billion. We have provided £2.5 billion in new funding to support improvements to bus services and, as was set out in a letter sent by my Department to unsuccessful areas, we will continue to support operators and local authorities as we roll out our national bus strategy.

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** Bus services are critical transport infrastructure in Newcastle, but too often my constituents are left waiting for long periods at bus stops for high-priced bus services, not knowing when the buses are going to come. That is only getting worse, with price increases and service cuts. When—I want a date, not talk about the Bus Back Better fund, because that is not going to do it—will my constituents get bus services of the same affordability and quality as London's? A date, please.

**Trudy Harrison:** This is an ongoing part of the progress that we are making to ensure that people throughout the country—everyone, everywhere—benefit from better bus services, in both rural and urban areas. As for specific dates, I should be delighted to write to the hon. Lady giving details of any further competitions or funds that might be available. Meanwhile, we will continue to help local authorities and operators—as we have been doing, particularly during the pandemic—to bus back better.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** In my constituency we have four railway stations as well as a tube station, but one of those stations, Queenstown Road, has no step-free access and is also inaccessible in other respects, so constituents wanting to board a train on that line have to go to Waterloo. Obviously, we would all agree that this is not fair or right, and it goes against the Government's commitment in their inclusive transport strategy. Along with other key stakeholders, I have been



calling for funds to ensure that we can make Queenstown Road fully accessible and fully inclusive. Will the Minister meet me and other stakeholders to discuss how we can make that a reality?

**Trudy Harrison:** Of course accessibility is a priority for the Government. As I have said, we want to ensure that everyone, everywhere, can benefit from local services. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the Rail Minister, will endeavour to meet the hon. Lady to discuss specific proposals for step-free access.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Before the pandemic, the trains to Stansted airport ran every 15 minutes. Since the Department for Transport has been pulling the strings, the frequency has slipped to half-hourly, with a knock-on effect on local transport services. As passenger numbers return to their pre-pandemic levels over the summer, will the Minister revisit that decision as a matter of urgency?

**Trudy Harrison:** I think the answer is yes, with £16 million of funding, but it would be sensible for the hon. Gentleman to receive further detail in writing from my hon. Friend the Rail Minister.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Buses are lifelines, and for four years we have worked incredibly hard in south Yorkshire to transform our services for the better. We have rightly been ambitious, putting forward a strong levelling-up fund bid and an excellent bus service improvement plan, but the Government supported neither. What advice can the Minister give those in our area, and many others around the country, who have the ambition to transform their services but need investment from national Government in order to do so?

**Trudy Harrison:** I do not think I have heard such support for buses in any previous session of Transport questions, and it is brilliant to hear it, because we want to drive that patronage. We want to increase the number of people travelling on buses, and I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is championing the cause. As for specific support, I think he should read the letter that we sent out giving details of the support available, and perhaps consider the levelling-up fund, which can also provide support for buses. The closing date for applications is noon on Wednesday 6 July. However, as I have already said many times, we will continue to help local authorities and bus operators to improve bus services for everyone, everywhere.

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

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On Monday, I was in Bradford meeting local schoolchildren left stranded by cuts in Northern rail services. In Wakefield, some passengers will face a four-hour gap in services between 6 am and 10 am. The Transport Secretary has not said a word about the cuts, but has spent his week boasting about new routes in Sevenoaks. Of course the south-east needs routes, as does the rest of the country, but what message does that send to our northern communities? If Ministers mean a single word of what they say about levelling up, will they commit themselves to restoring those northern services to pre-pandemic levels, as a matter of urgency?

**Trudy Harrison:** Of course we will keep everything under review. As for support for rail services in the north—

**Wendy Morton:** There was £16 billion at the start of the covid pandemic.

**Trudy Harrison:** My hon. Friend the Rail Minister is shouting, “£16 billion”. There is also £96 billion for improved services in the integrated rail plan.

### Footbridges

4. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to build more footbridges. [900103]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Government are investing £2 billion in active travel over this Parliament. This will allow local authorities to create new walking and cycling routes, including new footbridges.

**Robbie Moore:** My constituents in Silsden and Steeton have waited far too long for a footbridge to be built over the busy A629 dual carriageway. Six years after a feasibility study was granted, nothing has happened, despite this Conservative Government awarding millions of pounds to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to fund projects just like this. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on our Labour West Yorkshire Mayor and our Labour-run Bradford Council to stop dithering and delaying and get on and get that bridge built?

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend remains a powerful champion of this and other transport priorities across his constituency. The Government have recently confirmed an £830 million settlement for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority as part of the city regional transport settlements programme. We expect to agree a finalised investment programme of public transport, walking and cycling improvements in the city region in the coming weeks.

### Rail Services: South Wales and South-west England

6. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve cross-border rail services between south Wales and south-west England. [900105]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** We are always looking for ways to boost connectivity between south Wales and south-west England, and have most recently introduced through services between Cardiff and Penzance as part of the December 2021 timetable.

**Jessica Morden:** The Union connectivity review and the Welsh Government's Burns commission have both highlighted the need for new stations such as Magor on the south Wales main line to improve our cross-border rail services. Will the Minister commit to delivering funding for the long-awaited relief line upgrades, and will she meet me and campaigners to discuss the bid for a new station for Magor?

**Wendy Morton:** On the Union connectivity report, as I am sure the hon. Lady is aware, in response to Sir Peter Hendy's review which was published last year,

we have set aside development funding for projects to improve UK-wide connectivity. We are engaging with the Welsh Government and other stakeholders before issuing a formal response to that review. I am more than happy to meet her.

### Transport for London: Finance

7. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of Transport for London on its long-term financial arrangements. [900106]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** After providing £5 billion to support Transport for London through the pandemic to date, we continue to discuss a potential longer-term funding settlement to provide TfL with financial certainty while ensuring fairness to national taxpayers.

**Bob Blackman:** My hon. Friend may be aware that the do-nothing Mayor of London has announced consultations on hammering hard-pressed motorists yet again, with an extension of the congestion charge, an outer London charge, a pay-per-mile charge and an expansion of the ultra low emission zone. Will my hon. Friend rule out funding those schemes, and will he penalise the Mayor of London if he goes ahead with them?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Decisions on road charging are of course for the Mayor of London alone to take, but I agree with my hon. Friend that the Mayor must not punish people who need to use their cars, especially at a time when people are struggling with the cost of living.

### Bus Services

9. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to increase bus services. [900108]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The national bus strategy, published in March last year, sets out the Government's vision for delivering better bus services for passengers across England. In April, we announced over £1 billion of new funding for the bus service improvement plans, as part of a £3 billion investment in buses during this Parliament.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Well, we are back to buses. My local bus company is really struggling. Numbers 1, 2, 3, 3A, 19, 22, 39, U1, U2, U5 and D2 have all been cut, at a time when we must offer people proper alternatives to car travel. When can my constituents expect bus services to get back to at least pre-pandemic levels?

**Andrew Stephenson:** We have provided huge support for bus services across the country during the pandemic. I would like to remind the hon. Lady that since the Conservatives came to power in 2010 annual support for buses has been 15% higher in real terms than it was under Labour, and that bus fares rose far faster under the last Labour Government. This Government support buses and bus users and we will continue to invest in bus services across the country.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The people of Stoke-on-Trent were delighted to receive £31.7 million from this Conservative Government to bus back better, but sadly, First Bus still thinks it appropriate to cut some services despite this much-welcomed investment. Will the Minister meet me to talk about First Bus's shameful local record? If that company cannot handle it, maybe there should be franchising in the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend continues to make powerful points on behalf of his constituency. I am sure my noble Friend Baroness Vere, the Buses Minister, will be happy to meet him.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the shadow Minister, Sam Tarry.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Well, well, well, the Minister and the buffoons on the Back Benches talk of enhancing bus services, but at what cost? Today, Labour party research—[*Interruption.*] I suggest the Minister listens to this. Today, Labour party research shows that ZEBRA, or zero-emission bus regional area, funding to the tune of £15 million has been awarded to Arrival, which is interesting because that bus company is run by one Mr Denis Sverdlov, one of President Putin's closest allies. The funding will see Arrival's buses on the streets of the UK, sanctioned by this Government.

This Government are supposed to have sanctioned everyone connected to the Russian Government as a result of the horrific war in Ukraine, so I have one simple question: why is millions of pounds of UK taxpayers' money being handed to one of Putin's nomenklatura? This is not Bus Back Better but buses straight to Russia.

**Andrew Stephenson:** Dear oh dear, the shadow Minister is buffooning back better rather than bussing back better. I am more than happy to raise that issue with my noble Friend the Buses Minister. We will certainly look into the details of that allegation, but at a time when public transport users are beset by strikes that the shadow Minister will never condemn, he should look in the mirror at his own party's record on supplying public transport across this country.

### Noise Cameras

11. **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): What progress his Department has made on assessing the effectiveness of noise cameras since the completion of initial research into their use. [900111]

17. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle the use of loud engines and exhausts. [900118]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** Following encouraging initial research, further trials of the latest noise camera technologies have been announced to assess their effectiveness, and Members House are encouraged to submit applications for a trial in their local area.

**Esther McVey:** I welcome the Government's forthcoming acoustic camera trial, so much so that I have already submitted an application for a trial on the A34 bypass

through Wilmslow in Tatton, although I hear that competition is stiff because of the number of applications submitted. Although I do not expect the Minister to give me advance notice of the result of Tatton's application, if even places such as the A34 bypass through Wilmslow are not successful, will he consider having more trials in more places?

**Robert Courts:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her interest in the scheme and for highlighting the nuisance of noisy vehicles in her constituency. We will be carefully reviewing all the applications received, and we will choose four sites that represent a wide range of urban and rural environments across England and Wales. We will then consider the results of those trials.

**Mrs Drummond:** Villages in Meon Valley, including those along the A32, are blighted by noise from illegally modified motorcycle exhausts, so I am pleased the Minister has explained that the noise camera trial will move forward. Will Meon Valley be included in the trial to put an end to this unacceptable blight on communities in my constituency?

**Robert Courts:** My hon. Friend is right to raise the blight on her constituents, and I entirely understand why she does so. The noise camera trials will demonstrate whether the technology can be an effective enforcement tool that enables the police and local authorities to tackle the excessively noisy and illegally modified vehicles to which she refers. I know she will work with her local authority to apply for a trial in the best way possible.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. The pilot scheme has a target of picking up excessive noise, which has an impact on people's hearing over time that they might not notice. At the conclusion of the pilot scheme, will he share that information with the Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Ministers? I feel the findings of the pilot scheme could benefit us back home in Northern Ireland, too.

**Robert Courts:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. The enforcement of such matters is devolved, which is why we are doing the trials in just England and Wales, but of course we will talk to the devolved Administrations to make sure the results are shared so that we can, if possible, roll this out across the UK.

#### Local Transport Plans: Decarbonisation

12. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he plans to take to help ensure that local transport plans prioritise decarbonised modes of transport. [900112]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** As part of guidance to be published later this year, local transport plans will be expected to include quantifiable carbon reductions.

**Rachael Maskell:** The opportunity to make a seismic transition to cycling and walking in our towns and cities is simply not being realised in places such as York, the home of Active Travel England. "Gear Change" is the right ambition, but local plans and local transport

plans are just not reflecting it. So how will the Minister ensure that this ambition is instituted in planning? Will she publish the Government's funding plan needed by 2025 and 2030 to achieve this cycling and walking ambition?

**Trudy Harrison:** Goodness me, our ambition for cycling and walking is well and truly set out in our transport decarbonisation plan and "Gear Change"; it was the Prime Minister's ambition that by 2030 half of all journeys in towns and cities will be walked or cycled. As the hon. Lady mentioned, the home of Active Travel England will be located in York. This is just one of the ways in which we are decarbonising the transport system, moving away from fossil fuels and to electrification. I am also delighted that she has 33 electric buses operating a park-and-ride system in York.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to shadow Minister, Mike Kane.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister and I both know that the quickest way to decarbonise the air around our nation's great airports is to implement the airspace modernisation programme, which will allow for better take-offs, better landings, more efficiency and the ending of stacking. The good news is that guidance was issued in May—three years ago. Does the Minister want to take a punt on when the Government will implement it?

**Trudy Harrison:** I think it best that the hon. Gentleman has a meeting with the Aviation Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts)—specifically on that point. As for how we will decarbonise the aviation sector, again we are not short on ambition, nor on progress. We have rolled out the "Green Fuels, Green Skies" programme, and we continue to work with aviation manufacturers and airports to ensure that we decarbonise the aviation sector.

#### Rail Journey Times: Bradford to Leeds

13. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to shorten rail journey times from Bradford to Leeds. [900114]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** As part of the integrated rail plan, the Government will be upgrading the Calder Valley line between Bradford Interchange and Leeds to reduce journey times from about 20 minutes today to as low as 12 minutes.

**Imran Hussain:** Last year, the Government scrapped Northern Powerhouse Rail, which would have run from Manchester to Leeds, through Bradford, stating that it was too expensive. At the same time, they ignored the plans set out by the Mayor of Greater Manchester to look at serious alternative funding models. Those same models got the £19 billion Crossrail project built for London. So can the Minister tell me why something that is good in the capital is apparently too good for places such as Bradford? Has he even considered the serious alternative proposals set out by the Mayor of Greater Manchester?



**Andrew Stephenson:** Let me gently correct the hon. Gentleman: last year, we set out our integrated rail plan, which is a £96 billion investment in the railways of the midlands and the north. It is the biggest ever investment by any Government in the railways of this country, and that is five times as much money as was spent on Crossrail. We are committed to delivering improvements across the north of England to more places sooner than under previous plans, and I encourage him to get behind the plans. I am more than happy to meet anyone, including Transport for the North and the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and I meet the hon. Gentleman's colleagues from Bradford regularly to talk about other options. The Government have said that we will take an adaptive approach, and we will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure that we get this right, but £96 billion is a huge investment in our railways.

### Transport Costs

14. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of rising transport costs on the cost of living. [900115]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Department consistently monitors how transport costs impact the cost of living and is investigating ways to reduce them further.

**Joanna Cherry:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Of course we all know that petrol and diesel prices have hit record highs, and now the prospect of an embargo on Russian oil means they could increase further. Many of my constituents are struggling to fill up their tanks for essential use. The RAC has called on the Chancellor to reduce VAT on fuel costs, and many EU countries operate essential user fuel rebate schemes. What discussions has he had with the Chancellor about employing similar schemes and similar cuts in the UK?

**Andrew Stephenson:** At the spring statement, the Chancellor announced a temporary 12-month cut of 5p a litre in duty on petrol and diesel, to support motorists. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy recently wrote to the fuel companies to ensure that that cut was being passed on. Treasury Ministers continue to keep the matter under review and Transport Ministers continue to have regular conversations with Treasury Ministers about the importance of ensuring that motoring remains affordable.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The cost of rail travel could be reduced by maximising the income of the rail companies. On three of the four journeys that I took last week, there was no ticket inspection on the trains and none of the barriers were operational. Bearing in the mind the taxpayer support for the rail network, it is not only passengers who are being taken for a ride but the taxpayer. What will the Minister do to ensure that London North Eastern Railway, TransPennine and Grand Central—the guilty parties last week—maximise their income and reduce travel costs?

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Revenue protection is of course incredibly important for all train operating companies. Taxpayers have put more than £16 billion into our railways during the

course of the pandemic, so we need to continue to ensure that all operators do everything they can to maximise their revenues. I am interested to hear more details about not only my hon. Friend's experience but that of other Members, because the Rail Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—and I are committed to ensuring that what my hon. Friend witnessed does not continue to happen.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware of the huge costs for people who live in Wakefield and Huddersfield that have resulted from the fact that the small, regular and very good service between the two places was axed two years ago? It has meant that people have to travel in taxis and cars, which is much more expensive, so it is a disaster not only environmentally but financially. I was in Wakefield only on Saturday, and that is still a very important aspect of life and the cost of living for the people who live there.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I completely appreciate the importance of local rail services. We are working not only to restore rail services following the pandemic but, through things such as the restoring your railway scheme, to open new lines and services throughout the country. We continue to invest record amounts. As the lead on the integrated rail plan, I am particularly interested in ensuring that we get local services right throughout the north of England. I am happy to discuss with the Rail Minister the points the hon. Gentleman has raised, to see what more we can do in his area.

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

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): On Tuesday, we will see the opening of the fantastic Elizabeth line, which will run from east London right through the incredible town of Slough and on to Reading. It shows just what can be achieved when a Labour Government decide to make an ambitious public transport investment, as they did back in 2005 by introducing the Crossrail Bill. That stands in stark contrast to this Government, who are cutting services, jobs, safety checks and infrastructure projects throughout our rail network. The only thing they have increased is fares, and by eye-watering amounts. Will the Minister explain how huge cuts and huge fare hikes will do anything to get people back on to trains and to tackle the climate and cost of living crises?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Without wanting to test your patience with repetition, Mr Speaker, I emphasise again that the integrated rail plan in the midlands and the north is, at £96 billion, five times as big as the Crossrail project. I gently remind the shadow Minister of who the Mayor of London was when Crossrail was given the go-ahead and who the Prime Minister was when it opened. We are very proud of Crossrail and investing in London, but we are also very proud of investing in the midlands and the north.

### Railways: Connectivity

16. **Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to connect more towns to the railway network. [900117]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** The Government are investing record levels in rail enhancements across England and Wales. The £500 million restoring your railway fund is currently supporting more than 45 schemes to reconnect communities and reverse the Beeching cuts.

**Craig Williams:** Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Carno station action group, which has campaigned for more than two decades to reopen Carno station? I implore her to meet me to talk about the Welsh Government's kind offer to put forward 25% of the funding to open the station at Carno in Montgomeryshire.

**Wendy Morton:** I know that my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for all things to do with Montgomeryshire, particularly for better transport. Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review supported further improvements between mid-Wales and the midlands. We are obviously considering them very carefully, but I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

### Diesel-only Trains: Decommissioning

18. **Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress the Government have made on phasing out diesel-only trains by 2040. [900120]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** We remain committed to phasing out diesel-only trains by 2040, and have electrified almost 800 miles of track in the past four years alone to support that goal.

**Christina Rees:** The Minister is aware that the Global Centre of Rail Excellence being developed in Onllwyn in my Neath constituency is the first and only purpose-built UK rail test facility, which will test the capability and reliability of alternative diesel rail technologies. Will the Minister add "test British" to her "buy British" approach, so that all new and upgraded rolling stock endure a fault-free running period before being introduced into service in the UK?

**Wendy Morton:** The hon. Lady highlights exactly why electrification of our railways is so important and also the importance of British research, British innovation and British businesses' involvement in the railway sector. On the point about electrification, I mentioned earlier that we had included almost 800 miles in England. I remind the House of the importance not just of electrification, but of the fact that it was this Government who, since 2010, have electrified more than 1,200 miles of rail, compared with just 63 under Labour.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to topical questions, but, first, I want to let those on the Front Bench know that no letter was sent to me; it was sent to the Opposition. We have just had an apology. To all those saying that I have received a letter, I say, no, I have not. That is not good enough, and hopefully we will get it right next time.

### Topical Questions

T2. [900127] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** May I put on record my sincere apologies for the fact that a letter about the Secretary of State's absence was not received by you. [Interruption.] I will ensure that it never happens again.

The Secretary of State has travelled to the International Transport Forum to meet the largest gathering of international Transport Ministers from across the globe. The UK has taken the presidency of the ITF, an international, inter-governmental body on transport policy, at a pivotal time when the world faces multiple transport-related issues. The forum brings together 63 countries to work on shared goals, including making transport more connected, safe and resilient. Through the ITF, we will continue to work to tackle Russian aggression and to work with other like-minded partners to ensure Putin's brutal and unprovoked war in Ukraine fails.

**David Duguid:** I regularly hear from residents in Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Turriff and other towns and villages across my constituency complaining about the excessive noises from car exhausts, as was mentioned earlier. I welcome the recent announcement of trials and pilot schemes for noise cameras, but I was disappointed to hear that they will apply only in England and Wales. Given that the legal framework for statutory nuisance rules for construction and regulations for vehicles are UK wide, what engagement has my hon. Friend, or other Department Ministers, had with the Scottish Government to see what can be done in Scotland, and is there scope for expanding the pilot beyond just England and Wales?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I know that this is a big issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. Noise camera enforcement comes under policing, and policing is, of course, devolved in Scotland, but we continue to have discussions with the Scottish Government. We are keen to continue those discussions and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to see what more we can do on this issue.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Last year, the Chancellor slashed the road maintenance budget by £400 million, but we now know that those cuts are going even further. Pothole funding is set to be cut by 30% in real terms by the end of this Parliament. That is the equivalent of almost 12 million potholes every single year. Last year, the Chancellor confidently told the British public to enjoy National Pothole Day before the potholes are all gone, but that statement is now nothing more than a distant memory. Is that not further proof, if it were ever needed, that the Government are asleep at the wheel while road users continue to suffer on roads that are not fit for purpose?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Approximately £915 million a year has been committed for the next three years, which is consistent with funding levels for 2021-22. That will help local highways authorities manage their highway assets, including tackling potholes and other road defects across local road networks. As we know from the local elections, Conservative councils fix potholes faster than Labour councils.

T4. [900129] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Many of my constituents work at London Luton airport and they want secure jobs that do not

contribute to wrecking the planet. Sustainable aviation fuels can help with that, but we need a price stability mechanism, such as perhaps a contract for difference. Will the Minister update us on what action he is taking to give the industry that certainty so that we can fly sustainably?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about SAF, which is critical. We want the UK to be a world leader, and it has the potential to create more than 5,000 jobs; we have one of the most comprehensive programmes in the world. We are considering the role that a price stability mechanism, such as a CfD, might have. We are building the evidence base to support that. It is a complicated idea for SAF, but we are doing that work.

T3. [900128] **Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): The National Grid's main east coast electricity cables cross the River Tyne overhead and act as a constraint on trade on the river, the more so since commercial demand now asks for higher and higher offshore structures to facilitate renewable energy. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) was able to put that point to the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions on 22 January 2020. The Prime Minister replied that

"we will do whatever we can to ensure that it is sorted out as fast as possible."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 297.]

That was widely welcomed on Tyneside by me and my colleagues as well as local industry. Would it be possible for me, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside and my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) to have a meeting with the appropriate Minister to take the Prime Minister's urgings forward?

**Mr Speaker:** I remind hon. Members—I know that Chief Whips and Whips do not know—that topical questions are meant to be very brief.

**Andrew Stephenson:** The Government are aware of the impact that electricity lines across the port of Tyne have on businesses in the area. Electricity network infrastructure is a matter for Ofgem as the energy regulator, but the Government continue to engage with the National Grid and the Port of Tyne authority to help find the right solution to manage a key piece of electricity network infrastructure in the area. Of course, I would be happy to arrange any suitable meeting for the right hon. Gentleman and his parliamentary colleagues.

T5. [900130] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): We were disappointed last year when our bid to reopen Grove station was not taken forward, although I realise that only 13 of the 89 proposals were. However, Wantage and Grove is set to have a population that is 59% larger in 2027 than it was a decade earlier, so the need for a station in the area has never been clearer, in addition to the environmental benefits of getting people out of their cars. Will my hon. Friend meet me so that we can discuss other avenues I might pursue to get the station reopened?

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Grove station. Of course, I would be happy to meet him to discuss what future options might be available.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): An MOT centre in Wombwell has told me that it is fearful for its future after hearing of plans for MOTs to be required only every two years. It says that after the previous six-month extension, 90% of cars were not fit for use on public highways. The proposals are bad for motorists and local businesses, so will the Government think again?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** The Secretary of State has made it clear that we are always looking for ways to assist with the cost of living and, indeed, driving. Any decision to substantively modify testing requirements will be subject to appropriate consultation and legislation. It is right to keep the system under review, but no decision has been made and we will take seriously the responses from the consultation.

T6. [900131] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Even before the pandemic, rail services to and from Carshalton, Carshalton Beeches, Hackbridge and Wallington stations were congested and infrequent, but Govia Thameslink Railway is still operating a reduced timetable as people return to the railways. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with GTR to encourage it to get back to pre-pandemic levels and, indeed, fund the Croydon area remodelling scheme to put more trains on?

**Wendy Morton:** As I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate, the pandemic has really changed travel habits. Operators are using this opportunity to reassess services to ensure that they provide the rail timetables that meet new passenger travel patterns and are fit for the future, but also, importantly, carefully balance cost, capacity and performance. Our new timetables are demand-led. Where operators have modified their timetables we will keep them under review as appropriate.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Saturday, along with over 100 others, I took part in Newcastle's Kidical mass cycle, and parents raised with me the challenges of getting kids to cycle to school and, related to that, the impact on air quality of cars idling outside schools. I got my cycling proficiency from Hill View Junior School. What are the Government doing to help children to learn to cycle, acquire cycles, and stop cars idling outside schools?

**Trudy Harrison:** I think this is perhaps my favourite question of this session because we are improving and increasing the funding and support for Bikeability, which is a fantastic scheme rolled out right across the country enabling children—and adults, actually—to be equipped with the skills they need to ride on our roads and enjoy cycling.

T7. [900132] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): The integrated rail plan will see huge amounts of money invested into the TransPennine rail route, with major upgrades at not only Huddersfield railway station but Slaithwaite and Marsden in my constituency. How will the Minister ensure, though, that the disruption that will be caused during these much-needed works will be kept to a minimum and that local communities will be fully engaged with and consulted about the scale of the works needed?



**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. As much notice as possible will be provided of any disruption along the route of the TransPennine upgrade, and we will continue to work with the industry and delivery partners to ensure that any disruption is kept to a minimum. In advance of closures, plans are being developed to ensure that sufficient services are maintained, whether by diverted trains or bus replacement services. We are also relying on innovation to ensure that we have to close the track for less time than previously.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The ministerial team will know that those of us who have been lifelong campaigners for road safety are extremely worried that in future our Government will accept lower standards of safety in car manufacture and design, and much else. Can the Minister assure me that we will not become the poor man of Europe in terms of safety and environmental standards?

**Trudy Harrison:** Absolutely, yes. Safety will always be of paramount importance to us.

T8. [900133] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Like local authorities in so many other parts of the country, Worcestershire County Council was unsuccessful in its bid for Bus Back Better funds. Can the Minister assure me that the Department will give feedback to Worcestershire County Council so that next time it can bid back better?

**Trudy Harrison:** Absolutely, yes. My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for local services. We are providing that feedback very shortly to ensure that local authorities, enhanced partnerships and bus operators can all work together and stand the greatest chance of success in future applications. That support will continue.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Earlier on, the Minister replied to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) about safety in relation to P&O Ferries. The Minister will be aware of the occasion a month ago when a ferry between Northern Ireland and Scotland lost power in the Irish sea and was afloat for an hour and a half in one of the busiest places for boat and ship travel. Has he had any opportunity to talk to P&O Ferries to ensure that that dangerous situation, which could have led to an accident and loss of life, never happens again?

**Robert Courts:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this. Clearly, safety is the Government's paramount concern, particularly in such circumstances. The Maritime Coastguard Agency is responsible for ensuring safety. I have had discussions with it about that, and we will make sure that any necessary steps are taken. If he would like a further briefing, I am happy to give him one.

T9. [900134] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend detail how remote rural constituencies like mine will benefit from improvements to local transport services when our sparse population means that so many transport solutions are not commercially viable?

**Trudy Harrison:** Rural communities are particularly close to my heart, because I live in one. It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency of North Devon to enjoy a ride along the Tarka trail, which was absolutely fantastic. We will continue to support walking and cycling, as I have set out. In terms of her specific question, I hope that she will look forward to our rural strategy. The Government provided £20 million, as we have heard, to the rural mobility fund, which is just one of the ways to improve services in rural areas.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I am proud, on behalf of Rother Valley, to support Doncaster's bid to be the headquarters of Great British Railways. Doncaster is a great location that serves the whole of Rother Valley and the whole of South Yorkshire. Will the Minister look favourably on South Yorkshire's bid to be the home of Great British Railways?

**Wendy Morton:** We had an amazing 42 bids for the Great British Railways headquarters and all have been carefully considered. The shortlist will be out shortly and I wish them all success.

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): We have heard a lot today about the restoring your railway scheme, and I remind the House that it was launched by the Prime Minister at the Fleetwood to Poulton line. Can the Minister say where the scheme is at, what the next stage is and when that decision will be taken?

**Wendy Morton:** I know that my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for all things Blackpool North and Cleveleys. The next round of submissions for our restoring your railway programme—I was at the Dartmoor line just last week—is currently being considered, and we will be updating and announcing in due course.

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The zero-emission vehicle mandate requires a smooth glide path in its transition towards the 2030 ban on petrol and diesel vehicles. Will my hon. Friend consider the impact that the smooth glide path has on smaller automotive manufacturers? Their commitment to achieve the 2030 ban is absolutely agreed, but the capacity to achieve the smooth glide path for those smaller manufacturers, such as Aston Martin, is much more difficult.

**Trudy Harrison:** I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has referenced our zero-emission vehicle mandate. We continue to work with all manufacturers, including the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, and I have been delighted with the enthusiasm and the determination to transition from a fossil-fuelled car manufacturing economy to zero-emission vehicles. I will continue to work with all manufacturers, and in particular Aston Martin.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for his support for Doncaster's bid to become the home of the Great British Railways headquarters. Does the Minister agree with my hon. Friend and the wider community of Doncaster that Doncaster is the rightful home of the new Great British Railways headquarters?



**Wendy Morton:** Once again I am being tempted, but I am not going to show any favouritism, except to say that everyone will just have to wait.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in condemning the threatened strike action by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers at Green Park and Euston on 3 June, when many people from across the country will be wanting to celebrate the Queen's jubilee?

**Wendy Morton:** It is always regrettable when we hear about disruption, because it is the passengers who really suffer from the distress and disruption caused. I just flag once again that it is this Government who have earmarked more than £16 billion of funding for passenger

services since the start of the pandemic. That is equivalent to about £600 a household. This taxpayer-funded life support was the right thing to do, but it is important that we now get the right balance between what is right for passengers and what is right for the taxpayer.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Heritage railways are vital to the tourist sector, but they are struggling at the moment with coal supplies. Can the Minister give an assurance that she will do all she can to ensure that these heritage railways have access to the necessary supplies?

**Wendy Morton:** There are some fantastic examples of heritage railways up and down the country. I appreciate the importance of adequate coal supplies, and we will obviously keep that under close review.

## Food Price Inflation

10.34 am

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement on food price inflation.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice)**: The global spike in oil and gas prices has affected the price of agricultural commodities. Agricultural commodity prices have always been closely correlated with energy costs, since gas is used to manufacture fertiliser and fuel energy is needed throughout the food chain. Gas prices were rising as we emerged from the pandemic, but the invasion of Ukraine has caused some additional turbulence in international commodity markets. I have already set out measures to support farmers and growers in England ahead of the coming growing season. Those measures are not a silver bullet, but they will help farmers to manage some of their input costs from fertilisers.

The turbulence of the market has brought into focus again the importance of a resilient global supply chain and the importance to our national resilience of having strong domestic food production. In the UK, we have a high degree of food security. We are largely self-sufficient in wheat production, growing 88% of all the wheat that we need. We are 86% self-sufficient in beef and fully self-sufficient in liquid milk, and we produce more lamb than we consume. We are also close to 100% self-sufficient in poultry. Sectors such as soft fruit have seen a trend towards greater self-sufficiency in recent years because of the extended UK season.

As part of a global market, however, there have been pressures on input costs and prices. As a result of those rising input costs, there are of course also some pressures on households, predominantly as a result of the energy costs. There have also been some rises in food prices in recent months, although the ferocity of retail competition means that price pressures have been contained on certain product lines.

In March, overall food prices rose by 0.2%; the price of fruit actually fell in March by 1.2%. In April, however, food prices rose by 1.5%, which is a faster rise than we have seen in some years. If we look at the price of specific categories of food, in April, bread and cereals rose by 2.2%; sugar, jams and syrups rose by 2%; fish rose by 2%; meat rose by 1.9%; vegetables, including potatoes, rose at a lower level of 1.3%; fruit remained broadly stable; and oils and fats decreased slightly by 1.1%.

The single most important measure of household food security and the affordability of food remains the household food survey that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has run for many decades. That shows that, among the poorest 20% of households, the amount spent on food consumption was relatively stable at around 16% of household income between 2008 and 2016. It then fell slightly to 14.5%, but with the recent price pressures, we can expect it to return to those higher levels of around 16% in the year ahead.

We are monitoring the situation. The Government have put in place an unprecedented package of support to help those who need it. That includes targeted cost of living support for households most in need through the

household support fund, where the Government are providing an additional £500 million to help households with the cost of essentials.

**Jim McMahon**: I am staggered by that response. The Secretary of State speaks like a commentator or spectator on the sidelines, rather than the person responsible around the Cabinet table for food security. He seems oblivious to the cost of living crisis that people are facing. He can reel off the stats all he wants, but working people know that when they go to the supermarket, the price of almost everything they are buying is going up and up. All the Government do is spectate and commentate from the sidelines.

The Secretary of State says that the Government have made interventions, but to what end? He talks about a fertiliser shortage and an input costs crisis, but there is a fertiliser plant in the north-west that is completely closed and has been since September, and the fertiliser plant in the north-east is running at only 30% capacity. Let us also look at carbon dioxide, the labour shortage and distribution costs, and what they are doing to the cost of food.

Let us then look at the public sector. Bear in mind that the NHS serves 140 million meals a year, schools serve 600 million meals a year and prisons serve 90 million meals a year. Cost inflation has an impact on frontline services as well as on household budgets. For households, that is on top of inflation, on top of energy prices going up, on top of mortgage payments going up, on top of petrol and diesel going up, and on top of taxes going up.

What interventions have the Government actually made in practice? They have told people to ride the bus for the day to keep warm, to try to live off 30p a meal, or to just work that bit harder and they will be fine. Well, let me tell them: the number of working people in poverty is the highest since records began. Sixty-eight per cent. of people in poverty are in work. Working is not a route out of poverty after 12 years of this rotten Government.

I see it in Oldham. People who are coming for food parcels now are not in temporary crisis, but in permanent crisis. They are in debt. They are wearing NHS uniforms, coming to collect food parcels to put food on the table. But let us go from Oldham to Camborne, because I have visited the Secretary of State's constituency. The food bank there is now giving out 10,000 meals a month—just one food bank in his constituency. It is a constant crisis. Will he commit, even at this late stage, to call an urgent cross-Government, industry and charity commission to get ahead of the food crisis? He knows that, if the Government do not get a grip by Christmas, it is going to be even worse.

**George Eustice**: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not want to hear facts, but the urgent question is about food price inflation and the facts about that do matter. He is the one who wishes to spectate and commentate, rather than dealing with the facts before us. I absolutely acknowledged that food prices are rising, and faster than we have seen in recent years. Indeed, household spending among the poorest 20% may return to the levels it was when his party was last in power. However, it is also the case that, in April, overall food prices rose by 1.5%.

The hon. Gentleman asked about fertiliser prices. Here there has been more positive news this week. Fertiliser prices peaked at about £1,000 per tonne in

March. This week they have fallen to about £620 per tonne—it was £290 per tonne a year ago. Farmers are purchasing at that level. He expressed concerns about carbon dioxide supply, but that is a by-product of the manufacture of ammonium nitrate, and now that the main fertiliser plants, including the one at Billingham, have reasonably full order books for the remainder of the summer and are manufacturing and selling ammonium nitrate, we do not foresee a problem when it comes to carbon dioxide.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point, which was that the cause of the pressure on household incomes has been the global spike in gas prices and the corresponding impacts on people's energy bills—household electricity and gas bills have risen sharply. The Government have put in place some measures to try to mitigate and dampen that, but we have always been clear that we cannot remove the impact altogether. Of course, because people need to buy food every week, when there is pressure on the household budget, an inability to buy food is what they notice first, even if food prices have not changed dramatically from where they were previously.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned those in work. The Government have been very clear about that. Over the years, we have continued to raise the threshold before the lowest earners pay any tax at all and in April this year we increased the new national living wage to £9.50 an hour. Those on the lowest pay will have an additional £1,000 in their pay packets as a result.

Finally, I take this opportunity at the Dispatch Box to praise the work of Don Gardner and local volunteers, whom I meet regularly in my constituency of Camborne and Redruth. We often work in conjunction with them to help to ensure that people visiting that food bank can get access to the benefits and support that they need.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Compared with the last major recession we had under the Labour Government, we have done a great deal to expand provision, including free school meals to post-16 students and to all infant-aged children—something the Labour party never offered. On the issue of community food pantries and food banks, I commend to the Secretary of State the model established by Councillor Anne Handley in Goole, the Two Rivers community pantry and the incredible team of volunteers. They are providing heavily subsidised food to anyone in the town who wants it. We have received support via the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the past. Can he assure me that that support will continue for amazing schemes such as the Two Rivers community pantry?

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Projects and charities such as that do indeed perform an important role in our country. Often, the strongest part of their role is not just the provision of immediate emergency support, but help for people to get the support that they need to address other issues and challenges they might have in their life, so that they can get things back on track.

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

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The 9% rise in the consumer prices index is the highest since records began, with a quarter of those in the UK resorting to skipping meals. The Governor of the Bank

of England has warned of an “apocalyptic” outlook for consumers, with the worst yet to come as inflation looks set to hit 10% by the autumn. Food banks are already struggling to cope as households face unprecedented demands with the cost of living. Food banks themselves are a clear sign that the welfare system is failing: that is why food banks exist. Will the Secretary of State argue in Cabinet for measures such as converting the energy loans into grants, the reintroduction of the universal credit uplift, a reversal of the national insurance hike and an inflationary uplift for all welfare and state pension payments, so that—in 2022, in the UK—we do not have to witness the scandal and shame of people being unable to afford to feed themselves and their children?

**George Eustice:** We have obviously made some changes to the benefits system over the years, in particular the introduction of a tapered reduction in universal credit; it always pays people to work more hours and take on more work. We are in a fortunate position in this country in one way: unemployment rates are very low—the lowest since 1974—with close to 1 million job vacancies, and wages for the lowest-paid have been rising.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The same price shocks have left Japan and Switzerland with inflation nearer 1%. What difference in monetary policy has protected them and exposed us?

**George Eustice:** The analysis we have done on food price inflation—I would point out to my right hon. Friend that, in the month of April, food prices on average rose by 1.5%—suggests that around three quarters of the price pressures we have seen can be directly attributed to the price of gas and the remainder to other factors, including rising costs of labour as wages rise for the lowest-paid.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): In my constituency, many people before inflation began to become an issue were already finding it difficult to make ends meet. That is not propaganda; that is a matter of practical reality. Every Member of Parliament knows this about their own constituency. What I looked for from the Secretary of State was some indication that there was action that he and his colleagues in Government were going to take, and there came no answer. What is he going to do to help my constituents, who really are on the breadline?

**George Eustice:** The action that the Chancellor has taken so far was announced earlier this year in the spring statement. It included a £150 rebate on council tax bills, and a £200 rebate on energy bills to dampen and spread the cost of the spike in energy bills. We increased the national living wage in April to £9.50 an hour, and that puts an extra £1,000 in the pockets of the lowest-paid. Obviously, we keep this matter under constant review, as the Chancellor has made clear.

**Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): My constituents in Scunthorpe and the surrounding villages well understand the global factors affecting the cost of living and of course food price inflation, but they are worried about what is to come. I know the Government have set out a number of measures, and we are doing a lot. When does my right hon. Friend think we will start to see the effect of those measures at the supermarket till?



**George Eustice:** The reality, as I have said, is that the changes in global commodity prices are being driven by the high price of gas and energy. As I pointed out earlier, the cost of fertiliser, which is one of the key drivers of those international commodity prices, has now fallen by 40% from its peak in March, and is now running at about £620 a tonne. If fertiliser prices remain at that level, or indeed continue to fall, we are likely to see pressure come off the forward prices of international commodities.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I want to share with the Secretary of State the experiences of my constituent Rebecca, who is a single mum expecting her second baby soon. She said she reached out to me in “desperation and fear”,

and she told me:

“The cost of living has shot through the roof, it is unaffordable and I am having to make some pretty desperate decisions. My weekly shop amount has already jumped from under £50 per week to £75 a week... I am finding it virtually impossible to buy the necessary equipment for my baby’s impending arrival.”

How can the Secretary of State expect Rebecca and millions like her to struggle with tax increases and soaring inflation with no additional support? What is he going to do and what are the Government going to do to ease this pressure on families, which Rebecca tells me is now making her “fearful for the future”?

**George Eustice:** As I acknowledged in the statement, it is undoubtable that rising energy bills have affected household incomes, because people are paying more money on their gas and electric. Food prices have indeed risen—but across the year, with the rate currently at about 6.5%. Of course, we all have constituents with such challenges in their lives, and we all work with them. The Government have put in place the household support fund specifically to help those who fall between the cracks and cannot get support elsewhere, and we have doubled the size of that fund.

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): In tackling the global pressures behind surging inflation—US monetary policy tightening, the increase in raw material prices and the conflict in Ukraine—my constituents prefer the Government’s considered approach to the knee-jerk reaction of the Opposition. The key aspect that is beneficial to most families is to put more money into their pockets through tax cuts. Will my right hon. Friend work with the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to see what room there is for tax cuts as part of our response?

**George Eustice:** These matters are regularly discussed in Cabinet, but it is perhaps best that I do not go further at this particular stage.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Any fair-minded person can see that international factors are clearly at play, over which no Minister can have total control, but we can control the support that we give to our domestic food producers. Is this not the moment to do as the National Farmers Union has asked of the Secretary of State and pause the Department’s

programme of basic payment cuts to farmers? They will see their payments cut this year by 25%, next year by 30% and the year after by 50%.

**George Eustice:** The Government pledged to keep spending on agriculture in cash terms the same year after year in this Parliament, and that is precisely what we are doing. The right hon. Member is correct: we are phasing out the subsidy on landownership that meant that 50% of the budget went to 10% of the wealthiest landowners in the country and replacing it with a more logical approach that is about supporting the things that farmers do for the environment. Our sustainable farming incentive in England will deliver that by helping farmers with the cost of alternatives to fertiliser to chart their course. Of course, it is for Scotland and the Scottish Government to decide what they want to do in that regard, but we have a programme that is supporting farmers in England.

**Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is clear that food prices are up at the supermarket tills, but I am not clear about whether they are also up at the farm gate. Farmers in my constituency are being hit twice, because food is also more expensive to produce. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will continue to work closely with the retailers to ensure that, during this period of pressure, they give fair contracts and have good relationships with their suppliers?

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend raises a fair point, but I point out that the farm-gate price of milk has risen by close to 30% so far this year, the price of lamb is at record levels, having just gone above £6 a kilo at the farm gate, and the same is true for beef. The price of cereals has doubled. The price of pork is also rising, partly because poultry and pork contracts tend to be linked to the cost of production. So farm-gate prices are also rising, but we recognise that farmers also have higher input costs.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Government are at sixes and sevens on how to respond to the cost of living crisis. No. 10 is saying that Labour’s windfall tax idea is ideologically unconservative, although, of course, Margaret Thatcher had one. Will the Secretary of State go back to the Chancellor and demand a windfall tax to support families across our country?

**George Eustice:** The Chancellor is very familiar with all the arguments around the policy that the hon. Member mentions. I would simply say this: the Treasury is rightly concerned that, in an inflationary environment when prices are rising, we must be careful about borrowing and throwing more money at that or even increasing public spending in a way that could exacerbate the problem, so it is a difficult line to tread. That is what the Chancellor is considering as he looks at this issue.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): Food prices going up around the country has a particular impact in my constituency, which has the oldest demographic in the country. Pensioners are worried not only about rising food prices but about the value of their pensions. Between March 2021 and March 2022, food prices went up by 6%. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor, so that there is an



absolute cast-iron guarantee that the triple lock will return next year to help my pensioners who are struggling with food costs and the cost of living?

**George Eustice:** Mr Speaker, given the nature of these questions, I almost feel that this urgent question should have been taken by the Chancellor. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is well aware of the arguments that my hon. Friend makes. A decision was taken to change the triple lock temporarily, for reasons we all understand, with very rapidly rising incomes. That is a matter for the Chancellor to deal with in a future statement in this House.

**Mr Speaker:** Maybe the Minister will be the next Chancellor after a reshuffle, given these questions.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Recently, I caught up with staff and volunteers at the community one-stop shop in Broomhouse in my constituency. They are doing a great job, but their food bank and their community pantry is hugely oversubscribed. It has become a bit fashionable in here to laud food banks. These sorts of schemes help to feed families and give dignity to users, but they really should not be necessary in a society where so many companies are enjoying the benefits of huge windfall profits caused by the same factors that have led to some of the increases in food prices. I hear what the Secretary of State says about not being the Chancellor, but will he use his position in Cabinet to urge that those windfall profits are taxed so that the money can be used to help people like my constituents, many of whom are working hard—employment is not the answer; this is about in-work poverty—and many of whom have received cuts to their benefits?

**George Eustice:** Specifically on food banks, the area for which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility is through supporting projects such as FareShare and other food charities which play an incredibly important role in supporting food banks to ensure they have supplies. I think I dealt earlier with the second issue that the hon. and learned Lady mentions, which really is a matter for the Chancellor at a future date.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Ukraine is known as the bread basket of Europe and the world. It is one of the largest exporters of wheat, grains, oils and barley. On average, it exports between 4 million and 5 million tonnes of grain each month. At the moment, it is exporting only a couple of hundred thousand tonnes of grain and that is having a huge impact on food prices in England and on inflation across the world. What are the Government doing to increase the homegrown production of foods and help to secure more routes into the country for grain in order to lower prices?

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Ukraine is a very large producer and in particular it is the world's biggest producer of sunflower oil, which is the principal agricultural commodity we were importing from Ukraine. On cereals, Ukraine accounts for around 9% of wheat exports, a lower percentage of global production. In answer to his question, as I said in my statement we have a very high level of food security in this country, with high levels of self-sufficiency in wheat,

producing 88% of the wheat we need. Of course, we are also mindful of the impacts on other countries around the world, in particular those in north Africa that import significant quantities from Ukraine.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): In crises on this scale, Governments of all complexions, Conservative and Labour, have looked at ensuring people have the resources coming in so that they can afford basic foods. At the moment that means inflation-proofing benefits, pensions and wages, but they have also looked at price controls. The Government are looking at price controls for energy. Will they now look at price controls on a basketful of basic food stuffs, so that we do not see what we have seen in recent surveys, which is people actually now on the edge of hunger?

**George Eustice:** I would simply point out that the ferocity of retail competition in this country at the moment means that two of the big companies, Sainsbury's and Tesco, are in a price match war with Aldi. That will actually do far more to constrain prices in some of those categories—not all, but in some of them—than any regulation the Government can bring in. I would point out that the last time we saw a spike in food prices of this size, with household spending on food exceeding where it is today, was 2008. The Labour party did not choose at that point to introduce price controls.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend has set out for the House the complications involved in price rises of food and other substances, and supply is clearly one of those. Will he therefore take action to encourage our farmers to produce more, and then make sure that our supermarkets pass on the profits they make to farmers to encourage them to grow and develop more product?

**George Eustice:** Confidence among farmers to sow next year's winter wheat crop and to continue to put down flocks of broiler chicken and so on really does matter. In the case of poultry and pigs, many of the contractual arrangements automatically pass on some of the costs—for instance, the costs of feed. With fertiliser prices easing down, I think we will see confidence returning, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. In England we have chosen to bring forward 50% of the annual subsidy payment to July this year to help farmers with cash flow during a difficult time.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Dennis Woods from Unity in Community in north Hull told me last week that demand at its food bank is soaring. This is a left-behind community, so donations are suffering, and every week the food bank's stock is cleaned out. It seems to me that things will only get worse, so given that the Government are combining 1970s stagflation with attitudes from the 1870s about the working poor, what exactly will they do to help people in my constituency who are suffering from hunger and who cannot put food on their table?

**George Eustice:** As I said, we have doubled the funding in the household support fund, putting an extra £500 million into it to help the right hon. Member's constituents and others. We also support food banks through projects such as FareShare.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): The Secretary of State may be aware that in Wales a policy of providing free school meals to all primary school children is being progressed thanks to an agreement between Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Government. Will he speak with colleagues in the Treasury about potentially uprating the public sector budget so that that important provision is not affected by rising food prices?

**George Eustice:** These matters are often covered in the Barnett formula and the complexities of Treasury settlements with the devolved Administrations, so I advise the hon. Gentleman to write to the Chancellor or the Secretary of State for Wales to raise his issue.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Governor of the Bank of England has described food inflation as “apocalyptic”. Instead of telling people to work harder, buy cheaper or cook better, why do the Government not think again about raising national insurance, cutting universal credit and putting a windfall tax on the oil companies?

**George Eustice:** Again, these are matters for the Chancellor, but I would simply say that, as we emerge from this pandemic, there are challenges—challenges to global supply chains, challenges to the global economy and, domestically, challenges to our NHS. The NHS has had two years of wrestling with the pandemic, and it now has a backlog in some areas that it needs to get on top of. The national insurance rise and social care levy that we have put in place will bring in the resources that will help the NHS to get back on its feet after the pandemic.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): In my constituency, hunger, poverty and malnutrition are not abstract concepts. Food bank demand is through the roof, and many food banks can no longer cope with demand as donations are squeezed from the very communities that need their services. The Secretary of State can robotically repeat what the Government have done and how much they have spent—only once—but the simple, sad fact is that it is just not enough. Many of my constituents are going hungry in one of the richest economies in the world—here and now in the 21st century. We need some urgency and some action, Secretary of State.

**George Eustice:** The Chancellor acted with urgency in his spring statement to increase spending on the household food budget, to increase the national living wage and to put in place easements on council tax and energy bills.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When my constituent goes to Collective Sharehouse, she has to select items that do not need to be cooked, because she cannot afford to cook any food. She is therefore not getting a balanced diet, and we are going to see inequality grow not only economically but in terms of health outcomes. Will the Secretary of State go back to the Cabinet and speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ensure that we see a proper increase, in line with inflation, in people’s social security and pensions so that they can eat?

**George Eustice:** As I said, we recognise that the single biggest driver of pressure on household incomes has been rises in gas and electricity bills. That is why the

Government have focused their attention on those areas. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions obviously keeps under open review the approach and the support that we give people, but we should recognise that there are around 1 million job vacancies in this country, with unemployment at the lowest level ever. We want to support people into high-paid work.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As the campaigner Jack Monroe has highlighted, and as Newcastle’s West End food bank sees in practice, the cruel truth is that the poorer you are, the higher the rate of inflation you face and the fewer choices you have. But the Government have choices, and my constituents are amazed and disgusted at the choices they make to protect windfall profits rather than working people. Why does the Secretary of State think it should be the poorest who pay the price of inflation?

**George Eustice:** I reject the hon. Lady’s caricature. This Government increased the national living wage to £9.50 an hour and have consistently raised tax thresholds so that the poorest do not pay tax at all. This Government and this Chancellor have put in place a package of measures to help those on the lowest incomes.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): None of us came into this place thinking that we would see a day when children went to bed with no food in their tummy and no heat in their home. I know the Secretary of State to be an honourable man, but today’s statement does not show an understanding that this is a national and global emergency just like covid. There should be a Cabinet-level group—it could always be all-party—because this crisis is not going to go away. People are going to starve in this country and worldwide. We should have a programme to grow more, not just for us but for the whole world. Please, Minister, go back to the Cabinet, shake No. 10 up and get this moving.

**George Eustice:** Our domestic production of food is crucial to our national resilience and plays an important role in our overall food security, as do open markets around the world. We will be setting out a food strategy in June that will deal with many of these issues and will set out our ambition to expand agricultural output.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his answers to the questions—he is obviously over his subject matter. In my constituency, milk went up by 25p in one week and since March of last year the price has risen by more than 25%. That is only one of the cupboard staples, and an essential element for future health. What steps can the Secretary of State take with regional counterparts to bring down prices and ensure that the farmer is supported and helped? Will he bring to the ears and attention of the Chancellor the need to halt the plastic packaging tax, which has increased production prices for dairymen across all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**George Eustice:** There have been so many questions for the Chancellor that I am sure by now he has tuned in and is listening to proceedings. In answer to the initial part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, the Government are removing the tariff that was introduced on United

States feed maize so that we can reduce some of the input costs, particularly for the pig and poultry sector. That will also benefit dairy farmers.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the acting Chancellor for that. Let us move on to business questions.

## Business of the House

11.8 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer):** It will be a pleasure.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 May will include the following:

MONDAY 23 MAY—Second Reading of the Public Order Bill.

TUESDAY 24 MAY—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 25 MAY—Remaining stages of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill, followed by a general debate on Ukraine.

THURSDAY 26 MAY—My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will propose a Humble Address to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 26 May and return on Monday 6 June.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 June will include the following:

MONDAY 6 JUNE—Second Reading of the National Security Bill.

TUESDAY 7 JUNE—Opposition day (1st allotted day). A debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition: subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 8 JUNE—Second Reading of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

THURSDAY 9 JUNE—A general debate on social housing and building safety, followed by a general debate on a subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 10 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. I also thank him for mentioning the forthcoming recess, but staff tell me that they would like to plan their holidays, so will he help them out by announcing the rest of the year's recess dates?

I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that Ministers should make their statements before talking to the press, but it is also the case that ministerial statements should be made to announce Government policy. Yesterday's statement from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove)—who is also the Minister for Justice and Tackling Illegal Migration—was pure party political polemic. If his statement had been drafted by civil servants, it would have been an abuse of power, so I sincerely hope and trust that that was not the case.

Every day that the Government continue to dance their hokey cokey with Labour's popular windfall tax, working families and pensioners suffer. Bills, food—which was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—and petrol prices are up. Real wages are down. Suggestions from Conservative Members range from incentives for granny annexes to getting a better



[Thangam Debbonaire]

job. How does that help an actual granny whose pension went up by 3% when inflation is 9%, the highest in 40 years? How does it help the three in five people who are turning off the heating to save money? Putting on a jumper does not reduce the standing charge.

Yesterday the Prime Minister said that the Government were against raising taxes, although there have been 15 Tory tax rises in two years. He then said that they would look at “all sensible measures”. By the evening, the Chancellor was telling business leaders that he had a plan. I ask the Leader of the House: where is the plan? If he does not know, perhaps he could persuade the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency to use his “overgrown prefect” powers to put the Chancellor on the naughty step until we see it. The Leader of the House must know that the Government will eventually have to give in and accept our plan. Will his Government continue to leave people to struggle while they wait for the inevitable U-turn? Will the Leader of the House urge the Chancellor to present an emergency Budget now?

Members on both sides of the House are still experiencing unacceptable Home Office delays. Our constituents cannot obtain driving licences or passports. When I visited our local jobcentre last week, I was told that people could not take up jobs because they could not obtain ID. Yesterday the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Corby, could not say whether proposed cuts would affect the number of Home Office civil servants. The Leader of the House will surely have seen the long, slow queues in Portcullis House for the Ukraine drop-in hub, which is now also the passport drop-in hub. Civil servants are doing a great job, but this is not a plan. So I ask the Leader of the House again: where is the plan? How will people get passports and driving licences with fewer civil servants?

During the trial of the former MP for Wakefield, the survivor of this abuse said that he had contacted those at Tory HQ during the 2019 general election campaign to tell them about it. I commend his bravery. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) wrote to the co-chairman of the Conservative party on 24 April asking why there had been no action at the time. She has received no reply. Can the Leader of the House please help? Can he also tell us why these allegations were not acted on in the first place? Have the Government contacted the child sexual abuse survivor Sammy Woodhouse to apologise for putting her on a panel with the former Member for Wakefield after they had been informed of the allegations? Does the Leader of the House understand why survivors of sexual abuse might conclude that this could have been a cover-up?

Earlier this week, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) raised a point of order about a letter sent by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) to a previous Tory party chair about potential connections with members of the Russian state, which has also not received a response. Obviously this needs clearing up. My hon. Friend mentioned six other letters that she had sent to Tory chairs that had also gone unanswered. Other Members on both sides of the House have experienced similar delays in receiving replies to their letters to Ministers, if they have received replies at all.

I recently received one from the Department of Health in response to a letter sent six months ago, so this is clearly a pattern of behaviour. Could the Leader of the House please encourage his colleagues to invest in a pen and some writing paper, or perhaps to familiarise themselves with email? Is not good enough to have to wait six months for a ministerial response to letters. When the Government fail to respond to MPs, on all sides, they are letting down the British people we are all trying to help. Those British people are furious. They are sick of this Government's lacklustre approach to the country. They are tired of inaction when action is possible, and they are fed up with being treated with what can only be described as disregard. This Government need to get a grip, and to do it now.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not want the Leader of the House to go into the details of the case of the former Member for Wakefield. It is still sub judice because sentencing has not taken place yet.

**Mark Spencer:** Thank you for that advice, Mr Speaker. I should start by correcting the record. At last week's business questions I may have inadvertently misled the House when I said to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that the Government had introduced 33 Bills in the Queen's Speech. I forgot the five carry-over Bills, so we are actually introducing 38 Bills. This is a demonstration of the Government's huge commitment to our ongoing response to the global inflation challenge.

The hon. Lady asked about recess dates, and I will do my best. I hear her plea, and I will respond as quickly as possible. We then got into what I think we can call her party political rant; she started with Labour's plan for a windfall tax. It is time to undress exactly what this plan is. She paints it as a silver bullet that would solve the global inflation challenge faced by not only the UK but the rest of the world. That simply is not true—*[Interruption.]* I will tell her about my plan in a moment, but we need to address her plan. Let us look at the numbers. I think she is suggesting that the amount of support we will give each household will be somewhere between £50 and £100, as a one-off hit. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's actual plan is for a £22 billion intervention to try to help families fighting the global inflation challenge. That is an enormous package of support. It includes a reduction in the duty on fuel. That is alongside our plan to reduce national insurance contributions for over 70% of those paying them, and to change the taper regime for those on universal credit so that people can keep more of their wages. The Government recognise that this is a huge global challenge, and we will continue to fight it on behalf of people up and down the country. The Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer will continue to monitor what is happening, and will continue to deliver the £22 billion-worth of support.

The hon. Lady mentioned passports. Clearly there have been a number of challenges at the Passport Office, as well as at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. That is why we have recruited another 500 people since April 2021, with a further 700 arriving by the summer. There is a support centre in Portcullis House, as she identified, but if there are specific cases in which I can assist her constituents, I will of course feed them directly to the Foreign Secretary.



The hon. Lady made reference to Wakefield, and I hear your advice on that, Mr Speaker. We need to work together across this House to ensure that those who are victims of abuse in any way, shape or form have the confidence to come forward, and that their allegations are taken seriously and fully investigated. We have made huge strides in that direction, with cross-party support, but my door is always open to anyone who has suggestions on how we could move forward on this. I know that Mr Speaker is putting together a Committee to look at some of these matters. Together, cross-party, we can address these challenges. We take them very seriously, and I think we are moving in the right direction, but there is more to do.

The hon. Lady made a passing reference to political donations, for which there is a system that must be followed. The Conservative party and other political parties must follow those laws. She also mentioned the speed of ministerial responses, and I accept that challenge. Departments should respond quicker, bearing in mind that there has been a global pandemic.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** That is an excuse.

**Mark Spencer:** I use that excuse because it happens to be true, but I accept that the world has moved on. We are moving out of covid, so Ministers need to respond quicker. I will do my best to make sure they do.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Sir Charles Walker.

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): It is very kind of you to call me first, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much. If the country wants better politicians, it has to treat them better. The Administration Committee is about to start its inquiry on planning for the general election, and it will be looking at not only how we welcome people here but how we assist them as they leave this place. Too many people are put off coming into politics because they see it as career death or reputational death. Most colleagues have huge talents and, if we can prove to people thinking of coming here that we look after those who leave, we will improve the overall quality of this place.

**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend will have heard the House's response to his question. He is addressing something that needs to be resolved, and it is clearly something we need to do across parties. I encourage him to continue. If I can support him in any way, I would be delighted to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson, Pete Wishart.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Another week, and yet again I find no scheduling of an emergency Budget. This Tory-induced cost of living crisis is leaving our constituents in the worst situation and conditions ever encountered in modern times. Although there is no real action from this Government, there is plenty of budgeting advice from Tory Back Benchers. Let us look at the top five instances of their most patronising drivel: learn how to cook, work more hours, get a better job, put the name brands down and rent out the granny flat. Perhaps we need a debate about the real world, so we can examine how many Tories actually inhabit it.

We also need an urgent debate on law and order, with a laser-like focus on the emerging criminal hotspots across the United Kingdom. With Operation Hillman

winding up after an extraordinary and record-breaking 126 fines, No. 10 Downing Street is now the biggest covid lawbreaking address in the country by a country mile. The party of law and order is now the party that parties in no particular order. Surely this lawbreaking cell must be broken up and social services should be asked to intervene. This criminal gang should be sent a short, sharp shock; perhaps they should do some sort of collective community service, or perhaps even work in the food banks that they like to talk about at such great length. For some reason, this Government believe they have got away with it and that this scale of lawbreaking can simply be set aside, but the more the people of this country suffer at the hands of their cost of living crisis, the angrier they will be with this party with a culture of partying at No. 10. From no lawbreaking to 126 fines! Can the Leader of the House confirm that any Minister issued with a fine will come before the House at the earliest opportunity?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman says the Government have taken no action on the global inflation challenge we face, but I think £22 billion-worth of support is a huge intervention.

I understand why the hon. Gentleman is a little excitable this week, as it has not been a great week for the Scottish National party. The ferry-building fiasco has been going on for five years, and the SNP leader has been touring the United States to explain how an independent Scotland would join NATO with no military of its own as a sort of observer nation. The SNP recently nationalised Scotland's rail industry, only to cut a third of rail passenger services, and it finally acknowledged that it is failing students in Scotland, as it gave up on its flagship election promise to reduce the attainment gap for students from the most deprived areas. Unlike its ferries, the SNP is all at sea.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday was the 13th anniversary of the Tamil genocide. To date, none of those responsible for the murder of Tamils or their disappearing has been brought to justice. I understand that this morning the Sri Lankan Government have defaulted on their debt, plunging their country into a cauldron of misery. May we have an urgent debate, in Government time—it could be the debate for which no subject has been chosen yet—on the situation in Sri Lanka, because it affects thousands of our constituents across the country?

**Mr Speaker:** The Thursday after Whitsun is a possibility.

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a long-time campaigner on Sri Lankan issues. I know that his constituents and others with connections to Sri Lanka will be enormously grateful for the efforts to which he goes to raise the issue of their plight in this House. He will be aware that we have Foreign Office questions on 21 June; I am sure he will be in his place to question the Foreign Secretary, but will also find other avenues to continue to press his case.

**Mr Speaker:** I call and congratulate the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Ian Mearns.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. I am also very grateful to Members from across the House for putting up with me again. I understand

[*Ian Mearns*]

that the Backbench Business Committee's membership will be appointed on Monday, so I hope we will be up and running on Tuesday, if we can get a room to meet in; we are working on that. If there is still some time available in the week beginning 6 June, the Backbench Business Committee could fill a void; if the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), its Vice-Chair, were to make an application for a debate about Sri Lanka, I am sure we would be very happy to hear it.

I wonder whether the Leader of the House can help me. He will be aware that when sanctions were imposed on Russian oligarchs, Chelsea football club was given a licence to operate, so that it could finish its fixtures and its staff could be paid. When other oligarchs have been sanctioned, there has not such licence, and many staff have been made redundant, often without being paid. A constituent of mine is owed £14,000 from their previous employment; they worked for a service company and were employed by an oligarch. May we have a look at that, so that people can get their money, without there being benefit to the ultimate beneficial owner—the oligarch? People are suffering because of that situation, probably through no fault of their own.

**Mark Spencer:** I should join in congratulating the hon. Gentleman. I see that no one was brave enough to challenge him on this occasion. I know that people have challenged him in the past and have disappeared from view, so it is no surprise to me that no one was brave enough to do it this time. If he is struggling for a room, he can use my office to meet next week, in order to get the Backbench Business Committee up and running; we are very keen for that to happen, as it does great work. On the question about oligarchs, if he has specific cases that I can assist with, I will make sure that the relevant Minister responds to him directly. I understand the challenges he is talking about.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Metropolitan police has announced that it has concluded Operation Hillman, its investigation of behaviour in Downing Street and Whitehall. He will also recall that on Wednesday 9 February the Prime Minister gave me an assurance at the Dispatch Box that as soon as inquiries were concluded, he would publish Sue Gray's report immediately and in full. The Prime Minister has also said that when the inquiries were concluded he would be able to say more on this matter, and I am sure he would intend his first words to be to this House. Will the Leader of the House confirm that Sue Gray's report will be published in full next week, before the House rises for the Whitsun recess? Secondly, will he confirm that the Prime Minister will come to the House next week to make a full statement and to be questioned on this very important matter?

**Mark Spencer:** I am aware of those commitments made at this Dispatch Box and see no reason why they will not be delivered upon. I shall make sure that my right hon. Friend's comments are fed back directly to those who will make those decisions.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Please may we have a debate on the roll-out and take-up of electric vehicles? I know that a general debate on

transport is coming up, but I seek a specific debate to explore the issues that are affecting take-up, so that we can cover things such as consumer concerns, infrastructure roll-out and the regulatory and taxation frameworks. Simply put, the more progress we make on EV roll-out and take-up, the more progress we will make towards hitting our net zero objectives.

**Mark Spencer:** As my hon. Friend recognises, he could make some of those points at this afternoon's debate, but I understand that he will want more time to scrutinise the details he mentioned. The issue is worthy of further debate, and perhaps the right route would be to apply for a Westminster Hall debate, because I know the topic would command a lot of support throughout the House.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): There were 37 disabled residents living in Grenfell Tower before that awful fire nearly five years ago; 15 of them died that night. The Grenfell public inquiry made the sensible recommendation that all disabled tenants should be given a personal evacuation plan in the event of a fire. Ministers have constantly said in this House that they will accept the inquiry's recommendations in full, but yesterday the Government dropped their commitment to evacuation plans for disabled people, leaving my constituents and many others terrified. Will the Leader of the House please ask his colleagues in the Home Office to come here to explain why disabled residents do not have the right to be evacuated from a burning building?

**Mark Spencer:** As we approach the anniversary of the Grenfell disaster, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on what a terrible disaster that was and on the people who lost their lives in that disaster. We should do all we can to make sure that it is not repeated, which is why the Government brought in the Building Safety Act 2022 to try to reduce the chances of such a disaster happening again. I know that the hon. Lady will continue to hold the Government to account and to feed in her suggestions. The Government take this very seriously, and we should do all we can to make sure that such a disaster never happens again.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the Leader of the House's announcement that we will have the opportunity to pay tribute to the quite remarkable contribution that Her Majesty the Queen has made to the life of this nation for the past 70 years. I hope that, as part of that, we may reflect on how we treat that generation in general. My 98-year-old constituent Shelagh Connor recently enlisted my help to get support for the replacement of a medal that was awarded to her late husband in the second world war but stolen from a missionary station in what was then Tanganyika in 1956. Mrs Connor wants the replacement medal so that her grandson, who also serves in the Royal Army Medical Corps, can wear the medal that was originally given to his grandfather. She has been told that she can get the replacement only if she can produce a crime reference number or an insurance claim from the time. Surely we are capable of treating that generation, to whom we owe so much, with a bit more consideration and respect than that.

**Mark Spencer:** I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Her Majesty the Queen. The jubilee will be a huge opportunity for the nation to recognise

what a privilege it is to be alive at this time to see any monarch reach 70 years on the throne, particularly the amazing monarch we have now. I also share the right hon. Gentleman's admiration for that generation. The next generation takes for granted our national security and safety; that generation went through huge turmoil and two world wars, so I understand what he says. If he gives me the details of the individual case he mentioned, I will of course take it up directly with the relevant Minister. Defence questions are on 13 June; if am not able to deliver by then, I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will raise the matter again at that opportunity.

**Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): My constituent Leah Maries, from Woodside in Telford, is due to go on her first ever family holiday next week. Unfortunately, Leah's plans are now in disarray because a passport renewal application that was received by the Passport Office in February 2022 has got stuck in the system. No amount of effort by the family or queuing in the Portcullis House hub has been able to rectify the problem. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for whom I have great admiration and regard, is now personally on the case; however, may we have a debate on the inability of some Departments to deliver the basic and essential services on which millions of people, including Leah Maries and her family, rely?

**Mark Spencer:** Passport Office staff are firmly focused on ensuring that people receive their passports in good time for summer holidays. We have recruited an initial 500 staff since April 2021, and there are a further 700 arriving before the summer. We have an excellent civil service, which is working incredibly hard to deliver passports to people in good time. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, because we must be relentless in ensuring that people get their passports in good time.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Less than a month from today, communities across the country, including in my constituency, will celebrate Windrush Day and the immense contribution that the Windrush generation and their descendants have made, and continue to make, to our culture, communities and economy. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has still not announced the annual Windrush Day grant awards, which many local groups are relying on to fund their celebrations. The Department has said that grants will be awarded this month, but this could mean grant recipients having barely two weeks' notice of their funding, which is insulting given the importance of Windrush Day and the hard work of local community organisations on their celebrations.

Will the Leader of the House speak with his Cabinet colleague at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and urge him to ensure that grants are awarded this week? Will he also allocate Government time, during the week in which Windrush Day falls, for a general debate so that Members across the House can pay their tributes to the Windrush generation and reflect on the injustices that they still experience?

**Mark Spencer:** I do not know whether the hon. Lady had the opportunity on Monday to question the Secretary of State directly while he was at the Dispatch Box, but

I join her in recognising the huge contribution that was made by people coming to this country during the Windrush period. It has greatly benefited the UK both culturally and economically. I will pass on her comments to the Minister responsible and encourage him to respond to her directly.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last June, a six-year-old girl was tragically killed when a car hit her and her father as they walked along a road in Stoke-on-Trent North. Having sought advice from the Clerks in advance and to avoid hindering any legal proceedings, I will not name any of the individuals or the place where this incident happened, but the victim's mother, family friends, the wider Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke community and I have been outraged by the unacceptable delay in having this case brought before the courts. One reason for the hold-up was the wait for the defendant to give permission for his blood sample to be tested. The victim's mother, who am I working with, thinks it is wrong that permission for blood testing is required in cases where, tragically, a life has been lost. If a person has done nothing wrong, they should have nothing to fear. That is why I am campaigning on behalf of the victim and her family for an amendment to section 7 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 for blood testing to take place without permission being required where loss of life has occurred. Can my right hon. Friend help me to secure parliamentary time to debate this important change in our law?

**Mark Spencer:** I am truly sorry to hear about the case in my hon. Friend's constituency. The Department for Transport will be conducting a call for evidence on parts of the Road Traffic Act 1988, and I expect its scope to include drink and drug driving offences and the offences of failure to stop and report. He will have the opportunity to raise those matters again in this afternoon's transport debate should he choose to do so. Next week, there will be Justice questions, which will be another opportunity for him to raise that matter. I wish him well in his campaign.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): As you know, Mr Speaker, since he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease, rugby league legend Rob Burrow OBE has been a tireless campaigner, both raising awareness of the disease and pushing the Government to invest more in research. The hard work of Rob and other campaigners led to the announcement of £50 million of investment, but there are now serious concerns about delays to that funding. Today, as chair of the all-party rugby league group, I have written to the Health Secretary to raise the concerns of the entire rugby league community and to ask him to sort out this delay. Will the Leader of the House ensure a prompt response to my letter, and can we have a debate in Government time on funding research for motor neurone disease?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for once again raising the profile of Rob Burrow and all he does to raise this important issue. She is also a huge advocate for rugby league in general. I hesitate because I cannot remember whether she is a Bulls or a Rhinos fan, and I will upset somebody if I get that wrong.

Our spending on disability support is among the highest in the G7, but there is always more we can do, certainly with diseases such as motor neurone, to fund



[*Mark Spencer*]

research. A number of charities will benefit from the Rob Burrow Foundation, and I pay tribute to him, and to the hon. Lady for her work.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): I have received countless pieces of correspondence from constituents who are struggling to see their GP, including someone who waited for more than three weeks for an appointment, another who spent four hours waiting for a repeat prescription and even people whose children cannot see a GP in a timely manner. That simply cannot continue. May we have a debate in Government time on access to local GP services so that we can ensure that people across Keighley and Ilkley can access those vital services as soon as possible?

**Mark Spencer**: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. He will know that it will be Health questions on 14 June, when he can raise that matter directly with the Health and Social Care Secretary. I also encourage him to talk to our hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is not in his place, but does a huge amount of work on that subject. Access to GP surgeries is vital for constituents up and down the country. That is why we are recruiting more doctors into our NHS and why we have introduced the healthcare levy to fund our NHS properly.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Leader of the House would like to wish Huddersfield Town and Huddersfield Giants well in their challenges.

May I press the Leader of the House on two things? First, may we have an early debate on the steep decline in the number of people in our armed forces? When I first got into this House, we had about 200,000 people in the armed services. I think the Government's current plan is to reduce that to 72,000.

Secondly, there was a lovely, peaceful demonstration by JENGbA—Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association—which campaigns for people who are wrongly charged for being on the scene of a crime, not participating in it, and who finish up in prison. Often, this doctrine impinges on people on the autism spectrum. May we have an early debate on that?

**Mark Spencer**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his three points—he is a skilled operator who always manages to get more than one business question in. I would like to join him in wishing the fans of Huddersfield Town a speedy journey home from Wembley.

I also join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to our fantastic armed services. The United Kingdom benefits from the most professional military services in the world, and we should be enormously proud of that. I hear his call for a debate. The subject is worthy of further discussion, and perhaps he should apply for an Adjournment or a Westminster Hall debate, where he can explore those matters further.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): A number of my constituents are leaseholders in a property named Mar House in Colindale. Even though it is of fairly

recent construction, all the leaseholders have been subjected to demands to pay for a waking watch. May we have a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to clarify exactly who is legally responsible for paying for waking watch and other fire prevention measures? My constituents are receiving demands to pay for issues that are not of their own making?

**Mark Spencer**: The Government have made more than £60 million available to fund the installation of fire alarms and end the misuse of costly waking watch measures. We had Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions on Monday—I do not know whether my hon. Friend was in his place to question the Secretary of State directly. I have announced a general debate on social housing and building safety on 9 June. That will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise those matters again and get his thoughts on the record.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): A number of Government Departments have administrative backlogs, yet following the two press releases in the past week on the closure of Insolvency Service offices across the UK and the quite grotesque plan to put 91,000 civil servants out of work, there has been no written statement and no statement on the Floor of the House. When are the Government going to abandon government by press release, and can the Leader of the House assure us that next week we will have statements on the closure of Insolvency Service offices and the grotesque plan to put 91,000 civil servants out of work?

**Mark Spencer**: The hon. Gentleman must not confuse numbers of individuals who are employed with efficiency. The Government must be focused on the best use of taxpayers' money and an efficient civil service, and must make sure that those people who are working within the civil service are focused on what we want to deliver and are match fit for the future. That is what my right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency is doing. He is making sure that our civil service is fit for the future and is working as efficiently as possible for the Government and for the taxpayers of the United Kingdom.

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): The Health and Social Care Act 2012 provided for the establishment of health and wellbeing boards hosted by local authorities, and placed a duty on their commissioning functions to co-operate with those of senior stakeholders within the local community, but specifically with those of the clinical commissioning group. My constituents who are parents of children with special educational needs and disability are suffering really quite poor outcomes, with the local authority and the NHS really passing the buck. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate reflecting on the effectiveness of health and wellbeing boards, whether they are discharging the commissioning functions provided to them, and whether they are in fact delivering good outcomes for local people?

**Mark Spencer**: The creation of the integrated care system represents a huge opportunity to make sure that children's services are more joined up. The SEND review Green Paper published in March recognises the challenges with the current arrangements and includes a proposal to legislate to introduce new local SEND partnerships



to ensure effective local delivery. Health questions on 14 June will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise these matters directly with the Secretary of State, but he may want to pursue an Adjournment debate as well to explore them further.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Can we have a Government statement on what checks were made on an individual's background, including allegations made against them, before they were put on to the Home Office panel to advise the Home Secretary on how to deal with grooming gangs and child exploitation?

**Mark Spencer:** I have Mr Speaker's advice ringing in my ears and I do not want to talk about—

**Mr Speaker:** We do not want to mention individuals.

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, so I will not make reference to that individual. But clearly we have a responsibility in this House to make sure that we address the challenges that we face and that those individuals who do act inappropriately are weeded out and held to account. My commitment to the Chamber and to this House is to continue to weed out those who act inappropriately, and I look to working with the hon. Lady to achieve that.

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): The five-year survival rate for those with secondary breast cancer is just 22%. I pay tribute to my amazing constituent, Gemma Ellis, who, following her own diagnosis of secondary breast cancer in 2017, founded Stage 4 Deserves More—a brilliant charity that does so much to support lots of women with secondary breast cancer. Can we have a debate on the need to turbo-charge research into this awful disease so that we can give more hope and support to thousands of women like Gemma?

**Mark Spencer:** I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Gemma Ellis. The Government have invested over £52 million to develop the next generation of cancer and diagnostics specialists over the next two years. A new 10-year cancer plan is due to be published in the summer. I will raise his comments directly with the Health Secretary, but he has the opportunity to do that himself on 14 June at Health questions.

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): The Government have been promising to scrap section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, which has caused thousands of private tenants in my constituency and across the country to be evicted for no fault of their own. My borough of Enfield has the highest rate of section 21 evictions in London, and the people of my borough cannot afford any ministerial can-kicking on this issue. With the cost of living crisis hitting so many people, the effects of section 21 evictions are only going to get worse. Can we therefore have a debate in Government time on what steps will be taken, at pace, to ensure that this shameful piece of legislation does not continue to blight the lives of people in my constituency?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I hope she will note that in the Queen's Speech, there was an announcement of a social housing regulation Bill, as well as a renters reform Bill, so there will be

opportunity for her to continue to raise those matters on the Floor of the House. There are plans to come forward to try to assist with some of the challenges we see in the housing market, but I am sure she will take the opportunity going forward to continue to raise these matters with the relevant Ministers, and I will make sure they are aware of her comments today.

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that I recently visited Exclusive Secure Care Services in Barlborough in my constituency. While I was hugely impressed by the company, I was disturbed to hear that this organisation, which looks after and transports some of the most vulnerable people in our society—whether they are children in extremely difficult positions, or those who are having mental health difficulties—operates without any regulation. Along with its fellow competitors within the industry, it has been trying to get the Care Quality Commission to regulate them. They are actively looking to be regulated, and the CQC is not playing ball and is being intransigent. Will the Leader of the House please bash some heads at the Department of Health and Social Care, and could we have a debate on those who are most vulnerable in our society and need to be protected by our health services and regulators?

**Mark Spencer:** I have a feeling that Health questions on 14 June will be very popular. The Care Quality Commission wants to be able to regulate all providers that are providing remote medical advice to people in England. The Department of Health and Social Care will undertake a formal consultation on all proposals to amend the 2014 regulations, including in terms of transport services, triage and medical advice provided remotely, following a post-implementation review later this year. I am sure my hon. Friend will continue to press this matter, and I will make sure that the Health Secretary is aware of his comments.

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I propose a debate that affects all our constituencies, and all our high streets especially: bad commercial landlords. We have a fantastic organisation in Stirling called Creative Stirling, which has great plans for expansion. It is being held back by an intransigent, poor landlord, and other landlords are just not maintaining their properties in the way that they should. This issue is affecting all our high streets' recovery from covid, and we need to shine a light on these landlords' practices. I would be grateful for a debate in Government time to do just that.

**Mark Spencer:** I think the issue is worthy of further debate. We should also recognise that there are some very good commercial landlords as well, but the hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to those who fall below the standards that we and our constituents would expect. That debate would command support across the House, and colleagues would want to engage with it. I encourage him to apply either for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): When I became the first Conservative MP in Doncaster since 1964 and the first ever in Don Valley, I lobbied for a rail link to Doncaster Sheffield airport, as that would lead to an expansion of the airport and massively help to level up

[Nick Fletcher]

the whole of South Yorkshire. Through the city region sustainable transport settlement bid, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority and Doncaster Council have put together an economical package to connect the airport via the Lincoln line. This short spur will bring huge economic growth. However, that bid is apparently still being looked at after two years. Will the Leader of the House help press those decision makers for me to get a quick positive decision to help level up my constituency?

**Mark Spencer:** I should point out first that the two Transport Ministers on the Front Bench this morning will have heard his comments. I cannot let this moment pass without also mentioning the Robin Hood line in Nottingham, which I am sure those Ministers will want to consider. My hon. Friend is an admirable campaigner for Don Valley and his constituents. He recognises how important good infrastructure networks are to our communities. The Transport Ministers here today will have heard his comments, and I am sure they will hear them again in the debate this afternoon.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I will return to an issue raised by the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). Many of our constituents turn to us when they cannot get answers and we write on their behalf to Government Department and Ministers. It is unacceptable that those replies are taking weeks, and in some cases, months. I have tried asking parliamentary questions, but even then, a timely written response is not guaranteed. Many of our staff are spending many hours each week chasing responses, which is unacceptable. Can we have a debate or a statement to ensure that the standards set by the Government are maintained and our constituents receive responses in a timely manner?

**Mark Spencer:** I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the global pandemic caused some challenges in the last Session—that is not an excuse but a statement of fact. We are now in a new parliamentary Session. As Leader of the House, I expect Government Ministers to respond more quickly than during the pandemic and I will continue to drive that message as strongly as possible. As a constituency MP, I share his frustration at times that ministerial responses take longer than they should, and I will continue to press his message with Ministers across Government.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on prostate cancer? Every 45 minutes, a man in the UK dies of prostate cancer and one in eight men in Britain will suffer from it, which is about four to five of the men who were in the Chamber, including the Galleries, when I arrived. Last week, the brilliant Southend charity Prost8 UK launched a new national campaign to encourage the NHS to roll out new world-leading, minimally invasive treatments for prostate cancer. I am sure that he will be delighted to join me in supporting that important campaign.

**Mark Spencer:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising that important matter. In doing so, she spreads the message about awareness of prostate cancer. She

mentioned it in her maiden speech, so I know that she is passionate about trying to solve those challenges. I encourage her to apply for a Backbench Business debate; I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to engage in that debate. I think I am right in saying that it is the most common cancer in men and she has assisted in raising its profile this morning. I encourage anyone who has symptoms to go to the doctor and seek help.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My constituent, Joseph Kuria Waithaka, studied at the University of Hull and worked in healthcare while he studied. On graduating, he was employed by the Humber probation service and had a great future ahead of him. Sadly, however, he was one of the 157 passengers killed on flight ET302 on 10 March 2019 in one of the flawed Boeing 737 MAX aeroplanes. So far, it has not been possible to have an inquest in this country, as Ethiopia has not yet published an accident report. Can we have a statement from the Government on what they are doing to support families such as Joseph's to get closure on that awful event?

**Mark Spencer:** I am truly sorry to hear about Joseph and his demise. I will make sure that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is aware of her comments; I am sure that it will be engaging with the Ethiopian authorities. I understand that Joseph's family will want to know the facts of what happened on that day to assist them in getting some sort of closure and understanding as to what happened to him.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am sure the House will want to wish St Johnstone well in the first leg of their relegation play-off final tomorrow. My constituent Paul Broadley was backpacking in Australia when covid struck and the British consulate advised him to apply for another visa and remain there. Shortly thereafter, however, he started to suffer severe back pain and was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease, for which he received treatment, including multiple surgeries that were paid for with insurance and personal savings. He is now home but unable to work and the benefits he receives do not meet his bills, including rent. He has been told that he cannot claim a personal independence payment as he has not lived in the UK for 104 of the last 156 weeks. Can I ask for the Leader of the House's assistance in securing common sense and compassion in this case?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. If he sends me those details, I will pass them directly to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I am sorry to hear about his constituent's plight and I hope that he will recover in due course. I will ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions responds to the hon. Gentleman directly, so that he can assist his constituent.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): More than 2,000 autistic people and people with learning disabilities are being held in inappropriate hospital units miles away from home, subject to appalling treatment, including seclusion and restraint. In our report, "Treatment of autistic people and individuals with learning disabilities", the Health and Social Care Committee urged the Government to ban long-term admissions to assessment

and treatment units. It has now been more than 10 months since that report was published. The Government have not responded and nor have they set a timeline for a response. That is a deeply concerning indication of Government apathy on this important issue and a poor precedent to set for responses to Committee reports. Will the Leader of the House please take action to press the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the urgency of responding to the report and of acting to ensure that people who are autistic and people with learning disabilities can live in a home, not in a hospital?

**Mark Spencer:** The direct answer to the hon. Lady is yes, I will raise that matter directly with the Health Secretary on her behalf. I will find out where the Department's response is to her Committee's report.

**Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** The Leader of the House has already touched on this theme, but of the 141 outstanding cases that I have with the Home Office, 112 are more than two months old, 25 are more than five months old and the oldest goes back to August last year, which is outrageous. When I put down a parliamentary question, I get evasive answers, or the responses are not even timely. Would it be possible for the Leader of the House to arrange for a Home Office Minister to come to the House to talk through the strategy for resolving what is clearly an outrageously unsatisfactory situation?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity on 20 June, at Home Office questions, to question the Home Secretary directly. I hear his comments and those of colleagues across the House and I repeat my commitment to ensure that Departments take this seriously and respond in a timely way. I know that colleagues will think that it is an excuse that I blame the global pandemic, but it did cause huge ripples and backlogs in some of the systems. That is no longer a valid excuse and Ministers need to respond more quickly than they have in the past.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** The scale of the use of alcohol by young people, including in our public places, is deeply troubling. This week, I met the York Community Alcohol Partnership, which highlighted how the lack of youth services is leading to this crisis. So can we have a debate about having a statutory youth service and ensuring that every single local authority commissions youth services to help our children?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is of course right to raise the challenges that those people who are consuming alcohol underage present for

communities and their own health. Up and down the country, trading standards departments carry out a number of operations to prosecute those retailers who supply alcohol to underage people and police forces also take this seriously. It is something that is worthy of further debate and I am sure that she knows the opportunities that will come to her to do that.

**Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** Petrol and diesel prices have hit record highs, which is feeding inflation and the cost of living crisis. The Chancellor's spring statement included a 5p fuel duty cut that merely tinkers at the edges for my constituents. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in lobbying the Chancellor to reduce VAT on petrol and diesel, which would benefit motorists, businesses and the whole UK economy?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Lady will recognise that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has already reduced fuel duty, which is assisting people with some of the global challenges of inflation. VAT matters would of course be considered at a Budget, and I am sure that the Chancellor will come forward with his autumn Budget in due course, but I will ensure that he is aware of her comments today.

**Mr Speaker:** Finally, I call the one and only Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is always a pleasure to ask any question of the Leader of the House. Last Thursday, in this House at this time, we debated the arrest of Cardinal Zen and the other trustees of the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund in Hong Kong. A Nigerian student, Deborah Samuel, was murdered after being accused falsely of blasphemy in Nigeria. Deborah's life was cruelly taken away far too early. My thoughts and prayers, and those of many in this House, are with Deborah Samuel's family. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the use of blasphemy laws in Commonwealth countries and their impact on religious minorities, freedom of speech and the rule of law?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. If I can assist him in any way in continuing to raise the profile of religious persecution around the world, I will of course do that. Certainly, freedom of speech is something the Government take very seriously. I know that he is a huge campaigner for that as well and that he will continue to hold the Foreign Office to account in trying to achieve the things that he wants to achieve around the world. We will continue to spread the UK Government's freedom of speech narrative wherever we can.



## Transport

12.5 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport.

It gives me great pleasure to open this debate on what the Government are doing to build a world-class transport network. I do not need to remind the House of the vital economic and social role transport plays in our day-to-day lives. The pandemic revealed as much, with rail staff, bus drivers, seafarers and road engineers—to name but a few—continuing to work throughout so that the country could keep moving. It is why this Government have spent billions supporting our transport industry over the past two years, ensuring key workers and essential goods could get to where they needed to be.

While our transport network helped to keep this country going throughout the pandemic, it now, with covid firmly in the rear-view mirror, must help the UK thrive, helping us rise to new challenges such as rebuilding our economy in a way that is fairer and greener, and helping us to level up our cities, towns and villages by giving people the means to get on and improve their lives and livelihoods.

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend is only too aware of the story of Teesside airport, how it was saved by Ben Houchen and how it has gone from strength to strength. Executives at Heathrow have recently whacked up landing fees by 37%, showing complete disregard for regional connectivity and killing the viability of the Teesside flight. Will he look again at what can be done about that issue?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Of course, I join him in paying tribute to the phenomenal work of Ben Houchen and others in supporting that local airport. I am aware of local concerns on this and I hear what my hon. Friend says. Sadly, as he will know, this is very much a matter for the independent regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, but I am sure it is something that it will want to take a close look at.

Before I speak to the legislation the Government introduced in last week's Queen's Speech, I want to outline just some of the measures that we are already taking to improve transport links across the country. Our levelling-up fund gives local authorities the means to invest in infrastructure that improves the everyday lives of people across the UK, including upgrading local transport. The first round of funding will see 105 projects across the four UK nations benefit from £1.7 billion in funding.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle Tyne bridge is a critical part of our transport infrastructure as well as being an icon of the north-east. It is now peeling and rusting, and my constituents are also facing closures as the council assesses just how much money is needed to repair it. Can the Minister give assurances that all that disruption will not be in vain and that the Government will support the restoration of this icon of our engineering?

**Andrew Stephenson:** The hon. Lady is a dedicated champion of that bridge, having raised it with me before during Transport oral questions. It is something on which the Government continue to be keen to work

with local stakeholders to enable local aspiration to be supported. I know she will continue to champion this at every opportunity, but I am keen to continue to work with her and others on the issue.

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that, as we build transport links, they have to be sustainable and green. I have certainly promised the young electorate in Shrewsbury to campaign to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. We are working very hard to try to secure the electrification of the line between our regional capital of Birmingham and Shrewsbury. Will he please take an interest in the project? It is very important that Shrewsbury is served by trains that are not diesel and that we reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful case on behalf of his local rail line. I know that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), is looking at that. Of course, we have a programme to increase the amount of lines that are electrified across the UK. We have a good record on electrification over the past 11 years, but we want to go further and faster as we decarbonise the railways across the UK.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge that families currently face as part of the cost of living challenges. That is why we recently launched the Great British rail sale, which saw over 1 million tickets sold and saved the public about £7 million. We are taking action on fares, too. Not only did we delay this year's fare rise, but we kept it far below the current rate of inflation. We are taking action on rail fares, ensuring a fair deal for taxpayers, and ensuring that we can continue to invest in our railways. It is worth reminding the House that rail fares rose on average faster under the last Labour Government than they have under the Conservatives since 2010.

Similarly, we are improving local bus services, spending £2.5 billion on bus priority lanes and cutting fares across 34 local transport authorities in England. Work has started on transforming rail journeys as part of our record £96 billion integrated rail plan. That will deliver 110 miles of new high-speed line, 180 miles of new electrified lines and increased capacity. It means more passengers across the midlands and the north will benefit from faster trains more quickly, and to more places.

Members will soon have the opportunity to scrutinise the first piece of legislation that we intend to deliver—the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill—which will create the transport spine that will serve towns and cities across the north-west as well as helping trains travel further to Scotland.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Prior to introducing that Bill, will the Minister assure the House that the Department has examined the change in working patterns with more people working from home, the impact that that has had and is likely to have on demand for inter-city travel, whether that has impacted the core case for High Speed 2 and whether, even with several billion already spent, there is a case for spending another £100 billion in the light of those changes?

**Andrew Stephenson:** The right hon. Gentleman and I will have to continue to disagree on HS2. I, and people across the House, see it as a long-term investment in the

future of our country. Undoubtedly, passenger demand has been impacted by the covid pandemic, but we are confident that it will rebound. Part of the strategic outline business case, which we published when we deposited the Bill in the House, sets out our view that there is still a value-for-money business case behind getting on with investing in HS2, and not just phase 1, which is currently under construction—22,000 people are employed and 340 active construction sites are under way at the moment—but phase 2a to Crewe, taking those trains further and, with the new Bill, from Crewe all the way into Manchester.

**John Spellar:** I thank the Minister for giving away again. Can I bring him back to the point about whether there has been a long-term sectoral shift in demand for peak hour inter-city travel as a result of working from home and Zoom conferences. Has the Department analysed whether and why it thinks that demand will return to previous levels?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his further point. We have done and continue to do the analysis and look at all the evidence. If we look at parts of the world that have been through pandemics before, we have still seen growth in the cities in those countries. We have still seen a desire for people increasingly to live in cities and to commute between those cities. HS2 is an investment in the long term, bringing the cities of this country closer together and, with phase 1 due to open at the earliest between 2029 to 2033, there is sufficient time for passenger demand to recover.

As a country, we have come very late to high-speed rail. Many other countries around the world—France and Italy in particular, along with Japan—have helped to pioneer high-speed rail services. It is long overdue that a Government in this country get on and invest for the long term. That is why I am proud that HS2 continues to have cross-party support in the House. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman and I will continue to disagree, but many other Members do see the benefits of us getting on and investing for the long term.

**John Spellar:** Will the Minister publish that analysis?

**Andrew Stephenson:** We published a strategic outline business case updating the business case for HS2 when we deposited the Bill. We will continue to publish further analysis whenever investment decisions are made.

I need to make some progress. While there will be differences of opinions across the House on many issues—hopefully not too much on HS2—I hope that the transport Bill announced in the Queen's Speech last week will receive broad support. After all, I hope that we can all agree that we want a rail service that delivers day in, day out for passengers: one that provides comfortable, affordable services that run on time. I am sure we all agree that the current model is not working. I therefore hope that hon. Members will support our plans to fundamentally reform the rail sector. We will create a new body, Great British Railways, which will act as a single guiding mind for the entire network, get a grip on spiralling costs, replace franchising with passenger service contracts, improve the passenger experience and simplify the ticketing offer.

The Bill also paves the way for the transport of the future, putting the UK at the forefront of new low-carbon technology. It will help the transition to electric vehicles

by installing 300,000 public and private charge points across the country by 2030. It will set new safety standards and assign legal responsibilities to introduce self-driving vehicles on to our roads. That market, which is worth tens of billions of pounds and set to create 38,000 jobs, is a matter of when, not if, and UK consumers need to be reassured that the legal protections are in place. Similarly, rules are needed to improve the safe, legal use of smaller, lighter zero-emission vehicles such as e-scooters, which are only growing in popularity.

I hope that hon. Members will recognise that the Government are finally correcting the historic wrong that has long denied seafarers the same rights and protections as workers on land. That was ruthlessly and shamefully exploited by P&O Ferries earlier this year. My right hon. Friend the Secretary for Transport pledged swift action at the Dispatch Box, and I recall that his plans received support from both sides of the House. The harbours seafarers' remuneration bill will make it a condition of entry for ferry services to pay the equivalent of the national minimum wage to seafarers while in UK waters. It is not right that workers plying their trade in and out of British ports, carrying passengers or vital freight, are denied the rights that the rest of us enjoy.

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab):** I may be pre-empting the Minister in raising the subject of Hammersmith bridge, which has been closed for three years, but Putney residents will really want to know that urgent action is being taken. Will he give a date by which Hammersmith bridge will be reopened for vehicles, freeing up the roads in Putney from the congestion and pollution that they suffer?

**Andrew Stephenson:** The Government continue to work on that issue with the local authority. Obviously, we have committed funding towards supporting the repairs of the bridge, and I am pleased that the work is under way. I would suggest that the timescale for those works is a matter for the local authority, and I cannot answer that today, but the Government continue to support swiftly bringing that bridge back into use. We have been critical of some of the delays in getting the work under way, but I am pleased to say that it is now happening.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** York's rail supercluster is taking rail into the future. I would like to know whether the transport Bill will see investment in research and development to ensure that we can really build on the success of what has been created in York and go further, faster.

**Andrew Stephenson:** I am pleased to say that it will. We are keen to support innovation in our railways across the UK—not just in York I should say, before I get criticised. We have great clusters of small and medium-sized enterprises working in the rail sector to drive forward innovation. I thank the hon. Lady for not making a pitch for York to be the headquarters of GBR; I thought that her question was inevitably going there. I am sure that will follow later in the debate.

I want to leave plenty of time for the debate, so I will close by urging hon. Members to recognise that, far from holding back, the Government are fully backing our transport industry to help us build back better, decarbonise our economy, level up this country and give everyone, wherever they live, the tools to realise their talent.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On air connectivity, yesterday at a Hospitality Ulster event it became very clear that there is a problem with connectivity between Belfast City Airport and Heathrow, not because the flights are not there but because the staffing is not there. It is trying to recruit, but is unable to do so. Will the Minister have discussions with Heathrow on solving that problem, and therefore increasing and improving air connectivity?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. That issue is close to my heart, as someone who frequently flies to Northern Ireland and passes through City airport. Reducing delays at all airports across the UK is something that the aviation Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), is working on. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's remarks are brought to his attention and we will see what more we can do to ensure that passengers are not unduly inconvenienced when passing through that airport.

We are getting on with investing more money in our railway infrastructure than any Government have invested since they were built and that is why we are making funds available to local decision makers to restore railway lines, introduce cycle lanes and fix potholes. It is why we are carrying out reforms to make our trains and buses deliver consistent value for passengers. And it is why, from self-driving vehicles to micro-mobility to zero-emissions aviation and shipping, we are laying the groundwork and preparing today for the jobs and travel habits of tomorrow.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call shadow Minister—

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab) Sam Tarry.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab) *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Ah. The hon. Gentleman surprises me. I was expecting his colleague. I call shadow Minister Sam Tarry.

12.21 pm

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Sorry to surprise you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We swapped the buses issue.

Words matter. Days after the Prime Minister came to power, he said something crystal clear to communities across the north and the midlands:

“I want to be the Prime Minister who does with Northern Powerhouse Rail what we did for Crossrail in London, and today I am going to deliver on my commitment...with a pledge to fund the Leeds to Manchester route.”

Some 60 times—60 times—the Conservative Government committed to delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail in full. Conservative Members stood on a manifesto pledge to deliver it and the eastern leg of HS2 on three—three—separate occasions. Just last year at the Conservative party conference the Prime Minister said it all again. This was a once-in-a-generation chance to transform opportunities across the whole country, rebalancing the economy and making it work for working people. These schemes would have created more than 150,000 new jobs and connected 13 million people in major towns

and cities in our industrial heartlands. But last year, those promises were torn up and the Government do not even have the decency to admit it. They promised HS2 to Leeds. They promised Northern Powerhouse Rail in full and a new line from Leeds to Manchester. They promised the north that it would not be forgotten. But the one thing we know is that we cannot believe a single word the Prime Minister says.

This week, across the north, that is being repeated once again. On Monday, thousands and thousands of passengers saw their services cut back, and towns and cities across the north are paying the price. Let us take Wakefield: three services to the nearby cities of Leeds and Wakefield have been removed altogether; the hourly Huddersfield to Wakefield train has been replaced with a bus service that takes twice as long; and services from Keighley, Dewsbury, Halifax and Hull have all been cut back. Just six months ago, the Prime Minister's Government said that they would

“protect and improve services on existing lines”

and

“not neglect shorter distance journeys”,

saying

“levelling-up cannot wait.”

They are brazenly breaking the promises that they made to communities time and time again. These towns and cities deserve so much better.

What has the Transport Secretary said about those cuts? Absolutely nothing, to date—he is missing in action. Perhaps he is still waiting for the missing Wakefield to Huddersfield train that is never going to come. He is probably flying on his private little plane. In the middle of a climate and a cost of living crisis, it is senseless to force people off public transport and cut them off from jobs and opportunities. It is time for him to step in and stand up for local communities with a commitment to get services to above and beyond pre-pandemic levels.

The story on buses is no different.

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the £34 million being given to Lancashire County Council to improve bus services. That is exactly what the Government are doing for areas like mine.

**Sam Tarry:** Any investment is clearly welcome, but the problem is that the amount of money that transport authorities across the country were asked to bid for came to a total of £9 billion. The hon. Lady's authority was one of the lucky ones to have received funding, because the actual total amount of money dished out was only £1.3 billion. The reality is that dozens and dozens of transport authorities have been completely let down on the funding of buses.

Since the Government took power, 134 million miles of bus routes have been lost, and bus coverage in Britain is currently at its lowest level in more than 30 years. According to the Campaign to Protect Rural England—hardly a left-wing think-tank—that has led to the creation of transport deserts in communities up and down the nation. In response to the challenge laid down before us, the Prime Minister announced a national bus strategy, which he painted as the biggest sector shake-up in a generation. More than a year on from its release, the Government's ambition, which was limited from the outset, has declined even further. The cash—this speaks



to the hon. Lady's point—went to fewer than half the 79 English areas that were eligible and told to apply. Many areas, from Hull to rural North Yorkshire, from Plymouth to Swindon, will not see the lower fares and much-needed improvements to bus services that the Government promised. This is not me saying this; these are facts. The strategy offered nothing for those looking for a bold vision to reverse the loss of millions of miles of bus routes across the country since the Government have been in power. It was a missed opportunity to revolutionise the bus industry and ensure that funds were properly directed to deliver the transition to clean, green vehicles they promised.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** Bearing in mind we are now spending over £63 billion a year on debt interest payments, where would the hon. Gentleman get the additional money to pay for all of this?

**Sam Tarry:** The Government said we should be ambitious and local transport authorities therefore said the investment should be £9 billion. My view is that investment grows the economy and creates jobs. HS2 could have guaranteed jobs for hundreds of thousands of rail workers for decades to come. Not investing now is clearly short-sighted.

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): I had the pleasure of serving on the Transport Committee with the hon. Gentleman. The leader of his party, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), voted to block HS2. Was he letting down the north?

**Sam Tarry:** We stood at the past two elections on a very clear manifesto, which the current leader of the Labour party backed. Our current strategy, which the leader of the Labour party backs, states very clearly that we back it. It is not us who have proposed that HS2 should be cut; it is the Government who have implemented that cut to the eastern leg.

The hon. Gentleman does not have to take my word for it. Tory councils have joined the backlash against what the Prime Minister has done over his pathetic bus funding plan. Conservative Don Mackenzie of North Yorkshire County Council said:

"We knew the Bus Back Better budget had been severely curtailed, but I expected to get some money, not nothing at all, so I'm very disappointed."

In Shropshire, the Conservative cabinet member for transport said she was "devastated", adding:

"We are at a complete loss as to why we have been completely overlooked."

It is a sad and sorry tale that so many Conservative councils across the country are being let down by their own Government.

The sad truth is that, for too long the Tory party has overlooked buses. Some 5,000 services have been lost since they came to power—a staggering quarter of all bus routes in the entire United Kingdom. Far from a bus transformation, many will continue to see a managed decline. The underfunding by the Government has become so severe that a recent report by the former UN special rapporteur Professor Philip Alston highlighted a broken and fragmented system, with skyrocketing fares, plummeting service standards and disappearing routes depriving bus users of an essential public service. The report even

went as far as to say that we are failing in our fundamental human rights obligations by allowing this essential service to deteriorate so severely.

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for giving way—I do appreciate it. Does he agree that some of the issues he highlights, which are affecting councils across the country, are the result of continual multibillion-pound settlements having to be directed to Transport for London to bail it out because of the Labour Mayor's previous poor decision making?

**Sam Tarry:** My former colleague on the Transport Committee knows that that is a very scurrilous question. The money spent in London supports tens of thousands—and as many as 50,000—jobs outside the capital. For every pound spent in London, over 50p is then spent outside London, so every time money is spent in London, it benefits the wider economy.

**Chris Loder:** Even during the pandemic, over 18 months—this was even on the TfL website—there was an "extraordinary" funding settlement of £4 billion to bail out TfL because of some of the poor decisions made by the Mayor of London, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that things are not necessarily as clear as he suggests.

**Sam Tarry:** The reality is that the problematic, poor decisions were made by the chap who is now in Downing Street: the former Mayor of London. He is the chap who cut £1 billion off the budget that was given to TfL every year. TfL was the only major, and probably the biggest, transit system in the western world without any direct Government subsidy until the pandemic. If we ask a transport system to wash its own face—to pay for things only through fares—and 90% of that fare revenue disappears, how on earth can we expect that system to survive? Let us have some serious economics here, not the economics of jokesters.

As I said, the underfunding by this Government has become so severe that the UN special rapporteur has highlighted that it is hitting our poorest communities—communities such as those in Dorset. The report even went as far as to say that the Government were failing the fundamental human rights of people in rural communities. I know that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) is passionate about badgers, but he needs to be more passionate about buses and speak to the Prime Minister. The worst part of all this is that the same working people who have such shockingly bad services are bearing the brunt of the Conservatives' cost of living crisis.

Many people are paying 50% more on rail and bus fares to get to work than a decade ago. In March, the Government announced that they would go further still, with a brutal 3.8% rail fare hike for millions of passengers, and with bus fares rising nationwide. As the Minister said, it is great that there is a sale, but as he well knows, £7 million of tickets is a drop in the ocean of fare revenues.

**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): A lot of people have some sympathy with the idea of spending more on transport infrastructure, but the hon.

[Mr Richard Holden]

Gentleman has not outlined any concrete proposals. Does he actually have any plans to spend more money, or is this just hot air from the Opposition Front Bench?

**Sam Tarry:** Actually, the last Labour manifesto probably had the most comprehensive plan ever put forward at an election for running our rail and other transport networks. It is interesting that a lot of the ideas now being implemented by the Government are watered-down versions of what we put forward then. Instead of having weak lemonade, is it not about time that we had the full pint and something serious?

Incredibly, the Rail Minister had the cheek to say that the eye-watering rail fare hike would make rail more attractive. Many will wonder what planet Ministers are living on if they think people can afford that. Up and down the country, families are really paying the price for decisions made in Downing Street.

While the Conservative party punishes local communities with sky-high fares and substandard services, Labour is fighting across the country for better, cheaper and more affordable transport. In towns and cities nationwide, our leaders in power have a plan to turn the page on a decade of decline, putting communities back at the heart of public transport and transforming it for good. The vision of these Labour leaders is simple: to build buses quicker, cheaper, greener and more reliably. Last year, Andy Burnham decided to move to franchising, with a clear vision that talked of

“a world-class, integrated transport network which can unlock opportunity for all; providing access to jobs and education, reducing pollution, attracting investment and reducing isolation.”

Similarly, Tracy Brabin in West Yorkshire has promised to put “people before profit” by introducing

“simpler fares, contactless ticketing, and greener buses.”

In addition to investing millions of pounds in new routes and services, both Mayors are set to cap bus fares at £2, saving passengers up to £1.50 in West Yorkshire and, in some cases, more than £2 in Greater Manchester. That is the difference that Labour in power is making.

**Chris Loder:** It is important that the House notes that the Labour Mayor of London required continual multibillion-pound bail-outs from this Conservative Government—funds that would otherwise be invested in other parts of the nation. The Labour party is advocating making the same mistake again in Manchester, the west midlands and other places. The hon. Gentleman is advocating a fixed fare, with costs being completely unmanaged and the Government therefore being required to bail out the cost deficit again.

**Sam Tarry:** I had the misfortune of catching a bus in Manchester about a decade ago, when we had a variety of competing transport companies charging more than £5 a fare. That is clearly not right. All around the world, progressive administrations are making transport affordable. If we are serious about climate change, we need to get people on public transport, whether that is buses, trains or trams. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, finances in London are all to do with the crash in ridership on the tube and the wider TfL system. I am happy to see passenger levels start to rise again, and to do so very quickly, because of the work of our Labour Mayor.

What communities up and down this country need is a Government who match their ambition, not a Government who tell them to be ambitious and then give them hardly any money. We need a transport system that is fit to tackle the climate catastrophe unfolding before our eyes, and that works for the passengers and communities who rely on it. Labour would wrest our rail networks back in full from inefficient private operators. We would put into public hands the parts of the railways that the Government have not. We would give communities across the country London-style powers to reform bus networks, keep fares down and improve services. We would invest in our vital transport infrastructure to boost economic growth and rebalance the economy, which will create thousands of good, green, long-term, unionised jobs. Unfortunately, unless the Government match their communities’ ambition on local transport, they will have failed millions across the country, and their hotchpotch agenda on levelling up will not be delivered. Instead, it will lie in tatters.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit. We will be able to do so if everyone keeps to around seven minutes. If we cannot, I will put on a time limit.

12.37 pm

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** It is with great excitement that I rise to speak in this transport debate. I could go on all day, but I am well aware of your time limit requirements, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Prime Minister for giving us time to hold this debate; he has a great passion for transport, as we saw in his time as Mayor of London. I place on record my thanks to the members of the Transport Committee, some of whom are here today, and to the Department and its Ministers, who always engage proactively with us. They have accepted many of our recommendations, and we look forward to continuing to scrutinise them and to coming up with policy ideas that we think can make transport better. Transport matters because it is the one policy area that has an impact on pretty much every single person in this country, every single day. That is why I am so excited to speak about some of these measures.

I want to take hon. Members on a quick canter through some of the modes, and then talk a little about decarbonisation in each sector. This week, we heard from local government representatives. As has been said, 31 of the 79 bids under the bus service improvement plan were successful. I know that there has been some criticism on the grounds that all local transport authorities should have funds, but I believe that there needs to be a competitive process in which only the best ideas are funded. The best can then be taken on board by other local transport authorities, which may not be given the money, but can learn how it can be well spent. The lesson is that local transport authorities and indeed county halls across the country need to be aware that these bidding processes will continue, and not just for transport. Authorities need to have not just specialists, but bidding departments that can successfully bid.

On rail, I really welcome the forthcoming legislation on Great British Railways. The Transport Committee has been concerned that those with the train set in the

Department for Transport do not particularly want to give it away to the mix of the public and private sector that will be taking these things on board on an arm's length basis. I would like the private side of the rail sector to be given the opportunity to remain involved: it is the private side of the rail sector that has doubled rail passenger numbers over the past 20 years. We need that attitude now more than ever, given the issues from the pandemic.

I recognise and welcome the £96 billion of integrated rail plan funding. It must always be frustrating for the Minister to hear someone say that and then demand more, but I would like us to look in particular at the station opportunities at Manchester, Bradford and certainly Leeds, which seems to be at full capacity. Also, as the Mayor of the West Midlands has made clear, the midlands rail hub will allow the new grade of track to be shared across the wider region. I welcome the Minister's commitment to continue to listen and be involved in that project.

On aviation, we must learn lessons from the pandemic. We must have future-proofing so that if there is another variant of concern, we know how to react without another disproportionate impact on the aviation sector. We also need help for the sector to recover. That means more flexibility on staffing, especially security staff, so that they can be vetted and perhaps do some of their training as they go. We also need airspace modernisation to deliver both decarbonisation and more planes. I hear the Minister when he says that Heathrow landing charges are a matter for the independent regulator, but can Ministers test the numbers? The aviation industry says that the numbers will be much greater than Heathrow is saying. The lower the numbers for Heathrow, the higher the cost and the more justification for increasing the landing charges, which would hold us all back.

As we have left the European Union, we can surely do more on slot allocation reform. And can we please have the airline insolvency review? I have stood here so many times calling for it. We keep talking about it, but we do not deliver it. The Civil Aviation Authority should not be the body that repatriates customers who are stranded.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** My hon. Friend does an excellent job of chairing the Transport Committee. What is he doing to ensure that the road building projects that we secure for our constituencies—we have secured more than £50 million for the completion of the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury—do not get stuck in the planning process? Some of us are finding the planning process very laborious and complex. Is the Select Committee interacting with the Government to ensure that planning processes for the construction of roads are speeded up?

**Huw Merriman:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are halfway through the £24.5 billion road investment strategy 2 programme. My call—I think it probably aligns with his—is that that is closely monitored and that in place of those projects that are going to be held up, shovel-ready projects that might have been in RIS3 can be put in RIS2. I think that there are issues on that front in relation to the A303. The Committee pledges to look at that.

My hon. Friend takes me on to roads. I am keen that we continue with the audit of smart motorways to ensure that roads are safer, with some of the retrospective

fittings that should perhaps have been made in the first place. I recognise the Department's commitment on that front.

In the Bill, can we prohibit pavement parking outside London? That approach has worked in London since the early 1970s, and it is time to take it elsewhere.

In urban centres, 50% of all journeys will need to be active by 2030 if we are to hit our target. Can we embrace change, technology and innovation? I know that some will speak about e-scooters and say that more needs to be done to tackle them. At the moment they are illegal, but they are out there and nothing seems to stop them. It is better to regulate and control them and make them better than to pretend that they do not exist. How is it that I can buy a bike or a car, but only hire an e-scooter? Surely it is time to catch up with science.

On decarbonisation, I welcome the commitment to 4,000 zero-emission buses. I know that 2,000 have been funded, but not enough are on the road right now. We need to do more to get them delivered, not least because it helps our manufacturing sector, as they are unique to this country.

Although 37% of our rail track is electrified, there are another 6,100 miles to go. We need to look at hydrogen and bio mode, but electrification is the only game in town at the moment. If we had a rolling programme in place, perhaps we would be able to deliver it more cheaply than the £2.5 million per mile that it currently costs. Germany has a rolling programme that costs £500,000 per mile. The more we do, the cheaper it becomes.

On aviation, we need to back a winner, and sustainable aviation fuel is that winner. It needs a mandate and a contracts for difference market, which is delivered for electricity. The Government can really do more on that front.

On maritime, as well as protecting seafarers—we need to look at insolvency legislation all over again with regard to employment rights—we know that moves are afoot in the European Union on biometric testing, which will hammer our ports and our short supply chain routes if we do not do more.

Finally, on road, I welcome the 2030 target, but it will be incredibly difficult to meet if we do not get more people buying electric vehicles. The zero-emission vehicle mandate is a great idea, but it comes into force only in 2025. Only 6.6% of new cars sold are electric. In the second-hand car market it is only 0.3%, although those may be a previous year's figures. We are doing a lot more. Range anxiety will reduce as the Government invest more in smart charging and develop interoperability, but I am worried about delivering for people, especially the third of all households that do not have charging at home.

Once we all have electric vehicles, there will be a hole in the Exchequer because 4% of all tax receipts come from fuel duty or vehicle excise duty. That is £35 billion of funds. Only about 20% of that goes on to the road, so if we want to continue to invest in roads as well as schools and hospitals, we will have to find a way of replacing those taxes. It is time for road pricing. It will work; we have the technology to allow it to work. The beauty of it is that it is similar to the current system: the more you drive and the bigger your vehicle, the more you pay. It is time for bold decisions on such matters. We must not wait until it is too late. I know that the Government are all about bold decisions, and we will work very closely in that regard.



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

12.46 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee on which I serve. I agreed with almost everything he said up until the last line of his speech.

Today's debate is timely. As it is currently outlined, the Government's transport Bill is a missed opportunity to drive forward a transformational change and set an agenda for the years and decades ahead. At a time when transport initiatives are at the heart of the green industrial revolution, whether that be zero-emission buses on our streets, electrifying our railways, new hydrogen and battery-driven trains, e-bikes and e-scooters fundamentally changing horizons for urban travel or the moves towards 20-minute neighbourhoods to rebalance our economy and promote active travel, the paucity of ambition shown in the Government's programme is frankly embarrassing. They make no mention of properly ramping up the transition from diesel buses to zero-emission vehicles in our towns and cities, no mention of real high-level investment in active travel that matches the leadership shown by the Scottish Government, and no mention of fully decarbonising the rail network south of the border. A net zero future is also a future less reliant on energy supplies tied up in geopolitics or hostage to the whims of dictators and rogue states.

Europe and the United States are beginning the move away from Russian oil and gas; the UK could be taking the lead and accelerating the move away from oil and gas completely. They could be working with colleagues in Scotland and across these isles and across the continent to decarbonise our transport networks. But that simply is not going to happen any time soon with the limited horizons shown in the planned transport measures. We are in a climate emergency, but the Government's plans simply do not meet the needs of our times.

On a positive note, I welcome the Government's move to reform and improve the regulations relating to electric vehicle charging infrastructure and to enforce things like interoperability and minimum service standards. I hope that we will see those regulations promised by the Government in March on the statute book sooner rather than later.

We are just eight years away, as I think the Chair of the Select Committee said, from the Government's deadline of 2030 for ending sales of new petrol and diesel cars. Electric vehicle infrastructure needs a huge jump-start across these isles, but instead the Department seems intent on continuing its abysmal record in England outside London.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is difficult to encourage bus operators to move away from diesel transport when their diesel receives direct subsidy? Reducing or removing that subsidy would encourage the purchase of hydrogen or other vehicles.

**Gavin Newlands:** That may well be the case, but the bus operators to whom I speak would not welcome any decline in the subsidy—far from it. I am lucky in that Renfrewshire has more electric buses or zero-emission buses than anywhere in the UK outside London, but it

still has diesel buses as well. I am not convinced that bus operators would welcome the removal of that subsidy at a time when fuel prices are high. When fuel prices come down, the hon. Gentleman's idea will not be without merit.

As has become the norm in the Department for Transport, we have a glossy booklet for the Secretary of State to plonk on the shelf behind him while he is on camera—at least when he is not flying to New York for location filming in yet another cinematic masterpiece. I hope the folk at BAFTA are taking note of his current videos on Twitter. Behind the gloss, however, the electric vehicle strategy is thin gruel. While the Scottish Government plan to maintain our record as the UK nation with the highest per capita number of public charging points by doubling their numbers by the end of this Parliament, the UK Government are letting England fall even further behind. Already England, outside London, has been left in the slow lane as charging infrastructure is rolled out. That gap will only grow over the coming years, and as always it will be the poorer and more rural areas that will lose out as private investment focuses on high-density, high-capacity locations while intervention from the state is minimal. That ideological direction has to change, and change soon.

The fact that home charging attracts the standard VAT rate for domestic electricity supplies of 5% while public charging points are still subject to the full 20% is not just a disincentive to people thinking of making the switch; it also penalises electric vehicle users who do not have the benefit of a driveway or a space to park a car. I own an electric car, which I can charge at home, making use of the cheaper rates, but people not in that position are having to pay the 20% rate. Anyone living in a flat or shared space is paying a great deal more to charge their car than those with front-door properties. That is essentially a tax on the less well-off. There is no word in the programme for government of any action to tackle this inconsistency. I hope that the Minister will be lobbying her colleagues in the Treasury to address the anomaly and ensure that all those making the switch to electric vehicles are on a level playing field.

The DFT is also miles behind on zero-emission buses. Scotland has ordered nearly three times as many per capita, and since the start of the year those aged 21 and under, as well as those over 60, travel on them free of charge.

Active travel seems not to merit a single mention in the outline of the transport Bill. After two years of low traffic neighbourhoods, Spaces for People, a continued increase in cycling, the move towards 20-minute neighbourhoods and the exponential growth of e-bikes and e-scooters, I find that staggering. Within three years Scotland will be spending 10% of our entire transport budget on active travel, an unprecedented amount across these isles and a genuinely transformational level of spending. The potential waiting to be unlocked in our towns and cities through this spending is huge. Down south, however, the DFT is still stuck in same mindset: a funding scheme here and a bidding process there, dripping out relative crumbs of funding to local government.

By 2024-25, Scotland's active travel spend will amount to £60 per person per year, adding up to £320 million every year. That is transformational spending, not just because it will reduce emissions and offer alternatives to

cars, but because it will give a huge boost to our town and city centres and local neighbourhoods. In England, the DFT plans to spend barely that annual amount over the next five years, which works out at just over £7 per person. That is not simply a lack of ambition; it shows the lack of any kind of lessons learned from the pandemic. I give the UK Government credit for at least having the good sense to put Chris Boardman in charge of Active Travel England. He is backed by a cross-section of stakeholders. However, in the absence of real resources behind his plans and real political commitment from the Government, this is like expecting him to win the Tour de France on a bike with no pedals.

I hope that Ministers are noting the Scottish Government's spending plans, because our interests in Scotland are England's interests too. There is little point in putting out the fire in your house if your neighbours are dousing petrol on theirs. We need the policy makers here, and the Treasury, to understand the importance of active travel in the context of transitioning to zero carbon and boosting local economies to the benefit of both people and small businesses.

On rail, we are promised the establishment of Great British Railways. It has been clear for decades that the fragmented and illogical mess left behind by the Secretary of State's predecessors back in the Major Government and continued by their successors, both Labour and Tory, must be radically transformed. Reintegration is to be welcomed, and having heard in the Select Committee from the transition team's lead, Andrew Haines, I know that the will and the experience are there at the operational level, but the hard fact is that building a better railway system across these isles needs political will and ambition. Notwithstanding what the Minister of State said in his opening remarks, one look at the Government's track record since 2010 would lead anyone to conclude that ambition barely exists. Umpteen electrification schemes have been dumped or hugely scaled down, key parts of HS2 serving the north of England have been scrapped, and Crossrail is £4 billion over budget.

Everyone concerned with transport in the UK isles wants to see Great British Railways succeed, and begin to put an end to the wasted years that have seen the UK left in the sidings while other European countries have quietly got on with bringing their networks into the 21st century. However, if the DFT and the Treasury cannot match that good will with cold hard cash and a change in attitudes, I fear that we will be having these same debates in five, 10 or 20 years' time. If GBR is established without changes to the way in which rail infrastructure is governed, that will constitute yet another missed opportunity to put full control of our railways where it belongs, with the Scottish Parliament.

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gavin Newlands:** I had a feeling that my colleague on the Select Committee might pipe up at this point, and I am happy to give way to him.

**Chris Loder:** I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Rail operations in Scotland are, of course, delegated to the Scottish Government. The hon. Gentleman will know full well that there are great difficulties with the Scottish operations at present, not least because of

copious strikes. It is clear that the Scottish Government have allowed the unions to run the railways in Scotland, hence the difficulties, particularly at weekends. Given this Government's commitment to the Union connectivity review and to ensuring that we have excellent connectivity throughout the UK that benefits the economy of the whole UK, does the hon. Gentleman not think that before calling for too much more of what he would like—independence and delegating things away from Westminster—the Scottish Government ought to get their own house in order?

**Gavin Newlands:** I do not recognise the picture that my colleague paints. The fact is that with its integrated approach to track and train in Scotland, ScotRail provides the rest of the UK with an exemplar of how to run a rail system. As for the union connectivity review, we had backed HS2 to come all the way to the Scottish border and provide high-speed rail in the central belt of Scotland and beyond. I hope that when the Under-Secretary of State winds up the debate, she will be able to tell us when HS2 will actually reach the Scottish border and we can marry up that high-speed connection with Scotland. I should be very interested to hear about that, because the Scottish and UK Governments agreed to it a number of years ago.

As my colleague has pointed out, ScotRail is now in full public ownership, so now is the time to transfer full responsibility, permanently, for the infrastructure currently in the hands of Network Rail to the Scottish Government so that we have a truly integrated rail network. That will also allow for reform of the current track access charge regime, which is sucking resources from Scotland's railways to be mixed into the Network Rail pot, rather than their being invested directly in Scotland's track and infrastructure. ScotRail is forking out twice the access charges of Northern, despite a broadly comparable passenger network. West Midlands Trains, with almost exactly the same number of passenger kilometres as ScotRail, pays only one third of the charges paid by our publicly owned train operator. If the transport Bill is going to be mainly about implementing the Williams rail review, it must fundamentally alter the structure and framework of track access charges and provide a level playing field for publicly owned companies such as ScotRail, as opposed to the private concessions that will continue to operate in England under the auspices of GBR.

I welcome any action by any Government who try to put a stop to the shameful behaviour of P&O Ferries. It is still shocking to recollect that the chief executive not only admitted that his company flagrantly broke the law in treating 800 loyal and hard-working staff with the contempt that was shown by him and his colleagues, but said that he would do the same again. However, it is the Government who should be acting, rather than subcontracting their role to others. Palming off responsibility for employment law to port authorities—most of which are now privately owned—is not what workers in our maritime sector need. They need real protections from the likes of P&O, enforced by Government rather than subject to the decision making of port owners.

Privatising employment law must be the ultimate in Tory ideology. Who needs Governments to enforce the laws that they make when private enterprise is there to do their job for them? It also beggars belief that they are happy to transfer responsibility for employment law to the private sector, but still resist transferring it to a

[Gavin Newlands]

democratically elected Parliament in Edinburgh. The Scottish Government have made it clear that they want pernicious employment practices such as fire and rehire to be banned, but Scotland's workers are still trapped under the current antiquated system. If it is good enough for companies such as Associated British Ports or Peel Ports, it is good enough for our democratically elected Government in Edinburgh.

We know the important role our transport sectors play in our society and our economy. Since the last Queen's Speech, we have seen chaos at our ports caused by Brexit, huge cutbacks in funding for public transport in England and the continuing evidence from here and elsewhere in the world of the existential threat that climate change poses to us and the rest of humanity. Those threats need radical action to tackle not only the global challenges but those closer to home. Sadly, the Government's programme on transport falls well short.

No country can provide all the answers or claim perfection, but at least the Scottish Government are putting up a fight and trying to make the necessary changes, some of which are tough and, dare I say it, unpopular. If the UK Government do not want to make those changes, that is regrettable for all of us, but that should not allow them to continue putting up barriers around Scotland's response. We cannot be hindered by inertia and a lack of ambition any longer. On transport policy, like so much else, it is for the UK to try to show why Scotland should continue to be part of the Union. On the evidence so far, it has an impossible task.

1 pm

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I will make a few points, but I will be particularly aware of the time and make sure that I do not overrun, so that other colleagues can get in. First, I agree strongly with the point made by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), that Government support for the transport sector during the pandemic was very strong. It was necessary in the emergency that we faced. However, the message to people to avoid public transport, while I understood its point, undid some of the progress that had been made in getting people back on to public transport in the first place. Our task now is to encourage people to resume using public transport and to ensure that the Government investment programme surges ahead, although I recognise fully that these are tough times in transport planning, given all the uncertainties. We are still facing problems from the pandemic, when things like train driver training were cut back, but it is a bad mistake to think that the current level of passenger demand has stabilised and is somehow fixed and that service levels can be cut back accordingly.

We have seen some of the implications of this locally on the Leeds-Harrogate-Knaresborough-York line. The services that have been cut back are the early morning services to Leeds, although many people from Harrogate commute to Leeds for work. Some will now find it impossible to be in work on time. For other service users, it is now impossible to connect with the Leeds to London services that get into our capital before 10 am. That is not good enough for business people, and Harrogate has significant conference business at its convention

centre, with many people travelling to it from across the country. Other rail cuts have created long gaps in the evening services and an earlier finish on the Knaresborough service. These cuts are obviously bad for our night-time economy.

It is not great to see these things because we had been making such great progress after all of the years of Labour's no-growth northern franchise. We have got rid of the Pacers, we have much better rolling stock and we have more services, especially the six direct London services per day using the new Azuma trains. I have taken this matter up locally, specifically with the chair of Northern Rail, Robin Gisby, with whom I had a very positive meeting. It was clear that he recognised the significance of the services that have been cut, and he is working on reinstatement for later this year. Getting more drivers through training is a necessary ingredient for progress.

I recognise the challenges in resuming full pre-pandemic levels of operation. We have lower demand at the moment, as well as operational issues. We can see comparable issues in other sectors of the economy and in our public services, but lots of people have worked hard to secure the rail improvements we have enjoyed over the last 10 years and lots of people need the services that have been lost. Those services have a disproportionate economic impact, which is why we need them back at the earliest opportunity. May I ask the Minister to focus on ensuring that the operational side of the catch-up is delivered as fast as possible? I recognise that this is the industry's responsibility, but pressure from the Minister can help.

I would like to switch modes and talk about buses. We have many electric buses in Harrogate already. There was a step change in 2018 when a fleet of eight electric buses went into service. That funding came from a green bus fund initiative, which ran for many years. Before anybody intervenes, I acknowledge that I am indeed marking my own homework here, as a former bus Minister, but the point is that we are now seeing comparable initiatives all across the country. Indeed, only in the last few weeks the Harrogate Bus Company and North Yorkshire County Council, under the excellent leadership of Councillor Don Mackenzie, have won approval for their bid to the Government's zero emission bus regional areas—ZEBRA—scheme. The county council has secured £8 million and the Harrogate Bus Company is investing £12 million to create a scheme that will bring 39 electric buses to Harrogate and, especially, to Knaresborough.

I would like to share the experience we have had in Harrogate. The bottom line is that the new electric buses are very popular, and the customer response has been excellent. I have checked this with the bus company and with passengers. People like the ride quality and the quietness, alongside the fact that the vehicles are bright, airy and pleasant to be in. They are obviously also emission free, which is highly popular. When the new buses arrive, I know that they will be popular too. The point of mentioning this is to encourage the Government to put as much pace as possible into the Bus Back Better campaign. The 4,000 zero-emission buses that will come from it will be popular. They will drive passenger usage, they will help to deliver our net zero objectives and as the buses will be built across the UK, including in Northern Ireland, they will help to deliver on the levelling up agenda. There are not many policy areas that can tick that many boxes, so please can we look at how the zero emission schemes have been



implemented? There are lessons to be learned there, and those lessons will speed deployment. More wins, more quickly.

I have a moment left, and I have one further ask of Ministers. Will they keep the House informed of progress in the single leg pricing rail fare reform trial? Again, I must be up front about the fact that my fingerprints are on this issue. This trial is about simplifying fares on the London to Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh routes so that passengers can mix and match to get more flexibility and therefore better deals. Initial feedback from LNER has been positive. I am not surprised by that, because we have seen passenger benefits. If Ministers could keep the House informed, that would be great. If the trial remains successful, perhaps it could be rolled out into other areas of the country so that more passengers can get better deals.

Lastly, there has been an enormous amount of hot air today from the Opposition Benches. The Labour Government did nothing to invest in rail during their time in office. We have listened to Labour Members suggesting that they would spend billions of pounds without identifying where the money would come from. Their track record is woeful. I ask them to consider how many miles of electrified railway the Labour Government delivered during the course of their term in office. It was woeful. They should not try to hide from their record. They should recognise that things have changed under this Government.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** The hon. Gentleman did very well in sticking to the seven minutes that I asked for. I am afraid that more people have indicated that they wish to speak than I had originally been aware of, so I hope that we can now keep to a limit of around five minutes. I still hope that we can manage without a formal limit, which gives a little bit more relaxation—well, not relaxation; it should make for a better debate if we do not have time limits, so let us keep to five minutes and have some interesting interventions.

1.7 pm

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Five minutes is usually about clearing my throat, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will do my best in this debate, and I hope there will be no hot air from me today. I welcome the comments made by the previous Minister, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). Both Ministers on the Front Bench know of my commitment to Wrightbus in my constituency. It is a company that was about to go into the doldrums, starting with about 55 people, less than two and a half years ago, and it now employs almost 1,000 people. I remember the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) visiting the plant with me and sitting in a new hydrogen development bus and wanting to steer it around the streets of Ballymena. I know that those visits are incredibly important. In the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to meet the Secretary of State for Transport, and I have encouraged him to make his next big visit to Northern Ireland to visit the bus plant at Wrightbus and see for himself the great, pioneering work that is being done by the workforce there. They are immensely proud of the fact that they have produced the only workable hydrogen buses to

scale across the UK. Indeed, they have produced over 1 million miles of bus activity on the UK's roads. This is the future of public transport, and I hope the Government grasp it with both arms, give it a bearhug and take it forward, as is required for our industry to be successful.

I am also delighted that, in recent days, we have had a new export deal between Wrightbus and Volgren in Australia. Indeed, a deal with a European country for more hydrogen bus sales into Europe will be announced later this week, which is a very positive development. A small, 75-year-old company in Northern Ireland is now a world leader in hydrogen and other low-emission bus technologies. The job creation is significant and adds to our Union connectivity. Remember that 1,000 people employed in Northern Ireland is the equivalent of about 30,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. It is very significant for a small place like Northern Ireland to have such an impact. I encourage the Secretary of State and other Ministers to visit, because Wrightbus shows the importance of bus development.

Another aspect of Union connectivity as it relates to transport is the Heathrow hub link to Northern Ireland. A number of hon. Members have mentioned the interim price cap, which is disastrous for connectivity to Northern Ireland. If I wanted to fly to Northern Ireland right now and made an emergency booking with British Airways, a single flight would cost £375. I could probably fly to anywhere else in Europe for that. The price cap will cripple connectivity, and I encourage the Government to step in.

I heard what the Minister said, but it is not good enough to say that this is a matter for the Civil Aviation Authority. Government intervention is required because of the strategic and security interests at stake with Union connectivity. I know it is difficult for him to step in, and that he would be treading on all sorts of toes, but he should do the Northern Ireland thing and get his retaliation in first. He should put on his hobnail boots, tread on those toes and make the point that this is damaging trade and investment in Northern Ireland, damaging connectivity and damaging the Union. It is important that we address that issue.

I congratulate Translink on its significant work on our railways across Northern Ireland. It is improving the links between the villages of Cullybackey and Dunloy in my constituency and Ballymoney. These are significant transport links for connectivity and businesses across Northern Ireland.

I also thank the road surfacers who are trying to improve, with a very limited budget, what I can only describe as the Swiss cheese-like roads on which some of our people drive in Northern Ireland. Again, the Government here should be encouraging our Government in Northern Ireland to get on with developing those roads.

The Minister mentioned the levelling-up agenda, which is a significant opportunity to change the UK for good, if it is applied correctly. If we can get levelling-up funding into new air routes and new airlines operating across Northern Ireland and into the rest of the world, it will make a significant difference for trade and for my constituents.

Finally, I chair the all-party parliamentary group on motorcycling, and I encourage the Minister to meet us soon to discuss the point raised by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the Chair of the

[*Ian Paisley*]

Transport Committee, on the regulation of e-scooters and other e-vehicles. This is an important development, and we need to get ahead of the curve.

1.13 pm

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): Last week I had the pleasure of joining the all-party parliamentary group on Crossrail for my first Crossrail trip across London's city centre, and it is a triumph of engineering and creativity. From the cloud atlas ceiling as I descended into Paddington station to the pinstripes that inspired the entire construction of Liverpool Street station, the design tells the story of our city.

Crossrail's construction also revealed more of the city's history. Some of the construction workers told me of discovering more than 3,000 victims of the black death, buried at haste and without dignity, beneath the old Bethlem Hospital when they excavated the tunnel at Liverpool Street. Of course, Crossrail also plants a flagpole in our national story, having been unveiled in the year of the Queen's platinum jubilee and been christened in her name.

Crossrail has not all been plain sailing. It is overbudget and overdue, and it would not have made it without significant Government intervention. I have repeatedly cursed it over the years for the chaos it caused at Reading station and, as I crawled through on the bus, for the way it carved up Tottenham Court Road. Despite that, I have had a Damascene conversion. Crossrail is an extraordinary new piece of infrastructure.

It is incredible that we can travel from Paddington to Liverpool Street in 10 minutes, and even more incredible that we can get from Newbury station in my constituency to Canary Wharf, in the heart of the London docklands, in exactly one hour. Everyone who worked on Crossrail should feel proud. It will change our city and transform rail transport across much of the south-east.

Crossrail comes at a bittersweet moment for west Berkshire, because it is only two months since we learned that Great Western Railway is withdrawing three intercity express trains between Bedwyn and Paddington, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), who is not in his place, and I have been talking to Ministers ever since it was decided.

I thank the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is also not in her place, for her help in reinstating the 19.07 route from Paddington to Bedwyn, which is popular with commuters. She will understand that my predecessor, who now sits in the other place, worked very hard on the route's introduction, and it meant people moved to villages such as Kintbury and Hungerford because they believed those places were commutable from London. GWR is doing a great job of trying to improve connection times, and it has said its ambition is to reinstate the intercity express trains. I hope Ministers will understand if I keep up that conversation and keep knocking on their door in the months ahead.

Finally, and I will be brief, I strongly differ from the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) on *Bus Back Better*, as we have had generous indicative funding. It has perhaps not enabled us to realise all our plans—we have lots of creative ideas in west Berkshire—but it has

enabled us to realise some of them. Bus funding is often siloed in individual counties, and it is rare for counties to correspond on securing bus routes that travel between them, so Ministers will understand why I raise it.

For close to 18 months, I have been campaigning for a bus that links Newbury to Oxford, with stops along the way, not just because these two great metropolises ought to be joined, although they should, but because I think it meets the Department's BSIP criteria to maximise passenger growth. The A34 route between west Berkshire and south Oxfordshire is home to some of the most exciting technology and science enterprises in the country, if not the world.

The Harwell science park, just north of my constituency border, is creating 10,000 jobs over the next five years and is already heavily recruiting talented apprentices from Newbury College. The same can be said of the science parks at Culham and Oxford, and of the business park at Milton. They are all on the same route, but the only way one of my constituents can access these places, if they get a job, is by taking two trains and a bus, with a journey time of about an hour and a half for a distance of less than 20 miles. Of course, most of them get in their car, which is something we want to limit.

I am grateful for the energy and enthusiasm that Oxfordshire County Council, West Berkshire Council, the Thames Valley local enterprise partnership and many others have shown for my proposed direct bus route, recognising that we need to give people a cheaper, greener and faster way of getting to work in these important growth destinations. West Berks and Oxfordshire both made this request of the DFT in their BSIP proposals, but the decision ultimately rests with Ministers, and I strongly encourage them to approve it.

1.19 pm

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris). I welcome the opportunity to speak about transport issues today, as I am regularly contacted by constituents who are raising issues ranging from poor public transport links to the lack of availability of electric vehicle charging points. I will be covering a couple of those issues today, but I want to start with some good news for many of my constituents. As the hon. Lady mentioned, after years of waiting and a number of false starts, Crossrail, renamed the Elizabeth line, finally opens next week. One of its two eastern branches terminates at Abbey Wood, in my constituency. Having also had the opportunity to visit the station and ride the new trains, I am certain that will be a transformative new railway for many of my constituents and indeed the whole of London. So I, too, pay tribute to all those who have made it happen, including the many thousands of people who have worked on that colossal project. I also wish to point out that Crossrail got the green light under a Labour Government and a Labour Mayor.

There are of course lessons to be learned about the significant delays and cost overruns, but I am confident that the Elizabeth line will increase opportunities for many of my constituents and encourage more people to visit my part of south-east London. I can recommend the beautiful Lesnes Abbey Woods, near to Abbey Wood station—I recall inviting Madam Deputy Speaker there in my maiden speech—followed by a pint in the Abbey Arms, although I like to have a glass of wine.

I want to raise a point about ensuring as many of my constituents as possible benefit from Crossrail. To achieve that, we need well-thought-out and regular bus route links to communities across Erith and Thamesmead and to the Elizabeth line at Abbey Wood. Constituents have raised a number of issues, such as Transport for London extending services, but without increasing the number of buses on those routes, so people are left with lower frequency. Too many buses are being channelled down small roads, causing congestion problems. Parts of the constituency are still badly served, particularly at night, making it even harder for shift workers to get to and from work. Ultimately, we need good, reliable and regular bus routes across Erith and Thamesmead that reflect the needs of local people.

That brings me on to the wider issue of transport connectivity and my docklands light railway campaign. Thamesmead, in my constituency, is currently very poorly served by public transport. This cuts people off from work or educational opportunities, or means they have little choice but to drive. My "Next Stop Thamesmead" campaign is about finally putting Thamesmead on the transport map. I am backing plans, supported by the Royal Borough of Greenwich, Newham Council, TfL and Peabody, to extend the DLR from Gallions Reach, in Newham, over the river to Thamesmead. That proposal would unlock significant new housing on both sides of the river. Crucially, it would also increase connectivity for existing residents of Thamesmead and nearby areas.

When I raised this issue with the Minister in February, she said that work was ongoing with Homes England to assess the potential options. I would therefore be grateful if she could update me on that work. My constituents deserve the benefits of transport connectivity that many others across London already enjoy. Now is the time for the Government to commit to that project, back it with proper funding and get building the DLR extension to Thamesmead.

I want to end by talking about electric vehicle charging points. Many constituents have contacted me about the lack of availability of electric vehicle charging points near their homes and places of work. Increasingly, my constituents are keen to switch to electric vehicles; they want to do their bit for the environment, while also avoiding rising fuel prices. But too often, they are prevented from doing so by the lack of charging points, and the difficult processes they have to go through to request one from my local council. The availability of on-street charging points is a particular issue. Too few of my constituents, across both Greenwich and Bexley, have charging points on their streets. Although the provision and exact location of charging points is a matter for local councils, I firmly believe the Government must take a more proactive approach to ensure that everyone has access to charging points. I fully agree with the Transport Committee's report from last year, which said:

"Charging an electric vehicle should be convenient, straightforward, and inexpensive; owners should not face a postcode lottery".

Local authorities need the powers and funding to deliver charging points across our local communities. For instance, we should look at whether councils can be given more powers over charging points in supermarket car parks and other similar locations. The roll-out of on-street chargers in front of people's homes needs to be accelerated. We cannot afford dither and delay on

the issue. The public are ready and willing to switch to electric cars and they must not be let down by this Government's inaction.

1.25 pm

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): To truly level up, we need to make sure that we provide suitable connections for our constituents to get to the opportunities that exist, whether that be by road or rail. That is one of my key focuses for the residents of Hyndburn and Haslingden, but we have some serious issues with transport and connectivity, one example being that a journey to Manchester by road, which is about 26 miles away, can easily take more than an hour. By train it takes just under that. I have worked with colleagues in Westminster, just after being elected, to save the vital X41 bus service, which goes from my patch to Manchester. We did that because bus routes are key, especially when we are encouraging people to use more public transport, but they routes have to exist, be reliable and affordable. That is why I welcome more than £34 million of funding from the Government for Lancashire's bus service improvement plan, and I will push for much of the investment to go into Hyndburn and Haslingden.

Reliable services by train are vital, but our stations also have to be accessible. That is why I am pleased to see investment in Accrington train station, through Government funding. We are already seeing £300,000-worth of work being done on a compliant ramp on the Burnley-bound platform side, which came from the Department for Transport mid-tier funding. I have also lobbied for other stations to become accessible for all, such as Church & Oswaldtwistle and Rishton, and for further measures for Accrington. I am pleased that option selection reports and diversity impact assessments have been submitted to the Department for all those stations by Northern, which I have worked closely with. I really press that those be looked at favourably by the Department, as this investment would make a transformational difference.

Let me turn to some more of the schemes I have been lobbying the Government on, along with colleagues, the first of which is the Skipton to Colne railway line. I need to thank the campaign group SELRAP—Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership—for its hard work and dedication to the campaign. The reinstatement of just 13 miles of track removed during the Beeching cuts would be a huge benefit to our area and finally link up Yorkshire and Lancashire by rail. I would sincerely welcome a meeting with the Minister and other colleagues involved to discuss that further. As the Haslingden MP, my full backing is also behind the Rawtenstall to Manchester line bid under the restoring your railway fund. I was pleased that the Government granted £50,000 to Rossendale Borough Council for the feasibility study. Along with the local authorities, the local enterprise partnership, business leaders and East Lancashire chamber of commerce, we have been working together to get a freight terminal in Huncoat, which will be hugely beneficial for Lancashire and beyond, bringing jobs, investment and economic growth. I want the Government to be aware of that.

I want to talk about some key issues with our roads across Hyndburn and Haslingden, the first of which is speeding. Roads such as Hud Hey Road, Blackburn Road, Burnley Road, Manchester Road and Fielding Lane are just a few where we have severe problems with



[Sara Britcliffe]

nuisance and ignorant drivers, who use our roads as racetracks, putting innocent lives at risk and creating excessive noise. I have been working with our local police and the county on the issue, and with them I am putting together our application to be one of the areas to trial the noise cameras that the Government have put forward. I hope our application will also be looked upon favourably.

We have a big issue in Lancashire and beyond. One thing we have been talking about a lot is the use of speed cameras. I have been told by authorities that the cost of just a single speed camera is quite significant, so I wonder whether there is a pot of funding that could go to local authorities from the Government so that these cameras could be put into the communities that need them, such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden.

I come to the issue of congestion in areas such as Clayton, and specifically around the Whalley Road at peak times. That is one of the main routes linking the Ribble Valley to Hyndburn. The congestion is causing huge problems during rush hour and significant air pollution. Something like a relief road might be needed to solve the congestion. I would welcome further discussions on what we could do in Hyndburn to create something suitable for the area.

Finally, I hope the Government will carefully consider Lancashire's bid to make Preston the home of the Great British Railways HQ, because it is just the kind of investment we need in lovely Lancashire.

1.29 pm

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on which I serve, is currently considering the evidence for its report on rural mental health. Time and again, the expert witnesses mentioned isolation, loneliness and the problems of basic connectivity as factors leading to poor mental health in rural communities. Combined with the many current financial pressures, plus Brexit uncertainty and added bureaucracy, this is sadly all part of a deeply worrying pattern.

Rural communities are especially dependent on reliable, regular and affordable transport links. When local bus services are cut, the effect is immediate and has catastrophic consequences. For example, if a single parent's routine involves setting off for work knowing that their teenage child will leave for the bus 20 minutes later and arrive safely in time for registration, what exactly are they supposed to do if they are told one day that the bus route will no longer exist? What exactly is anyone who regularly uses a route for medical appointments or social reasons, or to go to college or work, supposed to do if the route is gone overnight? School and work are essential activities, so the buses are essential, too.

Far too many cars already clog up the few main routes into and out of my constituency, contributing to increasingly dangerous levels of air pollution and growing rates of childhood asthma, but what choice do people have when their buses simply disappear? We are building more and more houses, thereby inviting in more and more cars, and we are even building more roads to accommodate those cars and threatening much-loved

and historical green spaces, such as the Old Park area in Canterbury. Does this sound like a recognition of the climate emergency? It is hardly progressive.

People in Canterbury, Whitstable and our villages simply want to be able to move from A to B and to get to school without damaging the planet and everyone's lungs, but we will not achieve that if local bus services constantly disappear. What about cuts to school bus services, such as the one serving Spires Academy in Herne Bay, which is attended by many pupils who live around Canterbury? How is it more efficient for Kent County Council to have to source other modes of transport, particularly for otherwise stranded children with special educational needs and additional needs?

The cost of a school travel pass is now almost £400. There is no way that a single parent, possibly with two or more children, can magic up money like that. Several years ago, I had to borrow the money to pay for my two children's bus passes when they cost half that amount.

It is easy to forget how dependent people are on public transport while we in this place go around Westminster. Everywhere we look we see affordable buses on every corner. When my constituents visit London, they can jump on a bus and go anywhere for £1.65, but they have to pay more than £7 to travel for around 20 minutes from Canterbury to Whitstable and back.

The fact that the 27 bus route through Rough Common, one of my local villages, is about to be cut is causing so many problems. My constituents depend on it. There are also cuts to routes 922, 925 and 7.

Despite being one of the largest local authorities, Kent County Council does not have an endless supply of money. Our county has to deal with the horrors of Operation Brock—one of the many so-called benefits of Brexit—and the recent collapse of P&O Ferries, which was a disaster for our area and about which I am sure we will hear more later from the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke). The pause of Eurostar services from Ashford and Ebbsfleet has also had a catastrophic effect. Our local authorities urgently need direct financial assistance and help to tackle such huge issues.

Canterbury City Council has committed to building far too many new homes without the basic infrastructure that is needed. Will the Government help the county to update our outlook and aims so that we do not simply choke our children as a result of outdated car dependency? We need help with a cleaner, greener, more people-focused overview of transport. We need to keep our rural communities moving and maintain east Kent as an inviting and buzzing tourist destination.

Let us perhaps model ourselves a bit more on our European neighbours and have more pedestrian-friendly town centres and cheaper and more environmentally friendly and reliable transport. Let us help our local authorities and big bus companies to work together, in consultation with national Government, and adequately fund the active travel scheme, so that we can achieve a more ambitious, greener vision for local transport throughout the country.

1.34 pm

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and I thoroughly endorse her comments on the importance of rural bus services in our area of east Kent.

I welcome the Conservative Government's robust action in holding P&O Ferries to account, and the work that is under way to better protect seafarers, as announced in the Queen's Speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the combined membership of the Transport Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and Members from all parties for their support on the issue, which is so important to my constituents.

I represent an incredibly well-connected and successful area, Dover and Deal, and transport is central to both our economic and community life. We have the one and only, the original, the first of the high-speed lines: High Speed 1. It means we can benefit from trains that whiz from Dover to London in just over an hour, and there are high-speed connections right through to Deal.

Although the train line is excellent, services have not been fully restored to their pre-pandemic timetable, and the cost of tickets is nothing short of exorbitant. An anytime day return ticket to London is more than £85, which is simply not affordable for many people in my area. An off-peak return is almost £50. An annual season ticket is nearly £7,400, which means that to travel from Dover costs over £2,000 more than it costs to travel from affluent Tunbridge Wells or leafy Sevenoaks. That represents more than 23% of average earnings in Dover, compared with around 17% of average earnings for Tunbridge Wells and around 13% of average earnings for Sevenoaks—it is a pleasure to see my hardworking hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) in her place. The Dover tickets are more expensive than travelling from Cambridge, Southampton or even Birmingham to London. That cannot be fair and it does not make economic sense. Our country has invested millions of pounds in great rail services for our area. If people cannot afford to use them, we all lose out, nationally and locally.

As the House will know, Dover has a national strategic role as well as a local one. We are home to our country's most successful and busy port of its type: the port of Dover. It is vital to ensure a balance between the national interest and the community interest—between a trade corridor and a great place to live. Kent is served by not one but two motorways—the M20 and the M2—but Dover is not. As lorries and cars thunder along the motorways, the last few miles of the approach into Dover on either side of the town are not motorways, they are A roads: the A20 and the A2.

The A2 is mostly single carriageway, peppered with residential roundabouts that criss-cross the homes, shops and workplaces of local people. The A2 is so now overloaded that planning permissions for local homes are objected to by National Highways on the basis of capacity constraints. The road has been identified as in need of an upgrade for nearly all my adult life. It is now in the road investment programme, and the upgrade really must now go ahead, because Dover is becoming as famous for its traffic queues as for its white cliffs. It is time that the road blocks were cleared. It matters for national growth as well as local growth. Geographically, we are the closest point to continental Europe, and 60% of our trade with Europe transits the short straits route. Dover alone manages up to 10,000 freight vehicles, 25,000 cars and 90,000 passenger movements a day at peak times.

Contrary to what the doomsters and gloomsters said, when Brexit transition finally came, the sky did not fall in, the seas did not rise and there were not hundreds of

miles of tailbacks to the midlands and beyond. But there are days when the traffic grinds to a halt—there were before we left the European Union and there are now—because of weather, strikes and many other reasons. This is part and parcel of having a major transport hub in a constituency—be that a port or an airport. However, the fragility of the road network has increased in recent decades as the activity and growth—international, national and local—has soared, and the roads are long overdue for investment.

The Kent road system currently operates with a sort of sticking plaster—or should I say a series of sticking plasters? They are called Operation TAP: the traffic assessment project; Operation Stack; Operation Brock; and the euphemistically named active management protocol, which involves police standing on the corners of the main arterial roads, directing traffic. Yes, I am talking about a few traffic lights and police in high-vis jackets to manage local community traffic, those 10,000 lorry movements and up to 90,000 passenger movements at peak times. This sticking-plaster and piecemeal approach is letting down Dover and it is letting down UK plc. We need proper investment and I renew my request for urgent planned strategic investment to keep Dover clear and to make the most of Britain's opportunity to trade with the world.

Finally, Dover and Deal is a wonderful place in which to live and work. I want to see our area thrive, develop, grow and prosper even more. Getting the right infrastructure in place will deliver for our community and for our nation alike. In these financially constrained times, it is more important than ever to put national investment where it can deliver most bang for the buck. That means investing in Dover and Deal.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Please let us keep our speeches to five minutes or else I will have to put on a time limit.

1.40 pm

**Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD):** It is a real pleasure to contribute to this transport debate, because transport is so central to so many of the challenges facing us as a country, from net zero to levelling up. It is even central to the cost of living crisis, because the Prime Minister seems to want us to use our bus services as a refuge from unaffordable fuel bills.

For me, the most important issue that transport needs to tackle is decarbonisation. Local communities right across the country need better transport options that are not only greener, but more accessible, reliable and affordable. We need more and cleaner buses. I am delighted that two of our main bus routes in Richmond Park, the 65 and the 371, are now electric, which will have a positive impact on the air quality in both Kingston and Richmond—not only that, passengers can plug in their phone, which is a real win.

The Government need to go a lot further with their transport decarbonisation strategy. They have pledged £27 billion on new or upgraded roads, and a raft of ambitious goals and targets for phasing our carbon-emitting vehicles, but there is a distinct lack of detail in how those targets will be delivered.

I echo the comments of the hon. Members for Newbury (Laura Farris) and for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) about the Elizabeth line and how

[Sarah Olney]

marvellous it is that it has been opened, but there have been delays and extra costs. We need to leverage not just the opportunity that that extra connectivity offers to London and the south-east, but the opportunity to learn lessons from what went wrong on the Crossrail project and apply them to some of the other big transport infrastructure projects across the country. HS2, for example, has huge potential as an engine for economic growth across the north and the midlands, but it is so disappointing to see the scrapping of the Leeds leg, because that diminishes the opportunity to deliver on the Government's levelling-up agenda.

As we are investing in new rail across the country, the Government should focus on accessibility and step-free access for passengers of reduced mobility. It is such an important issue. While we are building those railways and investing in new track and carriages, we should build in that accessibility at the very start. I also want to renew my call for more tactile paving across the network for the partially sighted. We have seen some horrific cases in London of blind people falling off the platform, leading to a number of deaths, because there was no tactile paving.

I am really pleased to see that the planning application has gone in for lifts at Barnes station under the Access for All programme. That will make a huge difference to the ability of people with limited mobility to use the station, but it must be said that more than 40% of stations across the UK do not offer that step-free access, and that needs to be addressed.

Following on from what the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said, may I just mention Hammersmith bridge for my constituents living in Barnes? I want to see the Department engaging with Hammersmith and Fulham on the funding for the strengthening of the bridge. I know the business case is in preparation, but I urge the Department to do everything it possibly can to support that work, because my constituents really, really need it. The Government also need to think about a strategic plan for bridges right across the country. When there is the sort of catastrophic failure that we have seen in Hammersmith, it is too much for a single local authority to fund.

Quickly on rickshaws, I would welcome an opportunity to meet the Minister to talk about legislation for the regulation of rickshaws. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) brought forward legislation in the last Session on this matter. It could be a real game changer for those in my constituency and elsewhere in London and other cities who cannot access active travel in the same way. It could be an interesting opportunity and I would welcome the chance to take that forward. Transport for London needs a sustainable funding package, so that it can invest for the long term in projects such as those on Hammersmith bridge and on rickshaws.

I do not want to forget rural areas. We talk a lot about urban areas and solutions for urban areas, but too many rural areas are still very dependent on cars. In the south-west, for example, the cost of diesel is 0.5% higher than the national average, which really disadvantages people in places such as Devon when using their cars.

Finally, may I mention electric vehicles? We need to expand opportunities for charging and to think about a temporary reduction of VAT on electric vehicles to

encourage take-up. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead made a great case for investing in electric vehicle charging points, but if we want to accelerate the uptake of electric vehicles, we urgently need to consider making the price more attractive.

1.45 pm

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate; it is a pleasure to contribute and to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I worked for the railways for a long time before being elected to this House.

I am proud of the Government's ambition and determination to level up across the UK. I am also proud of the Bills in the Queen's Speech, particularly the transport Bill, but if I may, I will focus today on railways, buses and roads.

The Great British Railways proposal is good for the United Kingdom—the whole of the United Kingdom. I am particularly pleased about it because the current model has probably reached the end of its life. The results from that model have been good—we have seen passenger numbers increase 100% since privatisation began—but the Government fully understand that things need to change.

I draw the Government's attention to some initiatives that could provide further opportunities within the GBR proposal. In Japan, for example, the relationship between real estate and funding for railway operations is very close, to the extent that Government investment is often not required. That is because of the model that is adopted. I urge the Minister and her officials to look into that.

Enormous amounts of money are invested in transport, but it is important that we do not get carried away with the number of billions that will be spent. We need to be more concerned about the specific outputs than the amount of money that will be spent. We see billions going to Highways England—I think the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), said that it was £27.4 billion—yet there is consultation after consultation for years and years before any spades actually go into the ground.

It is the same in the railways, particularly in relation to the rail network enhancement plan, which has been a long time coming. We have seen some really good announcements for the midlands and the north—the integrated rail plan is bringing in £96 billion there—but regrettably we have seen nothing yet in the south-west. Even worse, when Network Rail announced that it was going to invest in re-signalling to enable more capacity and flexibility, the schemes were deferred at the end of the last control period with no hope in sight of the most basic re-signalling programmes.

We talk a lot in this House about tens of billions of pounds. The Opposition want more than £96 billion, forgetting that we pay £82 billion a year in interest. However, we must remember other parts of the country, particularly the rural parts and specifically the south-west—the local challenges in Dorset and Somerset have been immense. I am grateful for the Minister's support for returning the frequency of trains and the direct services on the Waterloo-Exeter line and the Waterloo-Dorchester-Weymouth line, which came into effect with the last timetable.



GB Railfreight, of which Parliament should be incredibly proud, is taking important steps to decarbonise the railway's freight sector. It recently introduced a first Class 99 hybrid locomotive that will eventually succeed the diesel-power Class 66. It will go a long way to decarbonising the freight network and we have much to learn from it.

The help that we give transport and railways in Ukraine is not often spoken about in the House. We take great pride in what our nation has done in past decades to help those escaping tyranny by train. Although we are not a neighbouring country to Ukraine, I urge the Government to participate in and actively support initiatives such as ALLRAIL, a group of European train operators that run up to the Polish-Ukrainian border and have brought people out of Ukraine and taken them across Europe. It would be a wonderful statement by the Government, on top of all the wonderful work that they have done so far, to participate in such an initiative. I encourage the Minister to consider that.

The bus service improvement plan has been quite painful for Dorset. I fully recognise that it has been good for the country in many ways, but Dorset and many other rural areas have not been successful. It is important that the Government consider what can be done to support rural areas, not necessarily with financial bungs but with tangible initiatives. That would be very much appreciated.

1.51 pm

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) in what is a hugely important debate to my constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields.

I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking. I would like to invite you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to my fun bike ride at 11 o'clock on Sunday, leaving from Putney embankment, as part of the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Wimbledon and Putney commons. It is my contribution to active travel as part of those celebrations.

It will not surprise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will start with the closure of Hammersmith bridge. Huge congestion, pollution and danger to cyclists—indeed, potential cyclists are being prevented from cycling in Putney—are caused by the additional 500 to 4,000 vehicles a day that go through Putney as a result of the closure. I urge the Minister to stop playing party politics. Every answer I get in the House suggests that Labour Hammersmith and Fulham Council should deal with the matter. No, there should be working together. People in Putney are sick and tired of the lack of urgency on the issue. I ask Ministers to stop expecting the council and Transport for London to pay two thirds of the more than £100 million cost of the heritage restoration. I urge the Minister to fix a date when the bridge will be open to vehicles and to take action, together with Hammersmith and Fulham Council and TfL, to pay for the bridge. A toll is not the answer, because it will still result in lots of vehicles going through Putney.

I echo other Members' comments about disability access to our tube and train stations. I make the case again for step-free access at East Putney station, which has high passenger use and high potential use for those with mobility issues and for parents of small children, but has unusually steep stairs, so many people in the area cannot use it. Covid has paused disability access

schemes for trains and tubes, but it can no longer be an excuse. I urge Ministers to work with TfL to move forward on access schemes and to put East Putney tube station at the top of the list.

I was disappointed by the lack of comment on active travel in the proposed transport Bill. In 2020, the Prime Minister announced £2 billion of ringfenced funding for the next five years for active travel, which is only about a quarter to a third of what is needed to meet the Government's active travel targets. After three years of allocations, the Government are not on course to deliver the £2 billion, and in the meantime, local authorities do not have the funding that they need for active travel. In Putney, many constituents write to me that they do not have safe cycle routes and safe places to store cycles. The council does not have the funding to deliver all that is needed. A huge number of people would cycle if our local authority had the funding. I urge Ministers to step up and release the promised funding, but also to beef up the provision in the transport Bill.

I look to the transport Bill to provide for far better connection between cycling and trains, and cycling and buses. On the continent, there are many buses where people can put their bikes at the front. They can cycle up, then take the bus, enabling them to make longer journeys and meaning that those who would otherwise need to use a car do not have to. That should also apply to trains: it should be far easier to take a bike on the train. There should be many more spaces for bikes and a much easier booking system. That would transform urban transport in areas such as Roehampton, which has poor transport links.

I would like much more emphasis on cleaner and greener buses. We have many greener buses on Putney High Street, which are essential for increasing our clean air—a real problem in Putney. However, the 39, 93 and 424—I am following other Members in naming bus numbers; it is important to get them out there—need to go green. We must have no more diesel buses.

I welcome the inclusion of e-scooters in the transport Bill. I have met constituents who are blind or have visual impairments and who will not leave their homes for fear of e-scooters because of their silence and speed. Regulation is key. E-scooters are here to stay, for sure, but we need to ensure that we do not inadvertently trap people in their homes because of them. It was heartbreaking to hear those stories, so I welcome that aspect of the Bill.

The Government have consulted on proposals to set up a road collision investigation branch. Last year, 55 pedestrians and nine cyclists were killed in London. We must have more investigation into the reasons for such deaths, not only in London but across the UK. A road collision investigation branch could do that far more effectively. I would like to hear from the Minister whether the transport Bill will include powers to establish such a body.

I look forward to seeing inclusive and ambitious transport policies that increase active travel and cut air pollution.

1.58 pm

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and to have heard all the contributions from around the Chamber.

[Anna Firth]

A famous politician whose name I forget once said that his priority was “Education, education, education”. When it comes to economic growth, what is required is better connected location, location, location. The new city of Southend has location in spades, but its connections are not all that they should be. Southend city is situated on the world’s most famous working waterway. It is served by two fast train lines and has a world-class, multi-use business park next to Europe’s fastest-growing airport.

The city of Southend is ideally located to be the best seaside city in the country. More than 7 million tourists visit Southend every year, contributing more than £470 million to the local economy and supporting 16% of our local jobs. Our advanced medical technology industries, among others, contribute £3 billion to the Exchequer every single year. Yet despite this extraordinary contribution, there is one area where Britain’s newest city lags behind other UK cities—our transport infrastructure. Long-term underinvestment and lack of planning from Southend city’s Labour-led council has left Britain’s newest city with a disjointed and deeply unsatisfactory transport network. As the Chancellor himself has said,

“Great cities need great transport”,

and Britain’s newest city now needs and deserves serious investment in our public transport network. Of course I welcome the fact that the Government have committed almost £7 billion to levelling up transport across the country, but sadly nothing of substance has yet made its way down the line to Southend, and levelling up must include our coastal communities.

As the UK’s newest city, we deserve to bus back better. Our buses are old-fashioned, irregular, too expensive, and liable to be cut without proper notice. In 2020, Arriva withdrew our eco-friendly bus fleet and replaced it with second-hand polluting diesel buses from another city. Another city’s cast-offs are not good enough for Britain’s newest city. Only last month, Essex First Bus axed the very popular No. 26 route, with only a few days’ notice, when the Labour-led council withdrew support funding. The loss of this vital bus route has cut elderly residents off from the hospital, shops, essential services, and, very, importantly, their constituency surgeries. There is currently no bus service for elderly people in my constituency to go to the seafront or to the town of Leigh-on-Sea. I regularly get letters saying that old people are left standing in the cold and wet because the buses and trains are not connecting. The A127, one of two trunk roads into Southend, is in desperate need of an upgrade, and our roads and pavements are literally crumbling.

All this must change. First, we need a new overarching integrated transport plan for the new city of Southend to turbocharge our local economy and attract even more investment into our city. We have already seen what can be done when proper investment happens. I welcome this week’s announcement to make Chalkwell station in my constituency fully accessible to all. Indeed, I would be delighted to invite the Minister to come and take the first ride in the lift at Chalkwell station, along with the brilliant local campaigner who has helped to make this possible—Jill Allen-King.

Secondly, our trains need overhauling. We need greater capacity and a real improvement in the ticketing system. There is nothing more dispiriting than standing on the

station, as I do myself, queuing for the one working ticket machine and seeing your train pull away without you on it. All the stations in Britain’s newest city need to have contactless ticketing.

Thirdly, buses are a lifeline for our elderly community. I echo everything said by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) in this regard. They are essential not only for economic prosperity but for wellbeing. Our buses must be overhauled, and I do hope that we will receive some of the Government’s planned 4,000 hydrogen buses. Most importantly, no bus service should be allowed to be withdrawn without proper notice and consultation. This must never happen again. The A127 needs to be upgraded, as I mentioned, and we must stop prevaricating over this. We also need safer provision for cyclists in the city, and all residents want the council to get on with fixing the potholes in our roads and mending our pavements.

For us as a new city, it is time to implement major projects that would have a long-term impact on Southend for generations to come. If the Elizabeth line was extended from Shenfield to Southend, there would be major local and national economic benefits similar to those that Reading is now enjoying. It would be the only direct route linking London Heathrow airport with London Southend airport. Better connecting the city of Southend to London would better connect London itself and unlock the biggest opportunity for growth in the south-east.

2.4 pm

**Julie Marson** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this transport debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth).

I will focus on two local projects that are of great importance to my local community in Hertford and Stortford. Yesterday I had the opportunity to speak in the final debate on the Queen’s Speech, on economic growth, where I made the point that delivering infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure, is such a key part of the Government’s agenda, along with delivering skills and innovation. I really do welcome the Government’s commitment to infrastructure and transport projects up and down the country that will deliver economic growth and improved productivity, and spread opportunity across our nation. We need sustainable, creative, innovative, green solutions.

That leads me neatly on to HERT—the Hertfordshire to Essex rapid transit proposal, which is being consulted on and developed right now, with public engagement across the relevant counties of Hertfordshire and Essex. HERT will deliver accessible, reliable, affordable, sustainable east-to-west transit in my constituency. I have two towns in the west, two towns in the east, and the rural piece in the middle, and east-to-west transport is difficult, partly because buses are less than reliable. This is a really creative, innovative solution to that issue, and it will go much further than my constituency and benefit both counties as well. It really is a forward-looking vision that will create and support jobs, growth and accessibility for our community. I look forward to the continuing development of this long-term project and engaging with the Department to realise it.

I also want to highlight the brilliant bid in which we have been shortlisted for Bishop’s Stortford to become the headquarters of the new Great British Railways.

I pay tribute to all those involved in putting this brilliant bid together as part of the Shaping Stortford group: East Hertfordshire District Council, Hertfordshire County Council, Bishop's Stortford Town Council, Hertfordshire's LEP, Solum, Bishop's Stortford BID—business improvement district—and all the local residents who have engaged so constructively and proactively. The proposed Goods Yard site dates from 1842, and it is very fitting to have the possibility of returning rail to this historic site, which is itself a key town centre regeneration project. Our area has its own pockets of deprivation, and the jobs this would deliver would be a huge boost for our community, and, overall, a great addition to our expanding but beautiful market town, which is so brilliantly located as the gateway to the eastern region, at the heart of the Cambridge-London-Stansted innovation corridor, and to Stansted airport itself, and linked by road and rail to London.

Both HERT and the Great British Railways HQ bid are projects that are a credit to Hertford and Stortford and to the people who are involved in them. I heartily recommend them to the Minister, who has an invitation to come and visit at any time.

2.8 pm

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): I want to talk about a few different issues. The first, which a lot of other Members have touched on, is reduced rail timetables as a result of covid. That is still significantly affecting communities across much of High Peak, particularly in places such as Glossop, New Mills, Buxton and Whaley Bridge, where we are seeing significant reductions in timetables that Northern has said are still due to covid staff shortages. The latest timetable reduction it has announced will continue all the way until at least December, which is very disappointing. The situation is especially difficult in the Glossop, Hadfield and Dinting area, where there are also major roadworks going on for 20 weeks on the main road out of town. The fact that those things are both happening at once is causing a lot of problems locally. There is a real need to get the full timetable back. Over 2,000 local commuters have so far signed my petition calling for Northern to restore it, so I hope we can get it back as soon as possible.

The second issue is the transport Bill that is coming forward and the Great British Railways reforms to try to sort out the fragmented franchising problems and get a better passenger experience across the country. I wholeheartedly welcome that.

In a similar vein, I also welcome the fact that Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, is finally starting to pursue bus franchising, five years after being given the powers by the Government. That is a very positive move and I support him in that. Given that Derbyshire County Council has just been given a significant sum of money by the Government to do bus improvement on our side of the border, it is important for those cross bus routes between Greater Manchester and Derbyshire that we get that right and work together properly so that we can see improvements, in particular restoring the 236 bus and the X57 buses, which have been lost, and trying to get a much-needed direct bus service through to Tameside Hospital from Glossop.

Next, I will talk about what is at the heart of transport, which is the desperate need to get transport right to fix the productivity gap in our economy. The Government

rightly spend an awful lot of money and have put a lot of time, focus and effort into skills, and that is spot on, but in much the same way that record sums of funding into the NHS will never be enough until we fix the social care system, huge sums of money into skills will never be enough until we get connectivity and transport right. Much of the work I have been trying to do is about trying to bring employers together, whether that is the High Peak jobs and apprenticeships fair or the High Peak apprenticeship exchange, which I have been setting up. A huge issue that comes back from so many employers is that they cannot recruit, simply because people cannot get to those locations—they cannot get to college or where they want to work on time for 9 am.

All the money and effort going into apprenticeships and skills will not be enough unless we make the connectivity work, too. That is particularly important for addressing regional inequalities. Quite a few Members have mentioned Crossrail and the Elizabeth line opening, which is fantastic—it is a brilliant scheme—but we really need to see that in other parts of the country. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry), who represents a London-based constituency and is not in his place, referred with slight distaste on his lips to having once ridden a bus in Manchester. For those Members who do not have the pleasure of representing somewhere in the north and midlands, the disparity between transport is absolutely enormous, and that is key to fixing the productivity gap. So many people are arriving late to work, or stressed and exhausted or are having to leave early as getting to work is so difficult, because the transport links are so poor. Fixing that is essential. How do we do that? It is about that focus on infrastructure and improving our transport.

The Government have done a lot of good things. Our bit of the Northern Powerhouse Rail project—the upgrade of the Manchester to Sheffield route with the Hope Valley line, where construction is already under way—will make a huge difference to passengers in such places as New Mills, Chinley, Edale, Hope and Bamford, but we also need to connect that up with bus services and active travel, which is why I am so pleased that just this month we have approved £120,000 of funding for the “Travelling Light” project for Hope Valley Climate Action, which I have been supporting. That will really help join things up, too.

At the same time, we need to get it right when it comes to road. Buses go on the road network, and if we are moving towards electric vehicles and low-emission vehicles, we have to get our road network right. We have the money committed and the contract signed for the Mottram bypass, which has been promised for more than 50 years. We need to get on and build it, and then build the second phase of that bypass around Tintwistle, too. Hopefully we can get that; I am very optimistic.

It is all well and good talking about improving rail, but whole swathes of rural areas have no access to rail. I have two examples I want to flag quickly. One is Chinley, where there is no step-free access. We have an “Access for All” bid that has just gone in, and I would love to see Transport Ministers come to the village and see just how important that is, because there is currently no step-free access in either direction. The second—I regularly get accused of being like Cato the Elder for mentioning this in almost every speech I make—is the desperate need to build Gamesley station. It is one of the most



[Robert Largan]

deprived areas anywhere in the country. It has very low car ownership. It was promised a station back in 1968 when it was built, and it was never put in. That station is badly needed to regenerate one of the most deprived areas. It would completely transform life chances for the residents there.

There are lots of positive things that the Government are doing, but there needs to be a much greater focus on delivering transport infrastructure, improving rail services and integrating it all together so that the smaller villages and areas that do not have their own stations can also access it.

2.14 pm

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): It is an absolute honour to respond on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition in this extremely important debate on transport. We have heard insightful contributions from so many Members. The shadow Transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry), who opened the debate along with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), referred to transport deserts, the decimation of bus routes, especially for rural areas—indeed, many Conservative-controlled councils are complaining—and, despite the inadequate funding from Government, the incredible work being done by the Labour metro Mayors.

I fully agree with the Chairman of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), on the future-proofing of the aviation sector, especially after industry pleas for support during the pandemic were largely ignored by this Government. I also agree with him on the need for investment in sustainable fuels to decarbonise transport. I also agree—there is a lot of harmony breaking out—with the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), on the need for electric vehicle charging infrastructure, because the Government are missing out on their targets. Indeed, there is the anomaly of VAT at 20% for public charging points, compared with 5% for home-charging points like mine. In essence, that is a tax on the less well-off, because those who cannot install a point in their apartment or home miss out.

The former Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), spoke of the difficulty his constituents face in getting to work on time because of the cuts to rail services and the need to simplify fares. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) spoke about the importance of the Government supporting pioneering and innovative technology, such as that for hydrogen buses and, indeed, the need for regulation of e-scooters. The hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) spoke of her damascene conversion after having experienced the Elizabeth line preview. Indeed, she does a great deal of excellent work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the western rail link to Heathrow, along with my good self, and the need for that infrastructure project to finally be realised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) spoke about the need for ambition, such as Crossrail being conceived and pushed through by the last Labour Government. She also spoke about the need for more proactiveness on providing on-street

vehicle charging points. The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) spoke about restoring local railway lines, especially after the Beeching cuts. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) spoke very eloquently about rural connectivity, or the lack of it, which then has a devastating impact on the mental health of those individuals who are cut off from other communities, about the cuts that have been inflicted on school buses and about the rising cost of school bus passes.

The hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) spoke about HS1 and the issue that there are still no services from Kent to continental Europe. We all agree with her on the diabolical behaviour of P&O Ferries. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) spoke about the need for regulation of rickshaws and the failure of this Government on step-free access and levelling up, after having reneged on manifesto promises on the HS2 eastern leg and Northern Powerhouse Rail.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) spoke about the need to stop endless consultations on highway projects. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who is a champion on the need to clear the logjam to end the Hammersmith bridge closure, spoke about the work of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking and the need to integrate cycling with rail. The hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke about the need for more investment in electric buses and mending potholes. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) spoke about the need for green solutions such as the local HERT scheme. The hon. Member for High Peak (Robert Largan)—we perhaps saved the best till last—lamented the reduced timetables.

Many Members have spoken about the upcoming transport Bill and the need for infrastructure investment in places such as Stockport and Bradford, as championed by my hon. Friends.

In my closing remarks, I will focus on rail, for which the backdrop to today's debate is sadly bleak. The 2010s can only be described as a disastrous decade for rail, with fares rising twice as fast as wages, cuts to rail services up and down our country, and a Government set to miss their commitment to decarbonising the railways not by a few months or a few years, but by more than 40 years. Despite the Tory rhetoric of investment and expansion, the Government's actions on rail speak far louder than their words.

Put simply, compared with 12 years ago, passengers travelling by rail pay twice as much for a lot less. Wages across the UK have stalled, with weekly median earnings increasing by just 23% since 2010, and households budgets have been squeezed by the pressing cost of living crisis, so how does the Minister expect people to be able to keep up with such brutal hikes? The Government's solution appears to be the Great British rail sale, which was touted as offering huge savings on many off-peak inter-city routes. Unfortunately, however, even that is a sham, as Labour has found suggestions that those discounts would apply to a mere 1% of all journeys taken. It is nothing more than a gimmick, as rail unions, rail staff and passengers have pointed out, so no wonder it has been relabelled as the "Great British rail fail". The future of our railways should not be short-term sales and political stunts but a permanent, affordable, efficient and green network.

Given the steep cost of travelling on our railways, passengers might have expected to experience an equally steep improvement in services. Sadly, that has not been the case. The Government are looking to make things worse with their plan to impose a 10% cut on operators, which is already being felt by communities across our country, with more than 19,000 pre-pandemic services yet to return. Last week, the shadow Transport Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), was at a school in Bradford where the consequences are stark. Cuts to rail services will mean that hundreds of pupils will be forced to wait for hours after school or take an unreliable and lengthy rail replacement service on West Yorkshire's already clogged-up roads. In Wakefield, too, there will be a staggering four-hour gap between 6 am and 10 am in some services, which will make it impossible for students and workers to travel.

In the midst of all that, the Transport Secretary is, frankly, missing in action. He jetted off to an overseas conference without notifying Mr Speaker rather than answer questions on the real disruption that families face. He and the Government should stop washing their hands of any responsibility in the middle of a climate crisis and a cost of living crisis. It is senseless to force people off public transport while simultaneously cutting them off from jobs and opportunities.

**Laura Farris:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Dhesi:** I would love to take an intervention, but Madam Deputy Speaker has said that I have only nine minutes, and I want to get all this off my chest.

It is time for the Government to step up and stand up for local communities with a commitment to restoring services to pre-pandemic levels and a genuine plan of how to get there. Right now, they are brazenly breaking the promises that they made to communities. Just three months ago, they claimed that they would protect and improve services on existing lines, that they would not neglect shorter-distance journeys and that levelling up could not wait, yet passengers are suffering the consequences of those broken promises. Ministers may claim that cuts have been made because there has been no increase in passenger numbers, but that is simply not true. In Yorkshire alone, we are told that passenger numbers have surged back to more than 90% of pre-pandemic levels, so cuts on that scale will force passengers on to crowded and congested services.

The truth is that under the Conservatives, passengers are paying more for less. When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, will she tell us what plans the Government have to bring back those lost services and provide passengers with a future in which rail travel is better value for money? I hope she will ensure that their manifesto commitments are upheld.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the Minister, I would like to make it clear that I have observed, in case no one else has, that neither the Minister who opened the debate nor the shadow Minister who opened the debate are present for the wind-up speeches. That is unacceptable and it is discourteous to the House. I would not like to think that any new Members would take that as acceptable behaviour, so I make the point clearly and positively that if someone has opened a debate or taken part in a debate, they must be here for the winding-up speeches. That is a simple

matter of courtesy. It is not some archaic old-fashioned rule, or me being difficult on a Thursday afternoon, but a matter of courtesy, and it is quite appalling that neither of those hon. Gentlemen are here.

2.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** It is my absolute pleasure to close this debate and I welcome the spirited contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is clear that transport elicits strong feelings across the House, and indeed across the country—and rightly so. The frequency of people's local bus or train services, the road congestion that poisons our air and slows our economy, and the ability to walk or get on a bike safely all affect not just our quality of life, but the quality of our life chances.

Transport links connect us to economic opportunities, education and training. We know that talent is distributed right across this great country, so we must ensure that opportunity, which is often enabled by transport, is also realised. The Government want to deliver world-class low-carbon transport infrastructure across the country, because that is how we will level up and reduce the inequalities that have persisted for too long. The Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), outlined the significant transport investment that the Government are already making, as well as our ambitious plans for reform. He described the measures that are essential for building back better and fairer.

I will set out how we are reducing transport emissions, which are our largest contributor of greenhouse gases and make up 27% of our total UK emissions. The Government have made world-leading pledges: we want all new road vehicles to be zero emission in the next two decades, from the largest HGVs to the smallest motorcycles. Electric vehicles are key to that ambition, along with general electrification, sustainable fuel and hydrogen production.

The transport Bill, which was announced last week, will help to drive an electric vehicle revolution and deliver 10 times the number of public charging points by 2030. It will give us powers not only to ensure that local authorities plan and deliver EV charging, but to address private charging, including for those living in multi-occupancy buildings.

**Ian Paisley:** If all the charging points that are being demanded are delivered, will there be sufficient capacity in electricity production to charge and drive those vehicles? My fear is that there will not, so we will need other solutions as well as electricity.

**Trudy Harrison:** The generation of electricity is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with which I work closely on exactly that point. The Prime Minister has set out that all electricity generated in this country will be low carbon in future, which is also incredibly important.

We already have one of the largest charging networks in Europe with 30,200 publicly available charge points, of which 5,400 are rapid.

**Gavin Newlands:** Will the Minister give way?

**Trudy Harrison:** I am sorry; I cannot.

[Trudy Harrison]

With EVs being cheaper to own, run and maintain than their petrol and diesel equivalents, which means that drivers can save hundreds of pounds by going electric, it is no wonder that their market share has doubled compared with last year.

The future is not just electric; it is also active. The Government are committed to ensuring that half of all journeys by 2030 are cycled or walked. That commitment will be delivered by the first dedicated Government cycling and walking body, Active Travel England. Its role will be to ensure that walking and cycling is the easiest choice for local journeys, to help design the right infrastructure and, ultimately, to usher in a golden age of active travel. I thank the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and others for their enthusiasm for active travel.

We are certainly not wasting any time. Only last week, we announced a £200 million investment to boost the take-up of cycling and walking. One hundred and thirty-four schemes will create new footways, cycle lanes and pedestrian crossings across 46 local authorities outside London. Nineteen authorities, including in Nottinghamshire, Hull and Manchester, will receive funding to develop the “mini Holland” feasibility studies. We will also accelerate the take-up of electric cycles by offering short and long-term loans.

Active travel is one of the best returns on investment decisions that the Government can make. It makes us healthier, saves the NHS up to £1 billion a year, reduces congestion on our roads and makes our economy more efficient. It is a zero-carbon way to travel, cleaning up our air and reducing emissions. We saw that happening in the pandemic and that is why we are investing £2 billion in our active travel fund. We are determined to ensure that the recent rise in cycling and walking is not a passing fad.

Hon. Members have raised important themes throughout the debate. The subject of electric vehicle charge points was raised by the hon. Members for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). As I have said, we plan to have 10 times the amount of EV charge points, as was set out in our EV infrastructure strategy.

Several Members raised the levels of rail service across the UK, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), who also celebrated Crossrail's opening. That was great to hear. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) championed SELRAP to join Yorkshire and Lancashire together over 13 miles of newly instated railway, which was a problem from the Beeching cuts. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) also raised the rail service.

To ensure that people could get to where they needed to be during the pandemic, the Government committed £16 billion of support throughout the pandemic to keep rail services running. Demand continues to recover. We are working with operators to ensure that services are fit for the future, carefully balancing cost, capacity and the performance that passengers rightly expect to see on their railways.

In the Wakefield and Yorkshire area, Members will, I am sure, be aware of the £830 million awarded to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority under our city region sustainable transport settlement. That will help to strengthen public transport across the area.

A number of Members asked about bus services. I commend the consistent and fantastic championing of Wrightbus by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I have had the joy of visiting it in Ballymena, including only last week at a heavy goods vehicle launch, where we committed to a £200 million zero-emission road freight programme. Other Members, including one from Southend city, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), also mentioned the importance of buses. We have provided more than £2.5 billion in new funding to support improvement of bus services, and are on track to meet our commitment of £3 billion for bus service transformation.

Members have noted the level of fares on rail and bus networks. Regulated rail fares increased in line with inflation—by 3.8%—on 1 March. As in 2021, we temporarily delayed the fares increase, enabling passengers to purchase tickets at last year's prices throughout January and February 2022. The spending review settlement agreed last autumn will see the Government invest £360 million in rail fares, ticketing and retailing, delivering a major overhaul of the way in which rail travel is bought and paid for. Last year, we also announced new flexible season tickets, which are helping to reduce the cost of rail travel for commuters.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder). He is a real champion of the rail industry but he also mentioned freight and the work that we are doing with freight operators up and down the country. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for how she champions her area and the way she manages the balance between local, national and international interests.

Many Members are concerned about the cost of living. As the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle outlined, we recently launched the Great British rail sale, available throughout the network and across a wide number of routes, including cross-border journeys with Scotland and Wales. Those tickets support business and commuter markets and help to drive leisure demand. That promotes local economies at destinations in scope, which receive a boost from the increased activity. More than 1.3 million tickets were sold in the sale, offering about £7 million-worth of savings for passengers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is the most fantastic advocate and champion. He scrutinises our work but also supports the changes that we need to make. We are providing more than £525 million for zero-emission buses in this Parliament, and we have supported the funding of nearly 2,000 zero-emission buses in England so far.

In conclusion, we cannot begin to tackle some of the most pressing challenges, be they the cost living, levelling up or climate change, without a world-class transport system. We were elected to be a reforming Government, unafraid to make the big decisions to shake up our transport industry so that it drives economic growth.



That is exactly what we are doing, across road and rail, sky and sea, delivering world-class infrastructure, ambitious reform and record investment.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We are running six minutes over schedule—not the Minister, but everyone altogether. Those taking part in the next debate can curse those in this debate if they do not get long enough.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered transport.

## NATO and International Security

*[Relevant documents: Fifty-Second Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2021-22, Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan 2021-31, HC 1164; Third Report of the Defence Committee, Session 2021-22, “We’re going to need a bigger Navy”, HC 168; and the Government Response, Session 2021-22, HC 1160; Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 1 and 15 March and 19 April, on US, UK and NATO, HC 608.]*

2.36 pm

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered NATO and international security.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss NATO and international security today. The ongoing war in Ukraine underlines the fact that we are living in a dangerous new reality, where aggressor states such as Russia are ever more willing to take risks and violate our international rules-based order. But it also reinforces the ongoing value of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the most successful alliance in history.

Since NATO’s formation in 1949, it has been a beacon of freedom. Twelve founding members, of which the United Kingdom was one, came together to protect their common values and the precious freedoms so recently won in the second world war—freedoms that until recently many of us took for granted. Over the last 70 years, NATO has more than doubled in size to 30 members, but each is still bound by the common values of that founding treaty: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Contrary to allegations that emanate from the Kremlin, people choose NATO; NATO does not choose them. Those founding principles have stood the test of time, while other authoritarian, oppressive regimes have been found wanting. Our principles have remained, but our military and diplomatic strategies have continued to evolve.

NATO’s strategic concept is the masterplan for the alliance. It reaffirms the alliance’s values and guides NATO’s future political and military development. It provides a collective assessment of the security environment and drives the adaptation of the alliance.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): My right hon. Friend will have had sight of the 2022 Defence Committee report and its recommendations. Does he agree, without wishing to put him on the spot about higher defence spending, that it is wise for the west and this country to talk softly and to carry a big stick, and to resource those capabilities accordingly? We are more likely to be listened to when talking softly if we have the hard assets required to ensure that.

**Mr Wallace:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about resource. I have always said that, as the threat changes, we should obviously consider changing how we deliver and what we deliver in defence. One of the key planks of my tenure as Defence Secretary is for us to be a truly threat-led organisation—if the threat goes up or down, we should adjust accordingly—otherwise we will end up fighting yesterday’s battles, not tomorrow’s. That of course includes resource. It is also very important to make sure that the machineries of both NATO and our Department of State reflect that and move quickly to deliver it.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Having served as a Member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I am glad that both the Government and Her Majesty's Opposition are of the firm opinion that NATO must be a cornerstone of our defence policy. What exactly is the Secretary of State doing to assuage the concerns of Turkey to make sure that the likes of Finland and Sweden can acquire the NATO membership they desire?

**Mr Wallace:** Turkey is an incredibly important member of NATO, and indeed a strong contributor to it. We should always remember that NATO covers a very wide frontier, from the high north—the Arctic—in Norway all the way through to the Black sea and Turkey. Turkey is one of the oldest members of NATO, and it is very important that we understand, in this environment, what Turkey is concerned about and that we address that to make sure that the 30 nations come together to support and accept Finland and Sweden.

I will be speaking to my counterpart—I speak regularly to the Defence Minister anyhow—and I have listened to the worries of President Erdoğan about PKK terrorism groups and whether members are doing enough to deal with them. I think there is a way through and that we will get there in the end. It is very important that we listen to all members about their concerns in that process. We will certainly be listening to Turkey, and I was in touch with my counterpart over the weekend about exactly that.

The NATO strategic concept is updated every 10 years and, in the wake of Russia's atrocities in Ukraine, it is critical that we make sure it is updated to reflect what is going on today. The 2010 strategic concept has served us well, but clearly needs modernising to reflect the new security reality we face. For example, in 2010, the concept stated that the Euro-Atlantic area was at peace. The next concept will reflect how NATO is accelerating its transformation for a more dangerous strategic reality, calibrating our collective defence to Russia's unacceptable invasion of Ukraine and the new challenges posed by countries further afield, such as China.

While the new concept will reaffirm our commitment to freedom, openness and the rules-based order, it must also embed the UK-led work to ensure that the alliance is fit for future challenges in line with the NATO 2030 agenda. This includes modernising and adapting to advanced technologies, competing and integrating across domains using military and non-military tools, and improving national resilience. The UK has been at the forefront of the strategy's development. We have full confidence that the 2022 strategic concept will reshape the alliance to ensure it is fit for purpose and for future challenges—in particular, by adapting its deterrence and defence posture on its eastern flank by expanding the alliance's forward presence from a tripwire to a more credible and combat-effective model, which is grounded through effective, enabled and equipped in-place forces, and supported by persistent, rotational and rapidly scalable forces from elsewhere.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I again put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State for his leadership during the present crisis. One of the challenges facing NATO, which may seem quite boring to many people, is the issue of logistics and the resilience of transport and other networks across the NATO alliance.

Does he see this being addressed at Madrid? Certainly from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly point of view, we talk about it, and it is one of those issues that comes up time and again.

**Mr Wallace:** NATO and many of its member countries are no different from the United Kingdom in that many of the unglamorous but key enablers have been disinvested in. That may be the bridge strengthening in eastern Europe that would allow heavy armour to get to the frontlines—that used to be a total norm in every design in the 1980s and at the time of the cold war—or it may be logistical hubs or transport to get people rapidly to the front. All of that has in effect been the Cinderella of defence spending for too long across the alliance countries, including the United Kingdom. One of the ways through that is NATO common funding, and Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General, has an ambition for a significant increase in that funding. We will look sympathetically at that request, obviously balancing our own budget requirements, but also making sure that it is going to be used for those purposes.

It is here that places such as the EU can complement NATO. The EU has recently published what I think it calls its strategic compass, and I was very keen to make sure that the EU complemented NATO and did not compete with it. What can the EU do well? It can co-ordinate in sub-threshold areas such as cyber, transnational crime, transnational migration and disinformation, and also in infrastructure-readiness across its member states. I am incredibly supportive of the EU doing more in that space, which would complement the NATO response and make it even more effective.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): I completely agree with everything that the Secretary of State has just said, but does it not make the case for the UK to have a defence and security treaty with the European Union?

**Mr Wallace:** We have a defence and security treaty with the 30 members of NATO, nearly every one of which is in the EU. I do not think that we need to replicate treaties, but we should recognise that where we can encourage the EU not to compete but to complement NATO, we should be full supporters of that. If necessary, we should join the EU in things such as the PESCO—permanent structured co-operation—mobility study. The United States has joined it as well, and we should be open to joining.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I am sorry that the Secretary of State missed that opportunity to ask what the SNP policy actually is on NATO, or which one it is on today. On logistics and transport, was it not a strategic mistake to pull the Army out of Germany? How far advanced are we in reinstating ourselves in bases that are far more accessible to where a theatre of operations may be?

**Mr Wallace:** I was one of the soldiers in north-west Germany at the time and there was always a desire after the cold war that we would bring forces back; the Dutch and everyone did that. With the unification of Germany and the accession of the Baltic states, Germany is a long way from any frontline. It is a different world now. It was a few minutes' drive to the iron curtain in my day; it is now a long way to any frontline.

If there were any desire to reinvest in mainland Europe near what are in effect the new frontlines, we would look openly at that. What we are looking for from NATO in this next phase is long-term planning for how it will contain Russia post Ukraine and provide resilience and reassurance to countries that cannot do that on their own. That could be permanent basing or it could be rapid readiness—being able to deploy quickly, instead of being stuck in a big base in one place. That is all up for development, which I think is incredibly important.

The year 2014 was a wake-up call. With Russia annexing Crimea, NATO began steadily transforming itself in relation to the increased danger. Thanks to the leadership of the United Kingdom, it enhanced the NATO response force, created the enhanced forward presence and launched the framework nation concept. Since 2019, it has developed a new NATO military strategy and a new deterrence and defence concept for the Euro-Atlantic area—the DDA. It has recognised space and cyber as operational domains, and we have agreed strategies on artificial intelligence and emerging and disruptive technologies.

Reflecting the themes of our own integrated review, we want to ensure that NATO is flexible and agile and has a resilient multi-domain force architecture with the right forces in the right place at the right time. In particular, the UK has been pushing to instil a culture of readiness in the alliance. The combat forces that deliver the NATO readiness initiative include 30 major naval combatants, 30 heavy or medium-manoeuvre battalions and 30 kinetic air squadrons—which, in English, is fighter planes. You never know what a kinetic air squadron is—only in the Ministry of Defence. [*Laughter.*] They are being organised and trained as larger combat formations for reinforcements and high-intensity war fighting or for rapid military crisis intervention.

I am proud that the UK has made the largest offer of any ally to the NATO readiness initiative by allocating our carrier strike group, squadrons of F-35Bs and Typhoons, and an armoured infantry brigade. I am also proud of our role in developing two significant UK-inspired military concepts, the DDA and the war fighting concept, which will further strengthen the alliance's ability to deter and defend against any potential adversary and maintain and develop our military advantage now and in the future. We will continue to play a leading role in the implementation of those concepts.

The recent war in Ukraine has helped to recover NATO's original sense of purpose. In the wake of President Putin's senseless invasion, he imagined that he would find NATO weak and divided. Instead, he has found only strength and solidarity. From the outset, the alliance made it clear that any attack by Russia on its neighbours—including NATO's enhanced opportunity partners, which is what Ukraine was—would result in the imposition of significant economic, political and diplomatic costs, and so it has proved. NATO allies, supported by further friends from across the globe, have imposed unprecedented costs on Russia, starving the Kremlin's war machine of resources. In a matter of weeks, President Putin has destroyed decades of economic progress for the Russian people. Allies are providing substantial financial and humanitarian aid, including by hosting millions of refugees across Europe.

I am proud again that the UK has been at the forefront of those efforts. We were the first European country to provide lethal aid to Ukraine. To date, the United Kingdom has sent more than 6,900 anti-tank missiles, including next generation light anti-tank weapons and Javelins; eight air defence systems, including Starstreak anti-air missiles; 1,360 anti-structure munitions; 4.5 tonnes of plastic explosives; thousands of tonnes of non-military aid and humanitarian aid; and military aid such as helmets and body armour. The Stormer armoured vehicles will be deployed soon, once training is complete.

Not only has the Ukraine crisis tested NATO's ability to support a neighbour, but it has rightly led to a re-evaluation of our collective security. As I have said to the House before, the greatest irony of the conflict is that President Putin has secured a larger NATO presence on his borders, the polar opposite of what he claimed he wanted to achieve. For the first time, we have deployed the NATO response force for defensive purposes. More than 40,000 troops are now under direct NATO command. We are setting up four new multinational battle groups in Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, doubling NATO's presence in the region.

As part of that effort, the UK has increased its readiness to respond to all contingencies. That includes sending four additional Typhoons to Cyprus and Romania to patrol the south-eastern European skies, in addition to the four Typhoons already conducting NATO air policing from Romania. It also includes sending ships to the eastern Mediterranean and the Baltic sea and temporarily doubling our military presence in Estonia to 1,700 personnel.

Article 5 is perhaps the most well-known article in the 1949 NATO founding treaty. It is the centre pillar of collective defence—the principle that an attack against one ally is an attack against us all—and it binds NATO's members together in a spirit of solidarity, committing them to protect one another. Contrary to popular belief, however, article 5 is not automatic; a member invoking it still requires the consensus of all allies. It is important to note that once there has been a vote, article 5 gives member states a range of options, including but not limited to military responses.

Article 5 has been invoked only once in NATO history: by the United States, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In contrast, the less well-known article 4 of NATO's founding treaty has been invoked on seven occasions since 1949. An ally or group of allies can invoke article 4 if they perceive a threat to their security, territorial integrity or political independence. On 24 February, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia invoked article 4 in response to the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine. As with article 5, the actions that follow article 4 can take a number of forms. On this occasion, allies agreed to significant additional defensive deployments of forces to the eastern part of the alliance.

Our ability to honour treaties comes at a significant cost, but in that area, too, the UK is leading. We currently have the largest defence budget in Europe. Not only is Putin discovering more NATO presence, but his belligerence has paradoxically ensured more investment in the alliance. At the end of 2020, the UK, anticipating the resurgence of Russia, increased its defence budget by £24 billion over four years. Since the outbreak of war, other NATO nations have begun following suit. Denmark has established



[Mr Wallace]

a defence diplomacy fund of €1 billion for 2022-23. France has indicated that it will increase its defence spending beyond the substantial increases already planned for the next few years. Poland has announced that it will increase its defence spending to 3% of GDP from 2023, while roughly doubling the size of its military. Most notably, Germany has dramatically reversed its historical position on defence and has announced legal changes to ensure that it will meet the 2% spending pledge alongside €100 billion for the Bundeswehr, which in effect doubles its defence budget.

What we spend our money on matters as much as its sum total. That is why NATO is putting the onus on spending more on research and development to develop the disruptive capability that we need to defeat our adversaries. As part of our settlement for defence, the UK has ringfenced more than £6 billion for R&D, so I am delighted that NATO recently selected the United Kingdom, alongside Estonia, as the joint host of the European NATO headquarters of DIANA, the defence innovation accelerator of the north Atlantic.

Sweden and Finland have both taken the bold step of seeking NATO membership. The UK will be strong in its support for them in that process. If Sweden and Finland are successful, all 10 nations of the Joint Expeditionary Force, from Iceland to the Baltics, will be in NATO. That 10-nation alliance will be well suited to training, exercising and operating together within the NATO alliance, with Britain as a framework nation.

**John Spellar:** The Secretary of State says, “If Sweden and Finland are successful”. Surely they have to be successful, having made an application. As militarily equipped democracies, their applications have to succeed. Nothing should stand in their way.

**Mr Wallace:** I totally agree. When Britain says that we want to support them, we want them to succeed. We will help them to succeed, and I believe they will succeed. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that they must succeed. We need to demonstrate that nations such as Sweden and Finland, having applied, are welcome in the alliance. As I said, people choose NATO, but NATO also recognises the values that those two countries stand for and the professionalism of their armed forces, with which Britain already integrates very strongly. Only a couple of weeks ago, I went to see British heavy tanks in Finland. I think that that is the first time in history that they have been deployed there.

There remain a lot of challenges. We have seen encouraging signs of countries rising to the spending challenge, but as of 2021 less than a third meet the pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence. The Russian Government’s invasion of Ukraine has, of course, presented new challenges to NATO members, which is why in March I asked NATO to produce a long-term plan on containing Russia, providing reassurance to its members and contributing to improving the resilience of countries on the frontline. I am pleased to say that earlier this week, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Tod Wolters, provided his initial thoughts on the long-term posture. Members will be discussing it between now and Madrid.

Events in Ukraine have reminded many people of the importance of NATO as a guardian of European security. There are many in this House who have been consistent supporters of our membership. Putin’s strategic miscalculations have been so great that he has even now recruited new supporters to NATO’s cause: not only are Sweden and Finland applying, but the Scottish National party has now come out in full support, which we welcome on the Government Benches.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will come on to this in my own remarks, but the policy happened 10 years ago this autumn.

**Mr Wallace:** Well, when I sat in the Scottish Parliament, I think NATO and the SNP did not go together.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** More than 10 years ago!

**Mr Wallace:** Yes, maybe it was. But let us not forget that NATO is a nuclear alliance. There is a danger that the people of Scotland will pick up the slight contradiction that the SNP, which campaigned to rid Scotland of the deterrent that has kept the whole United Kingdom safe for more than 50 years, is campaigning to join a nuclear alliance. In that nuclear alliance, it is Britain’s deterrent that is effectively allocated to NATO. If the SNP got its way, it would be ironic if its wholehearted support for NATO meant that it was reliant on an English nuclear deterrent.

**Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** And Welsh!

**Mr Wallace:** And Welsh.

I welcome the close working and clear support from the Labour party on Ukraine and NATO over the past few months. I noticed the article in *The Times* today by the shadow Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), arguing for the Opposition to have a greater involvement in the process of refining the strategic concept for the next 10 years.

You know as well as anyone, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I am always keen to be inclusive and above partisan politics. I am happy to discuss with Opposition Front Benchers the strategic concept as it develops over the next few weeks and months. I will, however, add that NATO has mechanisms to contribute to such decisions, not least the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, on which a number of hon. Members serve—there are six Labour Members on it. In both the Opposition and the Government, we do not pay enough attention to our Members who serve on committees abroad. The assembly is often an afterthought, when in fact it should be embraced wholly. It can work both ways, and we can learn what people are thinking in NATO—for example, when it comes to solving the Turkish issue, we should be using the members of the assembly as much as ministerial contacts.

It is not always the case that Opposition parties are so supportive of NATO. Only a few years ago, the previous leader of the Opposition was a man whose aim was to disband NATO. There is also an individual on the Labour Front Bench who recently said that he hoped Russia would successfully hack the nuclear deterrent in the United Kingdom. I know that the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne does not share those motives or views, but we should remind ourselves

that not everybody, all of the time, agrees with our positions. Every party is free to change its position on alliances such as NATO, as have the SNP and others, although a certain Member for Islington is, I think, still on a different track.

NATO's upcoming summit in Madrid, from 28 to 30 June, is an opportunity to address the new strategic reality and agree abiding changes to our deterrence and defence posture in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ours aims at the meeting will be straightforward: to maintain NATO's momentum; to ensure its forces are credible and combat capable in the east; to expand the alliance's forward presence from a trip-wire approach to a more effective model based on well-equipped, in-place forces supported by persistent, rapidly scalable forces from elsewhere; and to strengthen neighbouring countries and the global partnerships that underpin freedom and democracy. Critically, NATO nations will be looking to agree our new strategic concept, which will set the direction of the alliance for the next decade.

For more than seven decades NATO has protected our way of life and the democracy, justice and freedom that go to the heart of who we are. But peace must be defended in every generation, and as we confront a dangerous new reality in which those values and the international system that underpins them come under sustained assault, it is vital that the alliance is stronger and more united than ever before. I know that that desire is shared by Members on both sides of the House, and they should rest assured that Britain will do all in its power to make sure that NATO keeps delivering by upgrading its defence and deterrence, and will help it adapt to face the 21st-century threat, making sure it remains, as it has for nearly three quarters of a century, the greatest bastion of our security and the greatest guarantor of our peace.

3.2 pm

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): May I start by paying tribute to the men and women in Britain's armed forces, who are deployed across the NATO alliance as part of their policing operations, multinational battlegroups and maritime deployments? We play the leading role in some of NATO's most important missions, both on the frontline and in strategic command, as is the case at the British-led but multinational NATO maritime command, which I was privileged to visit last month in north London.

The steps the Government have taken to reinforce NATO allies since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine have therefore had, and will continue to have, Labour's full support. In Labour we are proud that Britain is NATO's leading European nation. We do not want to see that status damaged or deflected by the Prime Minister's trumpeting of the Indo-Pacific tilt. The first priority for Britain's armed forces must be where the threats are greatest, not where the business opportunities may lie, and that is in the NATO area—Europe, the north Atlantic and the Arctic.

**Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): The shadow Minister mentioned the Indo-Pacific tilt, which we have been looking at in the Defence Committee. There has been a miscalculation, which has allowed Putin to get away with too much for too long. We cannot make the same mistake again. Does the shadow Minister

agree that, although we have to focus on the current threat, we also have to focus on future threats, and that is why the Indo-Pacific tilt is relevant and important?

**John Healey:** Of course the hon. Gentleman is right, but the first and most acute threat, underlined by the brutal invasion that Putin has undertaken in Ukraine, is where our first duty lies. It is where our neighbourhood lies, and it is our primary obligation to our closest allies. That forces us to confront the fact that we can no longer take peace and security in Europe for granted, as we have done since the end of the cold war. We must now face a future of persistent confrontation with Russia.

Ministers have said to me and to the House in recent weeks that it is perhaps too early to learn lessons from Ukraine, but one lesson I take is that, despite the gung-ho, go-it-alone promotion of global Britain, almost no nation can do anything alone and Britain is a bigger force for good in the world when we act with allies.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**John Healey:** I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman and then underline the point that I have just made.

**Dr Fox:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I do not disagree with the fundamental point that he makes, but does he accept that, way back in 2007, in Munich Putin told us what he was and almost what he was going to do? The point is not that we have a confrontation with Russia now but that we had a confrontation with Russia when it went into Georgia and when it occupied Crimea. We simply did not do enough about it at the time.

**John Healey:** No one on our Front Bench or in the House would disagree with that analysis. Our response was too little, and it was regarded as too weak. It was certainly too little and too weak to deter Putin's belief that he could take the sort of steps that we have seen in the past three months in Ukraine.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I agree. We took our eye off the ball. But I will not have lectures from the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who was the one who withdrew our troops down in Germany in the rushed defence review. I remember he made a great statement at the time that we would never see tanks rolling across the east German plains again. We are actually back there, ruining the decision that was taken then.

**John Healey:** My right hon. Friend is right. I really do not want to make these sorts of points this afternoon, but the Prime Minister declared in recent months, before the Ukraine invasion, that the period of tank battles in Europe was over and justified the Indo-Pacific tilt and the deployment of defence priorities to areas outside the NATO area.

The point that I want to make is in part to recognise the role that the Defence Secretary has played. We in Britain are a bigger force for good not when we act alone but when we act with allies. I take this example from the Ukraine experience. Britain's supply of anti-tank and anti-air missiles to Ukraine is a fraction of the total weapons provided by the west, but we have helped a

[John Healey]

great deal more by calling donor conferences, co-ordinating the logistics of delivery and reinforcing the will of other countries to help. So Labour's full backing for the Government in providing military assistance to Ukraine will continue as we shift from crisis management of the current conflict in Donbas to delivering the medium-term NATO standard military support that Ukraine will need for Putin's next offensive.

**Mr Dhesi:** Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**John Healey:** Before I give way, may I in parenthesis say to the Secretary of State that the House is still looking forward to the figures that he promised to lay in the Library on 25 April about the total weapons delivered into Ukraine and the UK's contribution to those. I will give way to the Secretary of State because I have addressed him directly, and then I will give way to my hon. Friend.

**Mr Wallace:** I will just, out of courtesy, give the hon. Gentleman an update. The delay is simply the other countries' willingness to verify their information. As soon as we have the other countries' sign-off about what they want to announce publicly, we will give an update. That is the only reason for the delay.

**John Healey:** I am grateful for the progress report from the Secretary of State on that commitment, which I think he implies remains.

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Defence. I am glad that he is making the point about closer co-operation. Having undertaken a visit to Norway recently with the excellent armed forces parliamentary scheme, I saw some of the amazing work undertaken by our Marine commandos out in Norway. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need closer co-operation, especially with those Scandinavian nations, in view of the increased Russian threat?

**John Healey:** I do indeed, and I am sure that my hon. Friend also discussed Norway's contribution to the joint expeditionary force set up in 2015 and led by Britain, which the Secretary of State mentioned. The accession of Finland and Sweden means that there are now a full 10 NATO nations in the force, and that it can become even more flexible as a potential operational first responder in the Baltics and in the Nordic areas.

**Mr Baron:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**John Healey:** I will indeed, but then perhaps I had better get on with my speech.

**Mr Baron:** The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous, and I will be brief. He mentioned weapons systems. Is not one of the lessons from Ukraine so far the speed with which one gets through the systems that are being delivered? It reminds us of the need for deep stockpiles of such weapons and ammunition—and, indeed, security of supply lines—at times like this, which we should not underestimate when we factor in defence spending.

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. One of the most useful and effective weapons for the Ukrainians has proved to be the British-supplied Next

generation Light Anti-tank Weapon missile, but we rapidly ran out of our UK stocks. We have been very slow in getting fresh production under way, and we have had to raid the stockpiles and the production supplies set for other countries in order to continue to supply, as we must, the military assistance that Ukraine needs. I think that the question of procurement—I will say more about this later—is one of stockpiles, sourcing, and speed. Those three “Ss” are a part of the failures of the present military procurement system, which really does now require deep reform.

**John Spellar:** My right hon. Friend has touched on what seems to be the key lesson of the recent procurement issue, namely the maintenance of productive capacity, not just in the main equipment suppliers but right down through tiers 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Does that not require a steady flow of orders, and should not the Ministry of Defence focus in particular on procurement from domestic industry to maintain that productive capacity, which can then be ramped up?

**John Healey:** I think that it does. It requires a steady flow of orders, it requires a stronger commitment to design and make in Britain, and it requires a long-term strategy so that defence industrial producers and their workforces are not faced with a stop-go of uncertain contracts and, very often in the recent past, a competition that may put them at a disadvantage with overseas suppliers.

I am looking around the Chamber momentarily before I proceed, and I will proceed now.

The bravery of the Ukrainians, civil and military alike, has been extraordinary, and we pay tribute to them in the House again today. Beyond his misjudgment of Russia's military competence and capabilities, Putin has made two fundamental miscalculations, first of the fierce determination of Ukrainians to defend their country, and secondly of western unity. I believe that the two are linked. Just as Russia's invasion of Crimea and the Donbas region in 2014 strengthened Ukraine's national unity and resolve to resist Russia, this full-scale invasion of sovereign Ukraine has strengthened NATO's international unity and resolve to resist Russia.

NATO is becoming stronger. President Biden has doubled down on the United States' commitment to

“defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power.”

Led by Germany, a dozen European countries have already rebooted defence plans and defence spending, while Finland and Sweden have overturned decades of non-alignment, with their centre-left Governments now bidding for NATO membership, a move that we, as the official Opposition, fully support. Putin is right to say that this Nordic NATO expansion does not pose a direct threat to Russia—NATO is a defensive alliance—but the man who is waging war in Europe is certainly in no position to demand conditions on countries seeking NATO's collective security.

This afternoon the Secretary of State described NATO as the most successful alliance in history, and he was right. It is the most successful alliance in history because of the strength of both its military and its values. It pools military capacity, capability and cash, with a collective budget of more than \$1 trillion, to protect 1 billion people. Alongside the solemn commitment to



collective defence, the values of democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law are also enshrined in its founding treaties.

I am proud that the UK's post-war Labour Government played the leading role in NATO's foundation, and Labour's commitment to the alliance remains unshakeable. The Secretary of State, having said that he did not play party politics, then did exactly that. I gently say to him that the position of Labour's leadership on its unshakeable commitment to NATO and its commitment to the UK nuclear deterrent has been a settled position from Kinnock to Corbyn and from Blair, Brown and Miliband in between.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey):** You missed one.

**John Healey:** Check the record.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind):** Would my right hon. Friend agree that the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, originally conceived in 1968 under the Government of Harold Wilson, was an enormous step forward and is universally supported by most non-nuclear powers around the world, and that Britain could make a very positive contribution to the NPT review conference in August this year? Would he also agree that it would be helpful if the Government did that, so that we could start down the road of ridding the world of nuclear weapons and signing up to a ban on nuclear weapons?

**John Healey:** My right hon. Friend is right in many respects. Some of the most significant arms reduction and arms control treaties have been negotiated and signed by this country under Labour Governments. That was true under Wilson, whom he cites, and it was also true under Blair. He is also right to remind the House that part of our unshakeable commitment to NATO and to the deterrent has been a commitment to leading multinational arms control, reduction and disarmament talks. We may have lost sight of those in recent years—they have certainly commanded little attention over the last decade from the Conservatives—but they are part and parcel of pursuing the fundamental values of NATO, of this country and certainly of the party on this side of the House.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I concur with what my right hon. Friend has said, but is it not the case that we now need to be making the case for deterrence, so that when Putin is providing maps and threats of nuclear destruction for western Europe, we can say very clearly what the response would be? It is that deterrent stance that has kept the peace since the second world war, and we need to keep reminding him, when he makes those threats, of the reason that we retain a nuclear deterrent.

**John Healey:** My right hon. Friend is right. Clear and consistent communication is part of having an effective deterrent in place. It is not simply about the weaponry at hand.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):** Would the right hon. Gentleman dare to go a little further and acknowledge the truth, which is that it is the responsible possession of nuclear weapons by responsible democracies that has kept the peace, and that it would

be a mistake ever to get rid of nuclear weapons entirely as that would increase the likelihood of the major state-on-state warfare that we saw before nuclear weapons existed?

**John Healey:** I would agree with the contention that possession has helped to hold the peace, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has just pointed out, possession is a necessary but insufficient component of effective deterrence. The communication that my right hon. Friend has just talked about is part of a picture of effective deterrence, alongside political leadership of countries and alliances.

If the House will allow me, I shall move on to the strategic concept and the weeks ahead. Next month, as the Secretary of State has said, member nations will set NATO's strategy for the next decade, with all democracies now facing new threats to their security. NATO's last strategic concept was agreed in 2010. It declared:

"Today, the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace".

It sought a strategic partnership with Russia, it had limited reference to terrorism and it made no mention at all of China. The proximity and severity of the security threat in Europe now demand a clear break with the principles-based platitudes that have been the hallmark of NATO's previous public strategic concept. The nature of the threat is both clear and urgent. Russia has attacked Ukraine, overridden the NATO-Russia Founding Act, breached the Geneva conventions, buried the Helsinki Final Act, made unilateral threats of nuclear attack against NATO and stands accused of crimes against humanity and genocide.

The Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, said:

"Regardless of when, how, the war in Ukraine ends, the war has already had long-term consequences for our security. NATO needs to adapt to that new reality."

Most importantly, NATO has to adapt its primary task of collective defence.

When the Labour leader and I visited Estonia in February to thank our British troops, they told us about NATO's tripwire deterrent, which the Secretary of State mentioned, with forward forces giving ground when attacked before retaking it later with reinforcements. The horrific Russian destruction of Ukrainian cities and the brutal shelling of civilians makes it clear that such a strategy of deterrence by reinforcement is no longer conscionable. NATO must instead aim for deterrence by denial, which is the operational consequence of NATO leaders' commitment to defending every inch of NATO territory.

I am not sure whether that is covered by the combat effectiveness the Defence Secretary spoke about, but it implies a very serious strengthening of military capability, with more advanced systems, more permanent basing, higher force readiness and more intense exercises.

**Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con):** I hope the right hon. Gentleman will excuse me for not being here at the beginning of his speech but, when I saw him on the screen, I rushed to hear what he has to say.

Does not this reappraisal, which is the consequence of recent events, need to recognise that, contrary to predictions until very recently that all future warfare

[Sir John Hayes]

would be high tech and entirely different from what we knew before, we now see that much of what is happening in Ukraine is very conventional and rather old-fashioned in some ways? The horror of street-to-street and trench-to-trench fighting requires a reappraisal that might mean we need just as many, or more, troops on the ground, more tanks and more of the things that we were told, not very long ago, are redundant.

I might say the same of security more widely, particularly terrorism. Tragically and awfully, terrorism has adapted to use very ordinary, everyday things. We see cars used as weapons, for example. The recent terrorist attacks have been rather low tech, rather than high tech.

**John Healey:** I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman means to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, but he makes several important points. His last point, on low tech, is right. In many ways, high tech can sometimes become low-tech weaponry. It is easy to conceive that, in the wrong hands, an unmanned aerial vehicle or drone could almost be a flying car bomb.

It is important that we continue to invest in and develop high-tech systems, which give us the edge and some of the deterrent effect we require. Like the right hon. Gentleman, one of the lessons I take from Ukraine is that, in the reality of battle, conflict and confrontation, we need “now tech” and not just high tech. That is one of the flaws in the procurement system, as the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said in his intervention.

**Wayne David:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that we all have to deal with the difficulty of the Russians’ apparent willingness, in certain circumstances, to use theatre nuclear weapons?

**John Healey:** Indeed, there is certainly a willingness to threaten to use such weapons. The escalation of President Putin’s rhetoric at times in this conflict has been reckless. That requires responsible leaders in the western alliance to be careful, measured and consistent about the rhetoric we use. That has not always been what we have seen from some of our Ministers. It also requires us to be implacably clear that any use of such weaponry would be met with a strong, special response and that the universal opprobrium that would befall Russia must make a contemplation of this, even by those in the Kremlin, even in circumstances in which they may feel they are losing ground and losing the conflict, unthinkable.

I am going to press on, because many other Members much more expert than I want to contribute to this debate. Whatever the points the Secretary of State has made and I have made so far, NATO’s new strategic concept has to be a major diplomatic agreement on geostrategic goals first and a plan for force generation, doctrine deployment and procurement second. The NATO 2030 plan must spell out how we are going to contain Putin, what forces we will generate, what new technologies we will accelerate and how we will strengthen our homeland societies. It must set out also a strategy for our open democratic societies to deal with China, which the 2030 reflection group now rightly described as

“a full-spectrum systemic rival, rather than a purely economic player or an only Asia-focused security actor.”

As the reflection group prepared NATO for these decisions, it said:

“The line between civilians and combatants is being blurred”.

So we want the alliance to set democratic resilience as a new core task for NATO when its member nations meet in Madrid next month.

We cannot go far online without finding someone to tell us that western democracies are just as bad or even worse than Moscow or Beijing. Putin spends billions a year trying to divide and degrade our democracies. We have seen that in things ranging from meddling in elections to misinformation about covid and to criminal corruption. The waning belief in our own values has perhaps become the west’s Achilles heel. Just as we defend against attacks from beyond our borders, so we must respond to attacks within them, too. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly’s recommendations for this new strategic concept stress also the central importance of resilience in our democracies and our societies. It is the way in which we can both counter hybrid warfare and shore up support for our defence commitments.

Within days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Scholz declared it

“a watershed in the history of our continent.”

He overturned decades-long German defence policy and boosted defence spending by €100 billion. This is now day 85 and the Government have taken no action to reboot our own UK defence plans. Instead, we are told by Defence Ministers that

“the invasion of Ukraine has proved the integrated review right.”—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2022; Vol. 714, c. 136.]

Well, the integrated review was billed as a “threats-led” strategy. It has a prominent section on the Indo-Pacific, yet no section on Europe. It confirms that threats to Britain are increasing, yet it cuts the Army by a further 10,000 troops. It makes no mention of a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan or a Russian invasion of Ukraine. I say to the Defence Secretary that all democracies must respond to the newly realised threats to national and European security. That is why we are arguing that he and the Government must rewrite the flaws in the integrated review, review defence spending, reform defence procurement, rethink those Army cuts and reinvigorate UK leadership in NATO.

In the run-up to Madrid, 30 or—I hope—32 democracies and their civil societies will rightly demand a say in the priorities that are set for NATO for the next decade. As the Opposition party that intends to govern Britain in the near future, so do we—yet it is a closed process, confined to Governments. It is closed to the public and closed to non-governing parties, despite the fact that national elections are due within two years in 19 out of the 30 NATO countries. That is why I ask the Government to open up the UK process to create a common British vision for NATO. I welcome the Secretary of State’s offer, in response, to discuss the strategic concept with us as it develops, but I urge him to go further and to lay out for the public, in this House, the UK’s view of NATO’s strategic goals and military priorities, as well as the contribution that Britain will make to our collective defence. I want the UK to drive the debates as NATO gives a greater focus to defence, alongside deterrence and diplomacy. I want UK leadership in NATO to anticipate areas of future Russian aggression, to respond as the Arctic opens up, to settle the alliance’s relationship with the EU and to challenge and compete with China.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the remark he just made about future diplomacy. Does he not think that this moment, when defence expenditure is rising so rapidly all around the world, presents a big problem, and that we should also look at the role that the United Nations could and should play and regret the long delay between the start of the awful Russian invasion of Ukraine and any kind of diplomatic initiative by the UN? There has to be a world of peace and basically that has to come through agreements via the United Nations.

**John Healey:** I see it not as a big problem but as a necessary response. The right hon. Gentleman is right about the paralysis of the United Nations; that is because Russia is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Any UN action to try to deal with the conflict in and Russian invasion of Ukraine is therefore stymied before it starts.

I want the UK to have a unified commitment to NATO. I want our commitment to be bipartisan. I do not want it to be a conversation simply for current Ministers behind closed doors. Let me use NATO's reflection group to underline the point. It said that political cohesion is the basis of effective deterrence and that political consultation remains the most important means by which NATO can reinforce political cohesion. Bipartisan support has strengthened Britain's action to help Ukraine and confront Russia; it will also strengthen Britain as the leading European nation in NATO.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. As the House can see, a number of Members wish to participate in this relatively short debate. I will not put a time limit on the Chair of the Select Committee, but I know he will show enormous self-restraint in the time he takes, because we have only a little more than an hour before the wind-ups begin.

3.32 pm

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** Thank you very much for calling me to speak so early, Mr Deputy Speaker. When one has discussed these sorts of subjects for a very long time, it becomes rather difficult to avoid simply saying the same things over and over again. On the principle of trying to say at least one new thing that I have not contributed to a previous debate, I wish to refer to the role of formerly neutral states in the formation of NATO.

It comes as something of a shock to me to realise that it was in 1975—substantially before the admirable defence spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), was even born—that I had a conversation with the late, great strategic historian Professor Sir Michael Howard on the proposed subject of my doctoral studies, which was how the British empire, as it still was at the time, prepared to adopt a strategy for after the defeat of Germany and Japan, and how the possible revival of German and Japanese threats gave way to a confrontation with our erstwhile allies, the Russians. What I was surprised to find was that the first thinking about this went back to the end of 1941: Trygve Lie, the Foreign Minister-in-exile of the Norwegian Government, made an approach to the British Foreign Office and was soon

joined by the Foreign Ministers in exile of Belgium and the Netherlands. What did Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway all have in common? It was that in 1940 they had all been neutral, and in 1940 they had all been invaded and occupied nevertheless.

The proposal that those three Foreign Ministers put forward, which in the fullness of time led to the Brussels treaty and eventually the formation of NATO, was that Britain should be offered strategic bases in their countries once they had been liberated, and once the war was over, so that they could never again be occupied, despite their pacific intentions, by another European power.

Therefore, there is a certain appropriateness in the decision now of two countries—Finland and Sweden—with a tremendous history of neutrality, albeit strongly armed neutrality for purposes of self-protection, to apply now to NATO in order to prevent themselves being exposed and suffering the fate that Ukraine looked as if it was going to suffer, and which Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands had suffered in 1940.

That leads me to the only other point that I will make in this short contribution, which I have said before and will continue to say. Despite many years of thinking about these matters, all I can come up with in the end are three concepts summarised in half a dozen words. The three concepts are: deterrence, which is carried out by nuclear weapons primarily; containment, which is carried out by conventional weapons primarily until such time as the potential enemy has had a chance to evolve or implode, but either way until it can no longer cause a threat; and, finally, the unpredictability of future conflicts—the unpredictability of when or if they will arise, and the unpredictability of what will happen when they do arise.

My mind goes back to 24 February, the day of the invasion, when there was an exchange with the Prime Minister on the Floor of the House. At that stage, the best suggestion that I could make—at that time, let us face it, none of us expected Ukraine to resist as successfully and as courageously as it has so far been able to resist—was at least to offer a Ukrainian Government-in-exile a home here in Britain if their country became, as appeared likely, overwhelmed by massive Russian firepower. So far at least, there is every sign that such an offer will not have to be made. The lesson that we must take away from that is that we must always have a full range of military preparedness, because we do not know what the threat will be, we do not know when it will arise, and we do not know how it will turn out when it happens.

I end by saying, as I have said so many times before, that as recently as the mid-1980s we used to spend 4.5% to 5.1% of our gross domestic product on defence. Several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we were still spending 3.5% of GDP on defence. Successive Defence Committees have now called—even before the present crisis arose—that we should raise our target not from the minimum of 2% of GDP, but to at least 3% of GDP. It is a matter of priority. What has happened to Ukraine shows where our priorities must lie.

3.39 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):** It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), but I am afraid that, at the beginning of his speech, he somewhat misled hon.



[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

Members. He said that he would not say things that he had said before, but by the end of his speech, I was pretty certain that he had made those points previously—in fact, he tends to make them whenever I follow him. However, as always, he was worth listening to.

I commend the way in which the Secretary of State opened the debate. Despite his attempts to tease Labour Front Benchers and me—more of that to come, I am sure—he opened it in a suitable fashion. One might even think that he had in mind a future position in Brussels that might come up at NATO at some point later this year. He is far too popular for the Prime Minister, so he may not be Secretary of State for too much longer. [*Interruption.*] I am sure he would be most welcome in the Scottish Parliament.

I will try to be brief because I am conscious of time. NATO is clearly one of the two main pillars of Euro-Atlantic security. The Secretary of State himself identified the European Union as a strong player in some of the non-hard military capabilities that are required to underpin peace on the continent of Europe. It is undoubtedly correct that NATO is at the forefront of providing hard military defence and security to its member states, but Europe leads in other areas outwith that. The Secretary of State mentioned some—for example, cyber—but we should also look at energy, trade, resilience and crisis management. He is right that the two institutions should not compete but complement one another.

Britain is in a slightly different role in that it has recently left the European Union but remains a member of NATO, so it taps into only one of those two pillars of Euro-Atlantic security. I repeat what I said earlier, that we should seriously consider a comprehensive defence and security treaty with the European Union. I suspect we will end up in that position at some point, although perhaps not under this Government.

The Secretary of State went through some of the history of the alliance, not least its doubling in size over the past 70 years. We now have two applicants in Sweden and Finland. I suspect that the Secretary of State is right that they will join, despite the noises from Turkey. Undoubtedly, both countries will be positive, contributing members of the alliance, producing strong defence, resilience and security. The Scottish National party absolutely supports their application.

I want to consider the Strategic Concept. As the Secretary of State mentioned, we have had the strategic compass from the European Union—I think there is still a bit to come. The Strategic Concept is second in importance only to the Washington treaty and is undoubtedly a major turning point in the ongoing Euro-Atlantic security debate. The shadow Secretary of State is right that it is a shame that it is open only to Governments to participate, but I accept the Secretary of State's generous offer to have a discussion with him and his officials before the concept is published next month in Madrid.

I am slightly worried about some of the noises from the Foreign Secretary, and I understand, if the media are to be believed, that so are some Members on the Government Benches. The concept, which she has repeated without any detail, that we need a global NATO causes me concern. The Strategic Concept should underline that NATO's primary focus is the Euro-Atlantic area.

We do not need NATO to gallivant around the world. I know that the Government have an obsession with the Indo-Pacific tilt that they want to try to implement, but surely 24 February, if not 2014 and 2008, has told us that the Euro-Atlantic area needs to be NATO's primary focus, not a global NATO. Although there is no detail about what the Foreign Secretary means by that, I reject it in its entirety.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** On Monday and Tuesday, I had a long conversation with Ukrainian politicians on the border. They stressed to me how vital it is that the United States stays deeply committed to Europe and NATO, and that that is the lesson of what has happened since 24 February.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I do not disagree with any of that. I am not sure whether perhaps the right hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the point that I was making, but I do not disagree at all. The United States is clearly very important to NATO, but NATO's primary area of focus and operation, on the map, is the Euro-Atlantic area, and my concern is that the Foreign Secretary seems to want to take that further, with talk of a global NATO. Given that we do not know what she actually means by that, perhaps I have already given too much time to it, but it does cause me concern.

As the shadow Secretary of State said, we need to try to open things up with future strategic concepts. No multilateral international organisation, however important, has a right to exist; it always requires work to get the consent of the public. Undoubtedly NATO has that—it has proved this year alone just how useful it is—but it does need to democratise, and the processes for future strategic concepts need to be opened up not just to political parties, but to non-governmental organisations and others. We want to see coming out of the strategic concept a focus on resilience, on emerging disruptive technologies and on ensuring that the eastern flank of NATO is enhanced, as the Prime Minister of Estonia—the new Iron Lady, as she is being called—has been calling for. We would support that.

The Secretary of State knows that we have supported the Government in every move that they have taken to support Ukraine militarily, economically and in many other fields. Our only criticism, a deep and profound one, is how incredibly slowly we are helping Ukrainian refugees, but that is perhaps not for this debate. However, I am interested to tease out of the Secretary of State or the Minister where we are with planning to help to rebuild Ukraine.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) was correct to say that no one expected that Ukraine would fight so valiantly and last so long against Russia, or that Russia would crumble. No one saw that coming. Getting on to a debate about rebuilding Ukraine is therefore hugely important, and clearly the Ministry of Defence has an important role to play. Members on both sides of the House need to start engaging in this, not least because Ukraine is hoping next year to host the Eurovision song contest, which, as the Secretary of State said, will take place, one way or another, on the territory of a free Ukraine.

The Scottish National party supports Sweden and Finland in their accession to NATO. We are analysing that process very closely, as Members might well understand.

We support the Government in going into the strategic concept if they are serious about democratising it and addressing the challenges that we face in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Given the assault on the international order by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine, its continuing fraying and testing in other parts of the world, and the technologies that are used to deepen and hasten that, we need to work together, irrespective of the differing political and constitutional views of hon. Members present. We need to work together because we share values, and those values do not deserve to exist just because we think so; we always need to make the case for them robustly even where there are disagreements. I wish the Secretary of State well for the upcoming strategic concept and look forward to discussing it with him before he heads to Madrid next month.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. The wind-ups will begin no later than 4.40 pm. Six Members want to participate, so I am looking towards seven to eight minutes each to give everybody a fair whack, beginning with Sir Bernard Jenkin.

3.50 pm

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I will be as quick as I can. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who made an articulate and thoughtful speech, but I wonder why he said nothing about the SNP's attitude towards nuclear weapons, because it is now beyond any credibility and devalues everything that he contributed to this debate. By far the greatest contribution that Scotland makes to the defence of Europe is hosting the nuclear deterrent at Faslane. The idea that this would be uprooted by an independent Scotland, and that Scotland would then present itself as a good member of NATO, is utterly ridiculous. What is more, we now know from Iain Macwhirter's article in *The Herald* yesterday that this opinion is completely out of step with Scottish public opinion: some 58% of Scots want to retain the nuclear deterrent and only 20% want to get rid of it. When will his party change its policy and adopt the nuclear deterrent as its policy?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will be brief, as I have just given a long speech. When we put this matter to Scottish people in elections, they always return a majority of Members, not just from my party but from the Scottish Labour party, who oppose hosting the deterrent in Scotland. On the deterrent being in Scotland and the independence of NATO, is the hon. Gentleman really suggesting that the entirety of the UK's nuclear capability should be exclusively hosted in a sovereign foreign country, no matter how friendly and neighbouring that country is? It would be unprecedented in world history, and I suspect he does not support it himself.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** The answer is that it is one of the policies that encourages Scots to vote to remain in the United Kingdom, which was the outcome of the referendum held on Scottish independence.

I will concentrate my remarks on a background debate that has been going on, which is whether this 85-day crisis that we are now in is evidence that somehow

NATO has failed. I wish to contest that idea. It became axiomatic for decade after decade that war between major powers was unthinkable. It became our ingrained expectation. I was born 21 years after the end of the second world war, and it is now 77 years after the end of the second world war. Generations in this House and in our country have no folk or family memory of one of the defining moments, if not the defining moment, of our national history. Western Europe and the free world has to that extent become a victim of the success of NATO—success being peace in Europe and beyond Europe for decade after decade.

That success was based on two fundamental foundations: nuclear deterrence and NATO. That is not just because it provided collective security in Europe, but because it was binding—and still is binding—the US and Canadian security guarantees into the European security guarantees. It is the joining of transatlantic security that has made NATO so effective. Incidentally, one of the tragedies of the European Union is that it has gone down the path of trying to create a separate autonomous defence alliance outside NATO, which has corroded that automatic assumption that the United States and Europe will always act together.

Some still say that NATO has failed because of Ukraine, but NATO never declared that it would defend Ukraine. NATO is hardly to be accused of failing to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine when it never specifically said that it would seek to deter that. There have been political failures by the Governments of NATO members in recent years, individually and collectively, but as the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), said earlier, it was all laid out at the Munich security conference in 2007 by President Putin. Then we had the invasion of Georgia, the cyber-attacks, the Litvinenko murder, the violation of the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty—incidentally, that was unilateral rearmament by the Russians, rather than disarmament—the invasion of Crimea, the Salisbury poisonings, hybrid warfare, the weaponisation of gas, and the destabilisation of the Balkans. We ignored all those signals—the clearest possible signals—but the failure of the UK, the United States, the German Government and the French Government is a failure of our national strategies, not a failure of NATO.

Moreover, we can now say that NATO conventional forces are rather less inferior to Russian armed forces than we might have feared. The Russian forces, which are much larger and more extensively equipped than ours, have proved catastrophically incapable of delivering their intended effects. They are riven with corruption and have poorly maintained and poorly designed equipment. They are poorly led and incapable of conducting air superiority operations over a neighbouring country with meagre air defence of its own. They cannot defend their ships or run their logistics effectively.

In addition, we are finding that Russia has not dared to attack NATO countries even when they are actively supporting the resistance with arms to Ukraine. The first important lesson to take from the conflict is that we started out feeling much too timid about provoking Russian escalation. Perhaps the timing has been perfect, but I think we could have moved quicker and faster. I am delighted by the scale of the United States' response to the crisis now, and I wish it had come earlier.

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

Still, we must be ready to respond to Russian escalation, the possible use of chemical weapons and even the possibility of a tactical nuclear strike in Ukraine. That risk would rise significantly if Russia declared that captured Ukraine territory was now sovereign Russian territory, because that would trigger a whole set of defence doctrines in Russian military doctrine that would legitimise in Russian minds the use of tactical nuclear weapons. I do not expect the Government to comment on this point, but I have every confidence that NATO's SHAPE—Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe—in Belgium will be war-gaming escalation scenarios and will not be ruling out a vigorous response, as even the shadow Defence Secretary adverted to, involving co-ordinated retaliation to make sure that that escalation would be met with sufficient deterrence.

The second key lesson is that it is evident, if it was not obvious already, that the world is watching this conflict. The global implications of the outcome in Ukraine are profound. President Putin must not be seen to have gained from his illegal aggression, because of all the consequences for every other autocratic regime that is eyeing the neighbouring territory of another sovereign state. If we want to deter China, North Korea and any number of despotic regimes from thinking that they can behave in that way, we have to think in the same way that John Major and President Bush thought about the invasion of Kuwait, and that Margaret Thatcher insisted we had to think about the Falklands. The outcome of the conflict will be not just a watershed moment in European history, but a turning point in the history of the world. We must succeed and ensure that the Ukrainians win their war.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Let us say eight minutes, then everyone will get about equal time.

3.59 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I begin by thanking the members of our armed forces—the men and women who work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to keep us safe. I also put on the record my thanks to our NATO partners and the men and women of their armed forces. Today, however, our thoughts have to be with the people of Ukraine and the brave members of their armed forces, who are fighting Russian aggression in their homeland.

We are at a dangerous and pivotal point in Europe's history since the second world war. The attack going on in Ukraine is not just about contesting territory; it is about—more dangerously—undermining the rules-based order that we live with and have come to accept. It came out of the dark days and destruction of the second world war, and Russia is making a fundamental attack on that rules-based order, on the values of democratic governance, the rule of law and freedom of speech—things that we all take for granted.

Occasionally, we should all take a step back to think about the privileges that we have in this country. I sometimes get concerned that some populist agendas these days attack alternative opinions because they do not agree with them. That is the beauty of democracy, that we can have that disagreement. It does not make those people wrong; it makes the point that we are allowed to have those different opinions in our democracy.

Do not shout people down, but listen and argue. We do not want to reach the point where we have just one narrative, as there is in Russia, which is state controlled.

There has been a lot of talk about increases in defence expenditure, but one of the downsides of the invasion has been the lovely armies of armchair generals—including some on my own Defence Committee—coming up with instant solutions for what should be done. I accept the point about increased defence expenditure, although I would not argue for it yet; we need a sombre look at the lessons of Ukraine. The integrated review was right in its analysis, but the Government will have to admit that they need to update it at some point, and that will have to be done in a thoughtful and fact-based way.

I am sorry that the relevant Minister is not in his place, but I want to make the point that we must ensure that the Treasury pays for our support for the Ukrainian armed forces. It should not come out of the defence budget, which would limit what we can do. That message should be given loud and clear from across the House to the Treasury: the money has to come out of the special reserve and not out of the defence budget.

The Defence Secretary mentioned the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I have the privilege of being the deputy leader of our delegation to NATO. Last week, along with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) and the leader of the delegation, the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), we visited Latvia and Estonia. If one clear message is coming from there, it is that they now consider themselves to be on the frontline. They are small former Soviet republics, which have been referred to as the “canary in the coalmine” given the hybrid attacks that have taken place over the past few years. Clear in their minds, however, is the threat of invasion from Russia.

That leads to some questions for NATO's Madrid summit. The Latvians have always been supporters of the enhanced forward presence—since 2016—and we had the honour of visiting the EFP group in Latvia. I give credit to all those nine nations, as well as to our forces in Estonia, but I think that the tripwire idea and its reinforcement need to be revisited because of the events in Ukraine. Looking across at events in Bucha and other Ukrainian cities it is unthinkable for the Latvians and Estonians that they should be invaded. Clearly, as the Latvian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister said to us, there is no space in geopolitics but enemies will occupy it. We had a similar message from the secretary-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia when he said:

“Estonians don't want to be liberated.”

I think we need to take that on board.

What needs to happen in Madrid, certainly if we get Finland and Sweden applying to join NATO—and I welcome that—is that we come up with a new Baltic security pact. We are playing a very important role in Estonia, but we need to think about how that happens. We will need to have a permanent presence not just in the Baltic states, but across the eastern flank of NATO. I think the idea of rotating troops through is one that has served us well until now, but it certainly does not do so now, after the invasion of Ukraine.

One key thing that came out of our visit last week is that NATO needs to be united in our response to Putin's aggression. That is not just through the help and support that we are providing for the people and armed



forces in Ukraine; we must be united against destabilisation, cyber, the refugee crisis—the weaponisation of refugees—and the disinformation that takes place. That is not going to be done without investment and, I have to say, a certain amount of pain—this is certainly not going to be free. That will put pressure on all NATO nations, and not just on defence budgets and how we refocus them; it will put pressure on our populations. I give credit to both Latvia and Estonia, which have stepped up to the mark in supporting the efforts in Ukraine.

I will finish with a quote, which struck me, from Kristi Raik, the director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, who said that “freedom is priceless”. Latvia and Estonia are countries on the border with Russia, and those words from Kristi Raik mean to me that those of us in countries that have the geographical advantage of being further away need to ensure that we fight for the core values we are defending against Russia in Ukraine—freedom, democracy, freedom of speech and the rules-based order that we all live by. They are worth fighting for; they are priceless, and we must defend them. That is what we have to continue to do.

4.7 pm

**Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), from whom I have learned a lot when sitting with him on different Committees, including on the Armed Forces Bill, and the Parliamentary Assembly. He raises the very good point that we can have different views and not always agree, but we can do so in a respectful way, and ultimately the people here are looking to see that we have the best armed forces we can possibly have.

There is nothing I am going to say about the formation of NATO that has not already been said or will be said, but I want to get across my personal experience with NATO, both past and present. Looking back to when I was a young, fresh-faced soldier many years ago, I served on operations under NATO in both Bosnia and Kosovo, and I got to see the front end of what that looks like. Now, over 20 years later, I am in Parliament, and I sit on the Defence Committee and I am hugely honoured to sit on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

I thank the Secretary of State for what he said about the Parliamentary Assembly, because some of the information we get and the access we have to other MPs from NATO members is priceless. Last week, when we were in Latvia, I had an MP from Latvia telling me that, yes, Latvians take this seriously because he does not know if he is going to be fighting on his streets, defending his family and his country. That is how really seriously they take it. He said that all the words we say have such an implication for what happens over there, so we must choose our words carefully.

I have talked about some of the recent experiences we have had in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I have had the fortunate experience to look, on the Russian border from Norway down further south and on the Ukrainian border, at the build-up of troops. In 1999, I witnessed the build-up of NATO in Kosovo, and it was a strange experience to see the might of a mass military organisation taking over normal towns and villages to set that up. We lived in derelict buildings or old factories as there were no bases at that time. In 2003, I witnessed that on a bigger scale in Baghdad when the might of the US military and many other NATO members was around.

That was on a different level—they were even setting up Burger Kings—and in that I saw how the military moves forward.

On what we are now calling the eastern flank, I have witnessed a build-up of multiple NATO member states across not one country as we saw in Bosnia or Iraq but multiple countries. We need to get our heads around that and understand it, because that has not been seen since the second world war. I have experienced how they are working in unison and pulling together for a common goal that they take seriously.

I am proud to represent the UK and the House when I go overseas. I hold my head up high, and we are always met with great respect because of the UK's leadership in the response to Ukraine. I thank the Secretary of State, Defence Ministers and the whole team, who have got it right every step of the way. We are told that very clearly when we are overseas with other MPs. They hold us in such high regard and look to us to see what we are doing. I have not wavered in my belief that we have the most professional armed forces in the world—now and looking forward.

I have a couple of key points to put to the MOD for discussion. We always hear about numbers and percentages, and I take nothing away from people with those viewpoints. I was only elected in 2019, so this is really the first time that I have had the chance to analyse an integrated review—before that, I did not go into much detail; I just carried out the requirements or changes—and I probably look at it quite differently from a lot of people. I see it as a quite revolutionary change in mindset and way of thinking, and I believe that, in 10 years, we will look back and think, “That was a pivotal time in the defence of our nation.” It focuses on how we will be preparing warfare with our NATO allies and what we will look at.

I understand the points about the Indo-Pacific tilt and everything else, and I do not want to mistake threat and risk. The threat, which was identified as acute, still remains, and there is still a long-term threat from China that we must keep one eye on instead of miscalculating as we did long ago by giving Putin a free rein. I respect what Members say about the clear and present danger on the Russian border and about how we have got to identify that. We need to look at the integrated review, but not necessarily for lessons learned because there is evolution in warfare and we cannot take what is happening in Ukraine as a blueprint for the next battle that we will face. We need to look at evolution and short-term lessons to learn, but I believe that the concept of the integrated review is bang-on. The arguments around numbers and things like that must not come at the cost of lethality and agility.

One question raised on the enhanced forward presence in Estonia is about putting a division there. Do we want to put a division in such a confined space? There is a whole strategic argument around different areas for that, but the one thing that we must look at is what is now called permanent presence. Five months of pre-deployment training and six months over there is almost a year for the troops, once we have put in the rest and recuperation. The Secretary of State and I both served in Germany, and we could look to permanent deployment like that with a shift in mindset in line with the integrated review to set us up better. With the numbers that we have got, we could use our deployment around the world cleverly to create that agility and lethality. It is not

[Stuart Anderson]

an open and shut discussion. There are debates about how we move on that. I would always ask for more money and more troops, but not at the cost of agility and lethality, looking at the real world and where we are today.

I have been delighted to speak on this matter and to watch the evolution, from a young soldier to a politician being able to contribute.

4.15 pm

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Yesterday afternoon, I had the privilege to chair a fascinating discussion with Members of both Houses through the auspices of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. We also had with us the British ambassadors to Poland and Ukraine. A number of things came across very clearly in that discussion.

First, it was pretty clear to the participants that the war in Ukraine will not be over quickly. That has already been said by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The fundamental challenge from Vladimir Putin is not just to Ukraine, but to the entire rules-based international order and its significance cannot be underestimated. People are unclear what Putin's objectives may be, but it seems highly likely that his objective really is to defeat Ukraine and to occupy, by hook or by crook, in whatever timescale is necessary, the entire country. The implications of that are very serious and they are implications for us all.

Of immediate concern is what may be happening in the south of Ukraine, with Russia's slow but steady advance towards Odesa and then a possible link up with Transnistria, which has made a kind of unilateral declaration of independence at the behest of the Russians. Destabilisation would follow for Moldova as a whole, with implications for NATO and the European Union. These are big issues that we have to consider carefully and soberly, and—let us be honest—over a significant period of time.

It is also very clear that it is not too early for us to learn some lessons about what has happened and what is happening as we speak. The lessons have already been learned in Finland and Sweden. They have put forward their applications for membership of NATO. I am sure, despite the reservations expressed by Turkey, that they will be accepted—something we all must welcome.

A number of countries are rebooting their financial commitments to defence. In particular, Germany, as we have heard, is reorientating the whole scope of its economic development away from dependence on Russian energy to more self-sufficiency and a greater inclination towards the west rather than the east. Significantly—this is a pretty profound change for Germany—it has committed to a €100 billion increase to its defence budget, in the current financial situation in Germany. It has also committed itself to increasing its defence budget from 2022 to 2% of GDP. What is also significant is not just those pretty bold and emphatic statements, but the fact that there is in Germany cross-party consensus to a large extent about the need to do that. That underlines that we, too, accept that a fundamental realignment of foreign policy is taking place, which we must engage in, and we must be fully aware of its implications.

For the United Kingdom, too, there are very important issues that we must get to grips with very soon. One of the most important is that the cuts to our armed forces,

in particular the Army, have to be reversed. Quite frankly, it is indefensible that the Government are still entertaining the idea of reducing the size of the British Army by 10,000; in the present context, such a reduction is ridiculous. As the Defence Committee has been saying consistently for some time, there also needs to be a consistent, strategic increase in the moneys we allocate to defence, and I believe that 3% should be the absolute minimum for our future commitments.

We also need to set in train a fundamental sorting out of our defence procurement process. Okay, it has been a problem for a long time, and fingers can be pointed in a whole host of directions, but given the importance of defence procurement it really does need to be sorted out once and for all. A cornerstone of any new strategy must be the development of sovereign capability; we must have a proper, well-thought-out, well-structured and strategic industrial strategy for developing the defence capability of this country, and that must be based on our indigenous entrepreneurship, workforce and talents.

A number of Members have referred to the integrated review, and it is clearly important. The tilt to the east, which has been referred to by many Members, is all well and good, and I understand that we must not turn a blind eye to what is happening with China—of course we should not; that is a long-term, possibly real threat. However, we must recognise that the priority here and now is what is being imposed by Russia, and our alliance with our allies in Europe must be reinforced and deepened. That requires going beyond the debates about Brexit and so on; let us put that on one side, because it has happened—we all accept that. We really need to co-operate with our European partners, who take a like-minded view on defence matters and foreign affairs generally, so that we speak and act with our allies in the United States with one concerted, determined voice.

We need to do something else as well, although my list is by no means exhaustive. It is of critical importance long term that we make a real effort to engage with the population of this country. All too often it has been easy for people to see defence as being in one place and the population's priorities as being somewhere else. We must find a way to ensure consistently and over a long period—as they have in the Scandinavian countries and in Sweden in particular—that everybody understands that the country as a whole has a stake in its own defence. We need to have a discussion on that—cross-party if necessary—to make sure that that begins to happen in the United Kingdom. In other words, we need to develop national unity of purpose and the events in Ukraine make that an absolute necessity.

To conclude, it is well worth going back to what Ernie Bevin, the United Kingdom's Labour Foreign Secretary, said in May 1949. He said that we support NATO and that

“we shall act as custodians of peace and as determined opponents of aggression”—[*Official Report*, 12 May 1949; Vol. 464, c. 2022.] That was absolutely true in 1949, but it must be true also in 2022.

4.24 pm

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The ongoing terrible events in Ukraine remind us that we need to make sure that we not only maintain our defence expenditure, but invest wisely in capability that

will ensure that we remain a credible NATO ally. We have seen recently in Ukraine how good equipment can blunt the attacks of the most aggressive invader. Op Orbital, which began in 2015 in response to Russian aggression in the Donbas and Crimea, has been a successful training mission to equip Ukrainian forces and is paying huge dividends now as Ukraine's army has risen magnificently to the challenge. This is the best possible example of the value of investing in training and equipment.

The history of the last century shows us what happens when countries seek to appease dictators and are willing to trade other people's freedoms for their own security. It is for this reason that the Washington treaty signed in 1949 bound the founding members of the Atlantic alliance together with a pledge enshrined in article 5 that an attack on one member was an attack on all. Since then, the Atlantic alliance, the most successful military alliance in history, has helped to ensure the freedom of this country and western Europe, especially during the cold war, in the face of an aggressive Soviet Union. A mark of its success is that the original group of 12 founding nations has expanded to 30 today. It is no coincidence that, as soon as they were able to escape the yoke of Soviet tyranny, our neighbours in central and eastern Europe sought to join NATO. The fact that now both Finland and Sweden—long bywords for neutrality—have taken the first steps to join the NATO alliance shows the attraction of it as well as its reputation.

This country has always placed NATO at the heart of its defence policy, and the Ministry of Defence characterises the UK's armed forces as "Allied by design". Unlike Russia, this country has allies and partners around the world, and our NATO allies know that the UK will stand with them. We train together on a regular basis—something which should never be sacrificed on the altar of savings by the Treasury. We must increase our defence expenditure.

As a former British Defence Secretary, Denis Healey—another gunner—who was the military beach commander at Anzio said in 1969:

"Once we cut defence expenditure to the extent where our security is imperilled, we have no houses, we have no hospitals, we have no schools. We have a heap of cinders." —[*Official Report*, 5 March 1969; Vol. 779, c. 551.]

Or, as we are seeing in the Ukraine, piles of rubble.

The invasion of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was a much-needed wake-up call for the Atlantic alliance, but it was not an easy matter to stir up all of its members. In 2016 President Obama spoke of "European free riders" who relied far too much on the United States for their security under the nuclear umbrella. In 2019 President Macron accused the alliance of being brain dead.

Since 2014 the UK has contributed elements in the air policing mission in the Baltic on five occasions, as well as on the ground in Estonia, in the NATO battlegroup, since it was established in 2017. One of my sons, Michael, a fourth generation gunner, a Bombardier with 1 Royal Horse Artillery, has served in Estonia with his regiment and has just returned from a major exercise in Germany. I am pleased to see that we now have a brigade headquarters in Estonia.

If Putin thinks that he can unsettle the NATO alliance by his casual reference to Russia's "massive nuclear" forces, he is very much mistaken. Predictably, that has led to calls from some in this House, namely the Scottish

National party, that we should rid ourselves of the nuclear deterrent. To those who say that we can never use it, I gently remind them that we are deploying it and relying on it every single day. Talk of the use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia must also be dealt with by leaders being firm in their resolve to maintain the alliance's undertaking that an attack on one is an attack on all.

Events in Ukraine have given the international community a shock, but Russia's actions remind us all that rogue nation states still retain the capacity to act violently when they think they can get away with it. We were beginning to get used to the idea of counter-insurgency, grey zone and cyber warfare, believing that this was the pattern for future conflicts. Putin may have been encouraged by the weak western response to the situation in Syria and the weak response to his initial aggression in Georgia and Crimea. It is worth reminding ourselves that the mission in Afghanistan was a NATO one. It was begun as an article 5 mission—the only time article 5 has been invoked so far after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, so the shambolic abandonment of Afghanistan created a very dangerous perception of weakness of the west and NATO among our enemies around the world.

Russia is attempting to weaponise its gas supplies. This has long been foretold by those of us who warned of the dangers posed by the Nordstream gas pipeline. So alongside deterrence, we must relearn the need for resilience, in our supply chains as well as our food and energy security. I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to reinforcing our sovereign defence manufacturing capability.

While we congratulate ourselves on our united stance against Putin's aggression, some members of the NATO alliance were initially reluctant to commit to it. In the Ministry of Defence Command Paper, the Government announced the creation of the Ranger Regiment. This, and the sort of training missions that we have seen in Operation Orbital, will boost the ability of our NATO allies to defend themselves.

The message from the House to our allies must be that for as long as the UK remains a leading member of NATO, we will invest in our security to ensure our freedom, and we recommend that all our NATO allies do the same.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. The winding-up speeches must begin no later than 4.40 pm. I call Mr Baron.

4.30 pm

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Let me start by commending the Secretary of State and his Front-Bench team for their leadership on Ukraine. I also commend those on both Front Benches for their contributions to the debate. Indeed, I commend all the contributions. This is important, because if we are to move the dial on this issue when it comes to defence spending, it will require collaboration on a cross-party basis. We should not underestimate the importance of that if we are to convince the country that we need to spend more on defence. As we all know, the defence of the realm is the first duty of Government. We need our leadership—our respective party leaders—to wake up to that.



[Mr John Baron]

Having myself served in the 1980s in Germany, including Berlin, in Northern Ireland and with the United Nations elsewhere, I think we are all very much in agreement in wanting to commend the men and women serving in our armed forces—now and in the past—who have been prepared, and are prepared, to put their lives on the line and make the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of the liberties that we enjoy in this country today.

As some colleagues have already mentioned, the invasion of Ukraine is a wake-up call. It has, perhaps, given NATO a fresh purpose, and it has certainly reminded NATO of its original purpose. I would contend that for too long the west has been complacent. At the end of the cold war, we believed that the very concept of democracy would sweep the field. Everything was right about it: who could argue against it? However, democracy is a fragile concept; we need only look at what happened on Capitol Hill in the United States a few years ago to be reminded of that fact. Democracy needs nurturing; it needs encouraging; it needs defending. That was brought into sharp contrast by the recent vote in the United Nations when more than half the world's population, as represented by their Governments, failed to condemn the invasion of Ukraine. It is a stark lesson that perhaps, with the coming of the new cold war, we need to resource properly—and, I would argue, spend more on—both our hard and soft power capabilities in order to win the argument.

A number of us in this place, on both sides of the House—for this is not a party political issue—have been warning of the dangers of potentially hostile states, including Russia, for some time. I know that many would disagree, but I would humbly suggest that this country became distracted, as did the west generally, by a number of what I would term foolish interventions, starting with Iraq in 2003. That is now history, but we need to remember that Russia still occupies roughly a fifth of Georgia, which it invaded in 2008. These are very real dangers now, and it is the present with which we have to deal.

Against that backdrop, I was appointed chair of the 1922 defence committee, and was tasked with soliciting the views of Conservative Back Benchers on what our defence priorities should be. Our report was released last week, and is now with the Government. We had a good discussion with the Defence Secretary on Monday, and I look forward to continuing that discussion with the policy unit at No. 10 and, indeed, with the Prime Minister.

In the few minutes that are left to me, it may be helpful if I give a brief summary of the main themes that emerged from the report. There was a wide consensus that the integrated review—and perhaps more importantly, the associated documents that followed it, such as the Defence Command Paper—required revisiting. The integrated review was predicated on peacetime conditions, which frankly no longer exist. It does not need to be torn up and rewritten from scratch, but it does need updating, with an examination carried out as to what equipment and manpower Britain needs to protect its own and its allies' security. We suggest in the report that there should be a moratorium on any defence cuts until that exercise is complete. There is little point in shedding personnel, weapons, tanks, aircraft or whatever and then finding out that we might need them.

Conservative Back Benchers are adamant that Defence spending should be meaningfully and substantially increased. Instead of targeting a certain percentage of GDP, which is affected by the ebb and flow of the economy, Britain should, in the light of this review exercise, work out which specific capabilities it requires in manpower and matériel, and bid to achieve those. In addition, the report suggests that the cost of military and MOD civilian pensions should not come out of the Defence budget. Neither should the costs of the nuclear deterrent come out of the Defence budget. It is after all a strategic asset; it should be completely separate. The games that have been played in the past by including the nuclear deterrent cost in the Defence budget to ensure that we hit a certain percentage should, frankly, be left in the playground. We are dealing with the defence of the realm and we need to attach to this debate the severity and sincerity that is required to ensure that we do what is right. We should not be playing politics with figures.

The report made a number of other recommendations. It concluded that the Government should take steps to expand homegrown talent and skills in our defence industry. That would boost the defence sector as well as our sovereign defence capabilities. It also makes the point that we should adopt a more strategic view when deciding whether to allow foreign bids for defence companies. On procurement, it recognises that reform is being introduced to the MOD's procurement system, which does not have the best reputation, as we know. The committee also concluded that the MOD should give greater thought to buying off-the-shelf equipment rather than going down the bespoke route. A weapons system that is 80% perfect and available at speed and scale is sometimes preferable to a system that is 100% perfect but unavailable. We talked about having a deep stockpile of advanced weapons and ammunition. Ukraine has shown just how quickly we can get through our stockpiles. We have run out of serious weaponry in this country, and we need to ensure that we learn the lessons from that. At the bare minimum, we need to ensure that a rock-solid supply chain is in existence so that these weapons can be produced even in wartime conditions.

We suggested that consideration should be given to improving pay and accommodation, because this is not just about weaponry; it is very much about personnel, and we should never forget those on the frontline. Improving pay and accommodation is of great importance, as is ensuring that greater support is available to support soldiers' mental health. We also suggested—like everyone else in this place who has served, I have a vested interest, and I declare it—that recruitment should be taken back in-house and associated with the county associations that made the regimental system so strong and a major source of endurance on the regimental front. Outsourcing has not been a success.

We stand at a pivotal point. Given how fragile the concept of democracy is, we need a rounded, all-encompassing approach incorporating both hard and soft power assets—which require additional funding—to ensure that we do indeed talk softly but carry a big stick. If we do not embrace the concept of ensuring that we have a full range of capabilities relative to our assessment of the risks—risks that have increased since Ukraine—while always pursuing diplomacy, conflict will become more likely. I sincerely hope, as we all do, that the lesson of Ukraine will be the wake-up call that it is.

4.40 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Labour's commitment to NATO is unshakable. Eighty-five days ago, when Russia illegally invaded Ukraine, we faced a choice as a Parliament, a country and an alliance—to let Putin divide us or to stand strong with our allies in Ukraine—and we chose well. Eighty-five days later, NATO is more united than ever before, with historic bids from Finland and Sweden and with member state after member state rebooting its defence plans. Let us say very clearly that Putin's gamble to fracture us has backfired.

Labour is proud to be part of this united front, as we have heard today, just as we are proud of the men and women in Britain's armed forces who are deployed across the NATO alliance and further afield. We are also proud that NATO and the principle of collective security are stitched into the history of the Labour party, thanks to the Attlee Government playing such a pivotal role in bringing the alliance into being in 1949.

Just as we look to the history of NATO, we must look to its future, too. There are some big questions. How do we best support our Ukrainian friends through the new phases of this conflict? How should we approach NATO 2030, the new Strategic Concept for the alliance? How do we keep Britain a leader in international security and truly a force for good? As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, how do we protect the rules-based order? As my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said, how do we make sure that there is renewed cross-party unity of purpose to make this case, free from the party political distractions that do the debate no service?

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay for his speech. I am interested in reading the 1922 defence committee's report, but he may have summarised it so effectively that he does not need to leak a copy to the Opposition. He will find that, on both sides of the House, an awful lot of people were nodding during his speech, and I hope the Ministers heard what he said loud and clear.

Yesterday I attended the unveiling of the memorial to lost submariners. Since the Submarine Service came into existence, the United Kingdom has lost 5,960 submariners. The unveiling of the memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire shows just how important their sacrifice has been, and it sits alongside memorials to fallen comrades in every single service, representing people from across our country and, indeed, across the world who made the sacrifice in support of the freedoms we enjoy today. It is worth remembering those who came before us and those who served.

On the challenge before us, let us be in no doubt that NATO is the best way for western democracies to stand united and together in the face of renewed Russian aggression and an uncertain future. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) and the Secretary of State both said, agility and flexibility are important to our alliance, but we now need to think carefully about how we shift from crisis management in the early stages of this war to medium-term military support.

That means the UK Government, NATO and our allies continuing to reinforce our Ukrainian friends with weapons and ammunition while also setting up the

conditions for economic recovery and providing hope and determination to deliver the brighter future of a free, democratic and peaceful Ukraine, with Russian forces, defeated and withdrawn, unable to threaten that country and its people ever again. It means supplying more next-generation light anti-tank weaponry, loitering munitions, armour and artillery pieces, alongside defence equipment and medical packs—that is something we must do across the alliance—but it also means renewing our own strategic approach, as mentioned by Members on both sides of the House. I think it has been done without a partisan spirit, and in the best interests of our country and our collective defence.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I will have had one thing in common: watching the TV last Saturday, because we are both fans of Eurovision. I echo the congratulations of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) to the Kalush Orchestra on Ukraine's winning entry. I am not certain that President Putin is a fan of Eurovision or whether he was watching on Saturday, but if he was, he would have seen a great evening of costumes, song and solidarity. Uniting NATO against his criminal invasion is quite an achievement for the Russian President, but uniting Europe and Australia on Eurovision is an achievement equally worthy of song. I like the Secretary of State's words, "One way or another, it will take place in Ukraine." I look forward to watching it from Ukraine with him next year.

Turning to events closer to home, the NATO conference in Madrid next month will mark a crucial juncture in international security, establishing NATO's vision for the next decade or so. As the shadow Defence Secretary says, it is important that the doors are not closed to civil society or to Opposition parties, because this is the moment to bring more players together in the solidarity and common endeavour that Members on both sides of the House have spoken about today. I would be grateful if the Minister for the Armed Forces set out how the Government plan to approach that conference, what the strategic concept will do and how it will fit with the integrated review, especially if it is such a departure from NATO's current operating procedures.

Britain must also put democratic resilience on the agenda in Madrid. Liberal democracies must be better attuned to non-conventional threats, from election meddling to the spreading of misinformation online. There is a new home front in our defence against hostile actors: it is a digital home front, and we must not ignore it. We also need strong UK leadership in NATO to pre-empt Putin's next steps, including in the Baltic, the Balkans, Kaliningrad and the high north. A new strategic concept must also have a plan for the Arctic, as the climate means that new shipping routes are opened there and new threats exist.

Britain must champion co-ordination and interoperability among NATO friends and allies, because as NATO members rightly raise their defence spending and invest in their inventory, there is a risk that that new investment will be nation-specific and will not have the interoperability that we are seeing across the alliance. That must mean weaponry, bullets, vehicles and communication. For instance, the US is moving its bullet calibre from a NATO standard to a new US standard. We need to be aware that this is already happening. How will that interoperability work in the next decade? We need to ensure that we all stand together.

[Luke Pollard]

Labour places the highest priority on security in Europe, the north Atlantic and the Arctic. Before we tilt to the Indo-Pacific, we must first secure our own backyard. The illegal invasion of Ukraine reinforces NATO as our primary UK security obligation. We want Britain to be NATO's leading European nation, but our place at the front of the pack is not automatic or guaranteed and we should not be complacent. As our allies reboot defence spending, the question must be why the UK Government have not done so and why the flaws in the integrated review are not being fixed. Ministers should rewrite defence plans, review defence spending, rethink cuts to the Army, reform defence procurement and renew our international friendships.

Finally, let us not forget what NATO represents. It is about peace over war, democracy over tyranny, collective security over individual vulnerability, and hope over fear. We derive our strength from those principles and values. As President Obama once said, it is not might that makes right. Quite the reverse: right makes might. NATO is Britain's best option for defence. It is our best option for international security. It is our best option for collective defence. It is our best option for upholding our values. For those reasons, Labour's commitment to NATO will remain unshakeable.

4.49 pm

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey):** I thank all colleagues for their contributions to the debate. As ever over the past four or five months, it has been defined by gentle disagreement politely put by well-informed contributors to the debate around defence and security in the Euro-Atlantic.

NATO is inescapably the foundation on which Euro-Atlantic security is based. It is, always was and has proven itself over the past three months still to be the most enormous deterrent, even against Putin at his most belligerent. Other multinational fora, many of which have been mentioned today—the UN, the European Union, the G7, the coalition of donors that sit outside NATO and the coalition of those who have imposed sanctions on Russia—have all been able confidently to make interventions to try to resolve the conflict, safe in the knowledge that NATO's overwhelming firepower keeps the conflict contained within Ukraine. That has enabled many international fora to take measures to impose cost on Russia and try to persuade it to change course.

Not only does NATO have an enormous technological and numerical advantage but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) made clear, the nuclear deterrent is inescapably important to the deterrence that NATO provides. That is why the SNP's positions on nuclear and on NATO are so contradictory. Scotland's geography is the gatepost on the southern side of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. That is the most strategic gateway to the north Atlantic and is essential to all NATO's plans. Right now, at the very tip of Scotland, some of the most advanced anti-submarine warfare capabilities are based at RAF Lossiemouth. They are there because one of Europe's best-funded and biggest air forces is able to have those capabilities alongside the fast air that polices threats in the Norwegian and northern seas and beyond.

Of course, Scotland hosts the nuclear deterrent on which so many countries around NATO depend, because it is the only nuclear deterrent that is assigned to NATO. It therefore seems to me more than a little contradictory that a party that wants to expel the UK's nuclear deterrent from Scotland wants to apply to join an alliance that is ultimately underpinned by that very same deterrent.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will be brief. After a vote for independence, who will the nuclear deterrent belong to?

**James Heapey:** I am trying hard to follow the question. The answer is either that it belongs to the United Kingdom and the Scottish Government would insist on its removal—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes—so it is not ours.

**James Heapey:** Yet the hon. Gentleman's position and that of his party is that he would want to join an alliance whose deterrence is underpinned by that deterrent. It feels inconsistent. To NATO countries around the alliance, the idea that that pivotal geography on the southern end of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap should wish to break away from one of the world's biggest, best-resourced and best-trained armed forces seems like absolute nonsense.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I agree. The argument is clear: NATO is a nuclear alliance. SNP Members always refer to other countries in NATO that do not have nuclear weapons, but those countries have a commitment not only to receive nuclear weapons but, in some cases, to have aircraft that deliver them. Would a future Scottish air force have to deliver the nuclear deterrent?

**James Heapey:** That is an interesting point. It seems to me that NATO is one of the most powerful arguments for the Union, because if one supports NATO, surely one continues to support the Union.

Many colleagues have discussed the Madrid conference and shown particular interest in the strategic concept. Fundamentally, the strategic concept has three key elements for which we should be looking out and in which the UK has particular interests.

The first key element of the strategic concept relates to the resilience of member states and the wider alliance, and to the interweaving of national security plans, reinforced by a wider NATO mass at appropriately high readiness, with robust enablers and industrial bases to get NATO into the fight and sustain it once it is there.

The second element is adapting and modernising around advanced technologies. Inescapably, the battle space is changing. Everyone harks back to the armour-on-armour conflict of the past, and, of course, as we have seen in Ukraine, there is still a place for it, but, inescapably, there are technological advances that cannot be avoided and that the alliance must embrace. Missile technology is in the ascendancy. Cyber and space remain pivotal, even if their role in Ukraine has not been as great as we expected, and the alliance must embrace them.

The third element is competing and integrating across domains using both military and non-military tools. Far too often in discussion, NATO is viewed through a military lens when the nature of competition is now



more than just military mass on mass; it is the ability to bring to bear the full effects of the state, and all states within the alliance, to impose cost on the adversary.

It is a selective retelling of history if the UK's own increase in defence spending is ignored. I would argue that the UK led the way in encouraging people to increase defence spending in anticipation of the way the world was developing. Many countries have now followed, which is enormously welcome. That has changed the Euro-Atlantic security situation beyond recognition. In particular, Germany's spending as a large continental power in the middle of Europe has massively changed things. It gives the UK and others a lot to reflect on around the capabilities that we should seek, given the mass that Germany and Poland will have in the centre of Europe.

It is not just the cash spent on military mass that has changed; there has been a huge geo-strategic shift. As Members across the House have remarked, the fact that Finland and Sweden have abandoned decades of neutrality to join the alliance is a quite remarkable development—perhaps the most vivid example of just how badly Putin has miscalculated in his strategic aims for this conflict.

I do not accept the Opposition's charge that the integrated review has been overtaken by events. The IR was fundamentally about a return to systemic competition. I have an awful lot of time for the shadow Secretary of State, as he knows, but when he said that there was a section on the Indo-Pacific but not on Russia, I had a quick flick through the IR and the defence Command Papers since the IR. I found that almost every paragraph mentions NATO, Russia or the Euro-Atlantic. The one part that does not is the section on the Indo-Pacific to which he refers.

In any case, the argument that the UK can focus only on the Euro-Atlantic is just not sound. The reality—this feels rather like watching my son's football team play the Cheddar under-10s, where they all run around following the ball—is that there is lots to distract us in Europe right now, but there is a world beyond that is increasingly unstable and insecure. It is struggling with high food and fuel prices, which brings instability, as we saw in the Arab spring. The UK needs to keep an eye on that beyond Europe and remain engaged with it, because Iran, China, Russia and violent extremist organisations are all looking to use the west being distracted as an opportunity to stake their claim.

**Mr Baron:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**James Heappey:** If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will push on because I have only a minute and a half to go.

I pay tribute to our armed forces deployed right now across the entire eastern flank of NATO, in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, in the sea as well as in the air. Thousands of them are deployed, and they are enjoying their service alongside their NATO allies. They are coming to understand exactly what it is to be a part of NATO, believing in the collective defence of countries on the other side of Europe and being willing to give their lives in their defence, as the NATO treaty requires.

We will continue lethal aid to Ukraine for as long as it is required. We are sending in a great deal of our own stuff, but we are also bringing influence to bear to encourage others around the world to send theirs. Then

there is the race for Ukraine to rearm more quickly than a sanction-ridden Russia. We are working hard with the Ukrainians to understand what their requirements will be, work out how to get them the platforms and deliver the training that they will need to operate them. Of course, colleagues in the rest of Government are working to rebuild Ukraine when the conflict finishes. We must not get carried away by any of the successes for Ukraine in recent weeks. A great deal of hard fighting remains. There is no celebration when Russia fails, but Russia is failing far too often. We will continue to do everything we can to support Ukraine. NATO will continue to reinforce its eastern flank to reassure our allies there, and the UK will continue to do all we can to ensure that Putin fails.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** It has been my honour to chair this debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered NATO and international security.

## PETITION

### Waverley Junior Academy

5 pm

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I rise to deliver a petition on behalf of the residents of Rother Valley, calling on Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to take urgent and immediate action to extend the number of school places at Waverley Junior Academy for local children by introducing temporary classrooms this September so that no child loses out, as well as finding a long-term, permanent solution for the future.

The petition, both online and on paper, has received strong local support, with around 2,000 constituents signing it. The people of Rother Valley call on Rotherham council to reflect local needs in its decisions and on developers to build the infrastructure needed for the newly built communities. It is high time that the local authority and the developers delivered on that priority.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to implore Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to implement a temporary solution to this problem, in the form of temporary classrooms, to enable local children to attend their local school.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the constituency of Rother Valley,*

*Declares that provision of school places at Waverley Junior Academy must be extended for applicants this September via temporary classrooms; further that it is unacceptable that 39 children from the village, some living less than 200 metres from the school, have failed to get a place because Rotherham Council failed to adequately predict the level of need for places; and further that developers must follow through on their commitment to adequately build the infrastructure needed to support communities.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to implore Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to implement a temporary solution to this problem, in the form of temporary classrooms, to enable local children to attend their local school.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P002731]

## East Suffolk and Wherry Railway Lines

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

5.1 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Earlier this month, on 3 May, I helped unveil a timeline on Lowestoft station, the UK's most easterly station, to mark the 175th anniversary of the railway arriving in the town. Lowestoft is the end destination for both the East Suffolk line and one of two for the Wherry line, the other being Great Yarmouth. Those routes serve the most easterly points in the UK, which are now hubs for sustainable energy, manufacturing, engineering, hospitality and hopefully a revitalised fishing industry.

The timeline reveals a long and illustrious past. Looking to the future, if we make the right decisions and secure the right investment now, we can bring major benefits and job opportunities to communities all along the two lines in both East Suffolk and East Norfolk. The two railways pass through and are close to communities that Transport East assesses as being transport deserts, where there are few realistic alternatives to the private car.

Passenger numbers on both lines have recovered well from covid, particularly for leisure-based travel. In April 2022, the numbers on both lines were up 19% on the equivalent period in 2019. In recent years, some significant improvements have been made to the services on both lines, but there is so much more that can be done and considerable scope for further enhancement. It should be borne in mind that the journey time from Lowestoft to Ipswich is now longer than when the service was first provided in 1859.

In the past, the East Suffolk and Wherry lines have brought considerable benefits to the area, serving and supporting residents, facilitating trade and business and promoting tourism. The arrival of the railways was a catalyst for bringing prosperity to the area.

Today, the railway can play the same role as it did 175 years ago in a number of ways. Enhanced services improve connectivity. That is particularly important in a coastal area, where roads are not good. There is a need to provide reliable, frequent and fast services that connect seamlessly with the rest of the rail network. That is important for those working in the energy sector, whether in the transitioning oil and gas sector, offshore wind or nuclear. That workforce requires regular and reliable transport to the area. Strong rail services are crucial to meeting net zero. There is also, increasingly, the opportunity to return freight to the railways from over-congested roads, with opportunities to do this on both lines, from the port of Lowestoft, and taking an enormous amount of materials to the proposed Sizewell C power station, to which there is a link to the East Suffolk line at Saxmundham.

Stations must be attractive, functional and accessible so as to help draw more customers. Several on the two lines are in need of upgrade, such as Great Yarmouth. Stations and their surrounds can also be a focus for regeneration. This is particularly the case in Lowestoft, where the station occupies a unique location in the town centre and where the community rail partnership, the Lowestoft Central Project and the Railway Heritage Trust have carried out considerable improvements to the station in recent years, with more work proposed.

There are also exciting plans in the town improvement plan, as part of the towns fund bid, to enhance the surrounding area and to make Station Square an attractive and desirable destination. Thinking laterally, the railways can be a source of innovation. Perhaps these two lines could be pilots for alternative-fuelled trains from local low-carbon sources, such as hydrogen or bioethanol.

Nationally, there has been significant investment in the rail network in recent years. On Tuesday, Her Majesty the Queen opened the new Elizabeth line, construction of HS2 is well under way, lines closed following the Beeching report are due to be reopened, and a significant investment is being made in ticketing services. These proposals are welcome, but it is important that they complement and connect into the whole rail network. There is a concern that the East Suffolk line and the Wherry line—which are, respectively, east of Ipswich and east of Norwich—are left out on a limb and are not properly incorporated into the rest of the national rail network. They are not just branch lines like something out of “The Titfield Thunderbolt” but vital economic arteries serving growing communities.

I shall provide a very brief summary of the two lines over the past 175 years. In 1844, Sir Samuel Morton Peto purchased Lowestoft harbour and announced plans to construct the railway from Reedham to Lowestoft. After gaining parliamentary approval, the Norfolk Railway obtained a lease to construct the line, and work commenced in 1846, with the Lowestoft to Norwich line opening to goods traffic on 3 May 1847. Following the arrival of the railway, Lowestoft grew rapidly, with the railway developing and operating the fish market, the harbour and the south pier, as well as a number of rail-related manufacturing supply networks, including the harbour engineering works, the sleeper depot, and a concrete products factory. In addition, in the south of the town there was a network of freight lines serving shipyards and factories. Morton Peto also developed much of Victorian Lowestoft, which became a fashionable resort that was likewise served by the railway. By the 1920s, Lowestoft was the busiest port owned and operated by the Great Eastern Railway.

The gradual decline of the railway network in east Suffolk and east Norfolk probably started in 1963 with the publication of the Beeching report, which initially recommended closure of the East Suffolk line. However, in 1966 the line was reprieved from closure following a successful campaign led by the East Suffolk Travel Association, which is still going strong and of which I am a member. In 1970, despite local opposition, the direct line between Lowestoft and Yarmouth South Town was closed, and in 1973 the transportation of fish by rail from Lowestoft also came to an end. This was followed in 1984 by the ending of direct through services from Liverpool Street to Lowestoft. In 1992, despite local opposition, the concourse roof at Lowestoft station was removed—although there are now exciting plans to reinstate a lightweight version.

The good news is that the decline in the latter part of the 20th century has been reversed in the first two decades of the 21st century. The Beccles loop was constructed on the East Suffolk line, enabling an hourly service to Ipswich to be reintroduced from late 2012. In the subsequent 10 years, passenger numbers have doubled. In 2013, a new bus interchange facility was built at Lowestoft station. Local community groups have come

together to upgrade facilities at stations, including those previously mentioned at Lowestoft and Campsea Ashe, but also at Beccles, where there is a need for accessibility improvements, as there is now at Halesworth, too.

The most notable improvement occurred in 2019, when Greater Anglia introduced a brand new fleet of trains across its network, thereby dispelling East Anglia's unwanted reputation as an elephants' graveyard, where old trains that other regions no longer wanted came to see out their final days in service. The new bimodal fleet is more comfortable and has more seats, good accessibility, with low floors and retractable steps, and full wi-fi. Further improvements have taken place since, including the £60 million investment in re-signalling the Wherry line and the reopening of the freight sidings at Lowestoft, from where since 2020 aggregates brought into the adjoining port have been transported to the midlands.

Recently, Network Rail has announced plans to refurbish the historic swing bridges at Oulton Broad, Somerleyton and Reedham. As mentioned, EDF is working up plans with Network Rail for as much as possible of the material and aggregates required for the construction of Sizewell C, which is a nationally important strategic infrastructure project, to be brought in by rail.

These upgrades are welcome and provide a good foundation on which to improve the two lines still further so that they can make an enduring contribution to the local economy. However, there is concern that with a focus on major projects elsewhere, the two lines could be overlooked. The fact that the 2016 franchise commitment to reintroduce a through service from Lowestoft to Liverpool Street has been dropped from the new contract that Greater Anglia signed with the Department for Transport last September has come as a major disappointment to many.

So as not to lose momentum, I suggest that the following issues need to be addressed. First, while not actually on the two lines, the upgrading of Haughley junction on the Great Eastern line and the improvements at Ely junction will have a beneficial knock-on impact that will cascade right across East Anglia. They will not only increase capacity, but facilitate the transfer of freight from road to rail. These projects must be included in the forthcoming rail network enhancements pipeline, and I know that colleagues from across the three countries of Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire will be repeating those requests to my hon. Friend the Minister in the coming days.

Secondly, services on the East Suffolk and Wherry lines must properly connect into the national rail network. That means not only the aforementioned through service to Liverpool Street, which initially could be trialled on a weekend seasonal basis, but improved connections to the Queen Elizabeth line at Shenfield and Stratford, to Cambridge, to Stansted and ultimately linking into the East West Rail project from Cambridge to Oxford.

Thirdly, the speed of the services must be reviewed. We now have faster trains, but they cannot go any quicker because of track constraints, such as single-line sections, level crossings and historical speed restrictions. The new trains are more powerful and can accelerate and decelerate quicker, and that should be reflected in the timetables, which should be reviewed. While it is important not to take any risks with safety, in the short term, Network Rail should be given more flexibility to make small-scale improvements under normal operator

maintenance renewal works, rather than having to go through the rail network enhancements pipeline process, which is cumbersome and is better suited to major large-scale projects, not local, quick-win initiatives.

In the longer term, journey times could be reduced further if level crossings were upgraded or closed and line speeds increased. Feasibility studies should be carried out to look into that issue in detail and come up with an agreed strategy for which we can then seek funding. The study should also consider the reliability of rail infrastructure. The Wherry line was closed in February due to flooding at Haddiscoe, and work should be carried out to mitigate that. There are also assets along both lines that are in need of renewal through Network Rail control period 7.

Fourthly, it is necessary to improve the frequency of services along both lines. It is clear that more regular services stimulate greater use. The hourly service on the East Suffolk line, which has resulted from the construction of the Beccles loop, has proved incredibly popular.

As part of the aforementioned studies, research should be carried out to ascertain what infrastructure improvements are necessary to enable half-hourly services to be introduced on both lines. That may involve the construction of further passing loops, which could also facilitate greater freight use, whether to Sizewell or from Lowestoft port, or possibly in due course from the sugar beet factory at Cantley. On the East Suffolk line, there is the possibility of further passing loops to the south to facilitate through services to Liverpool Street and to the north to enable the introduction of that half-hourly service.

Fifthly, in the longer term, the siting of stations and whether all trains should stop at all stations should be reviewed. In the Lowestoft area, it might be appropriate to consider having one consolidated station at Oulton Broad to serve the significant amount of residential development proposed in the immediately surrounding area, and to consider a station at Carlton Colville, where there has been significant development in recent years and where the line runs close to Suffolk Wildlife Trust's increasingly popular Carlton Marshes visitor centre. The opportunities for promoting tourism should be fully considered.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for giving way. I am very familiar with his area: indeed, when I drive in my constituency from Diss to Ditchingham, which is just east of Bungay in his constituency, I think I cross the Norfolk-Suffolk border four times. I should declare a further interest in that my grandfather lived in Lowestoft when I was a child. My great-grandfather took him to the coast, he took my father, my father took me and I take my sons.

In addition to the extraordinary growth in leisure use of local rail services, which I experience myself—it is sometimes difficult to get a seat at the weekend—does my hon. Friend agree that the biggest impression that we should leave with the Minister today is on his point about the vital economic arteries that serve growing local communities? The capacity for East Anglia to grow and to make a growing contribution to the national economy, given our size and scope and the availability of land, will be enhanced only if we get the investment that we need. The dropping of the commitment for the Lowestoft to Liverpool Street service should be reversed,



[Mr Richard Bacon]

and we would like to see the Department put pressure on for that to happen. The upside potential of the region is extraordinary, if only we get the investment.

**Peter Aldous:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend's points. East Anglia has enormous potential to add to the national economy and investment in rail will facilitate that.

Sixthly, we must think innovatively and out of the box. Although it is very early days, we could consider pilots for trains that are fuelled by local low-carbon fuels, such as hydrogen generated at Sizewell or bioethanol from sugar beet from Cantley.

Finally, two pernickety points must be addressed. First, the local community are doing great work in restoring Lowestoft station and its surrounds, but that work will move forward significantly if the disused and dilapidated building at the rear of the station is made available to East Suffolk Council so that it can bring forward plans for bringing it back into use. I understand that Network Rail has agreed to that, but the matter has been dragging on for some time. Secondly, a few years ago, improvements were carried out on the Wherry line at Oulton Broad North to reduce the time that the level crossing barriers are down across Bridge Road and reduce the amount of traffic that builds up on either side of the crossing. The re-signalling of the line has led to the barriers being down for longer, which is increasing congestion. Network Rail is working to resolve the problem, but it has been going on for some time.

In conclusion, I highlight the lead role that the East Suffolk and Wherry lines can play in levelling up across coastal East Anglia, so that our area is well placed to take advantage of the opportunities emerging in renewable energy, tourism, hospitality and a revived fishing industry. I urge the Minister to do all she can to get approval for the Haughley and Ely junction upgrades and to commission the feasibility studies into route and service upgrades along both the East Suffolk and Wherry lines.

5.19 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and congratulate him on securing this debate on the East Suffolk and Wherry railway lines. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) for his contribution. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made a number of points. I will endeavour to cover as many of them as I can in the time I have. However, he should rest assured that I was listening carefully to his contribution.

Recently, my hon. Friend unveiled a mural at Lowestoft railway station installed by the Wherry Lines Community Rail Partnership and the Lowestoft Central Project to commemorate 175 years since the arrival of the railway in Lowestoft with the Norwich-Lowestoft-Wherry lines railway. The arrival of the railway brought enormous growth and prosperity to the town, as we heard, attracting major industry, facilitating trading links through the port and creating a seaside resort. The railway still plays a crucial role for the local community and economy, providing connectivity for residents and visitors.

I understand the importance of the routes to Lowestoft and the connectivity that they provide across the wider area, which is vital to facilitating the region's development and further economic growth. With the growth of various industries in Lowestoft, including green energy and tourism, I appreciate the importance of convenient transport to the Government's levelling-up agenda.

During the debate, I have heard the request for direct services from Lowestoft to Liverpool Street. I recognise the importance and helpfulness of direct rail services into London, but I will explain that a number of other factors are under consideration to facilitate that on the route between London Liverpool Street and Lowestoft. The introduction of new direct services requires that there is sufficient capacity on the route to allow the service to operate in a manner that will not adversely impact the performance and operation of other services along the route. I understand that Greater Anglia has considered the introduction of a direct service to Lowestoft, but has regrettably concluded in the past that it was not feasible to implement that at the time due to operational, infrastructure and timetable factors.

Members will know that the Great Eastern main line is very congested, with a lack of space for extra services. Additionally, the East Suffolk line is constrained by single-line sections and, as we heard, many level crossings. The introduction of new services needs to be done in a way that does not adversely affect performance and create delays. That said, I have asked officials at the Department to request that Greater Anglia continues to look for opportunities to introduce a direct service in the future.

On a more positive note, I am pleased that Greater Anglia is part way through its full fleet replacement programme, with all its new Stadler trains in services on the rural routes from Norwich and Ipswich, and to Lowestoft. Those new trains have delivered significant improvement for customers. They are more comfortable, provide more seats and have much improved accessibility, with low floors and retractable steps. The Lowestoft regional trains connect into the new Stadler inter-city trains. Additionally, Greater Anglia is part way through its roll-out of new Alstom trains, with 63 out of the 133 five-carriage trains now in service across the region, again providing customers with a much improved journey experience, with many more seats, air conditioning, wi-fi and power points.

On another positive note, operational performance on the East Suffolk and Wherry lines has been very strong, with public performance measure levels of 95% for the Ipswich-Lowestoft services and 97% for the Norwich-Lowestoft services in the most recent rail period. In fact, the Anglia route had among the best on-time performance across the country in the last financial year.

Looking back at improvements on the route, I recognise the importance of the completion of the Beccles loop 10 years ago, which allowed the hourly service to commence from Ipswich to Lowestoft. That important investment, part-funded by Suffolk County Council, made a significant improvement to the timetable and provided a real alternative to road journeys.

Building on that, in 2020, more than 130 years of signalling history on the Wherry line entered a new era when—

**Peter Aldous indicated assent.**

**Wendy Morton:** My hon. Friend is nodding. A new signalling system was commissioned, following completion of work to introduce a new computerised signalling system, improving reliability of train services. Victorian mechanical signals, which had been in place for over 130 years, were replaced with a modern computer-based system, and as part of the project, a number of level crossings were also upgraded to improve crossing safety.

Despite the strong performance, the railway cannot be complacent, and we must continue to improve and invest. Network Rail continues to maintain and improve the rail infrastructure, and I understand that this autumn Network Rail will upgrade a number of important bridges in the region on the Wherry line. The work on the swing bridges at Oulton Broad, Somerleyton and Reedham will improve reliability for rail passengers and reduce disruption for boat users. Beginning this autumn, Network Rail engineers will upgrade the internal components of the three bridges. It is thought that the internal components of the three swing bridges have not been replaced in more than 100 years. Dating back to 1905, they require more frequent and costly maintenance. The upgrades will reduce the need for maintenance, ensuring the bridges will be able to operate more reliably throughout the year for rail passengers. This will also benefit river traffic by providing more reliable access to the local waterways, helping to support the local economy, especially through the busy summer tourist season.

I would like just quickly to take the opportunity to mention the recent Great British rail sale. To help passengers facing the rising costs of living, this was a scheme that we launched. The Great British rail sale offered up to 50% off more than 1 million tickets on journeys across Britain. It was targeted at leisure travellers, and the reason I mention this is that, as part of the sale, tickets from Lowestoft to London were just £6, which is incredibly good value for money.

Delivering for customers is of course essential. It is always good to see innovative projects to improve passenger experience when using our railway, so I was pleased to learn about the Katch on-demand electric bus scheme,

which I understand has been extended to the end of 2022. This taxi-bus route launched in the spring of 2021 as a 12-month pilot, connecting Wickham Market rail station, Wickham Market village and Framlingham on the East Suffolk line. It is great to see how this really important innovation for local transport can really improve the passenger experience. It provides bookable transport through a mobile app or by telephone, but with fares that are in line with a bus service. This is exactly the sort of initiative that is a really meaningful way to connect our local communities with people and places, and it shows the important role our railway has moving forward.

I am conscious of time, but I want to remind hon. Friends and colleagues that next week is Community Rail Week. I pay tribute to the team of volunteers who work with the community rail partnerships on this route. The East Suffolk lines and Wherry lines groups provide great links between local communities, stations and partners from the rail industry. As an example of the work they do, the mural I mentioned earlier, which my hon. Friend unveiled, was installed by the Wherry Lines Community Rail Partnership and the Lowestoft Central Project, which both the Wherry lines and East Suffolk lines groups were involved in. I know these partnerships are always looking for ways to improve their stations, the environment and train services, and they are always trying to raise the profile of our railways. In fact, I am hoping to visit—in a different part of the country—a community rail project next week.

I absolutely recognise the importance of the East Suffolk and Wherry railway lines. The new trains that have been rolled out on these lines really have delivered improvements and benefits for customers, but we should not stop there. We should continue to look for opportunities to deliver further improvements to the infrastructure and our railways in the region.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.28 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 19 May 2022

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

## Child Maintenance Service: Reform

1.30 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):  
I beg to move,

That this House has considered reforms to the Child Maintenance Service.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees, and I thank the Chairman of Ways and Means for allowing me to secure today's debate on child maintenance reform. I honestly did not know how to start this debate. I have been campaigning on this issue for seven years, and in a debate in July 2019 I asked for sweeping reforms of the Child Maintenance Service, which is a cry I repeat today. At the risk of repetition, deviation and very little hesitation, here I go again—that is the only funny in my speech.

I thank One Parent Families Scotland, Gingerbread and Mumsnet for their helpful briefings, and I thank One Parent Families Scotland and Gingerbread for the work they do to support families with child maintenance issues. I reaffirm that my interest and campaigning on this issue is based on the needs of the children involved, on the Child Maintenance Service being able to work effectively to support them, and on ensuring that those children receive the maintenance they are due.

It can be difficult for folk in a stable relationship to understand the difficulties faced by parents with care when trying to receive child maintenance from previous partners who renege on their responsibilities. There are millions of relationships that have fallen apart, but at no point should a relationship breakdown mean that parents do not have a responsibility for their children. It is a fact of life, however, that some parents just walk away and try to shrug off those responsibilities. At that point, I believe that the responsibility should fall on us all to support those children and make their lives better, yet in these rich nations children fall into poverty, and the Department for Work and Pensions fails them with a system that does not help them, writes of huge debts to them, and does not adequately enforce payment.

Child poverty in the UK is a national disgrace and a reflection on the Government's attitude to welfare. This is a Government who think it is fair to impose a benefit cap on families, for example, but children do not ask to be part of one-parent families where the paying parent is not facing up to their responsibilities. The Government and the DWP should not be failing them too.

Single parents with children are more likely to be in poverty, so any reduction in income is likely to be particularly harmful. In the face of the Tory-made cost of living crisis, maintenance matters even more in protecting children from poverty. That is why the SNP has been calling on the UK Government to introduce a minimum maintenance payment, to provide parents with care and their children a guaranteed income, and to prevent hardship and ensure a dignified standard of living.

Child maintenance arrears have also been exacerbated by shortfalls in making payments to parents who lost income during the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report in January this year showed that nearly half the children in lone-parent families live in poverty, compared with one in four children in couple families.

The workings of the CMS have been criticised by colleagues from all parties, either here in Westminster Hall or in the Chamber, and all Members will, at some time, be asked to help constituents with issues relating to the CMS. When the National Audit Office recently spoke to parents involved with the service as part of its report, they confirmed what many parents tell third sector organisations and their MPs: the system does not work for them or their children. In advance of this debate, I forwarded a list of asks to the Minister in order that I may have a fuller response today, and I really hope that will work.

The DWP is meeting its objectives in reducing reliance on state-administered maintenance, but Gingerbread is deeply concerned about the laissez-faire approach to understanding why so many families have no maintenance arrangements in place. One Parent Families Scotland states:

“A functioning CMS needs to offer bespoke advice and support to parents to reflect individual circumstances. It needs to give confidential help to those with more challenging living arrangements, such as domestic abuse, to safeguard the vulnerable. For instance, it should remove face-to-face meetings with ex-partners who have carried out domestic abuse to avoid power imbalances and coercive control. The CMS needs to advocate better on behalf of single parents to ensure that their voices are heard. However, the feedback from parents suggests that these objectives are not at present being met.”

A Mumsnet survey states that just 11% of parents described their experience of using the CMS as positive, with 73% describing it as negative, and 72% saying that using it has made their mental health and wellbeing worse. Paying and receiving parents told the NAO investigation that the CMS was not working properly for them.

The recent NAO report explores the failures of the CMS, showing that it is simply not working for far too many single parents. The report found that the UK Government have not learned one of the key lessons from the now-defunct Child Support Agency, and that in preventing arrears build-up, enforcement can be too slow to be effective. The report suggests that unless the UK Government write off more CMS debt, outstanding arrears will grow indefinitely. Indeed, they are forecast to reach £1 billion by March 2031 at current rates.

The DWP does not yet fully understand why those without an effective arrangement do not use its service, and it could do more to help prevent around half of direct-pay arrangements from failing, leaving maintenance unpaid. The DWP still has significant problems with its customer service, which undermines trust in the CMS. According to the latest DWP figures, in the quarter ending December 2021, out of over 158,400 paying parents due to pay via the collect and pay service, 32% paid no maintenance, 68% paid some maintenance, of which 23% paid up to 90% of the maintenance due for the quarter, and 45% paid over 90%. I do not like to use statistics in debates like this, but it is absolutely incredible that 32% of parents paid no maintenance.

[*Marion Fellows*]

The percentage of parents paying something toward their child's maintenance has fallen by four percentage points to 68% since the last quarter. The last time a compliance rate of 68% was observed was in March 2020. There has been an eight percentage point decrease in the percentage of parents paying over 90% of the maintenance due for the quarter since the quarter ending March 2021, falling steadily from 53% to 45%.

All concerned organisations representing parents and children involved with CMS are calling for the abolition of the £20 application fee and a 4% deduction from collect and pay arrangements, as those are a barrier to the poorest parents becoming involved with CMS in the first place. It might be hard for some of us to imagine the difference that £20 or 4% of a maintenance arrangement would make, but to some people that is a huge amount of money.

I am calling on the Minister and the Government to reduce the income charge threshold—currently 25%—to ensure that low-income non-resident parents are not disproportionately charged, and that higher-income non-resident parents pay their fair share. That is important when people change or lose jobs, as it affects the ability of some parents to pay the amount of maintenance due.

The withholding or restricting of child maintenance payments can be used as a tool for economic abuse. According to DWP data, in the quarter ending in December 2021, 60% of new applicants to the CMS were recognised as being survivors of domestic abuse, which is why the way they are treated is so important. When will DWP introduce a trauma-informed service delivery and appropriate training for staff to identify ongoing financial abuses, given the increasing number of CMS customers who have experienced domestic abuse? When will the service introduce better customer service and management for parents, such as having the same caseworker for individual cases? Having to phone up repeatedly, and getting someone different every time, is almost an abuse in itself.

The Government announced in March that they have plans for future changes to the CMS, such as including unearned income in child maintenance calculations, for which I have been calling for quite a while. The caveat, however, is that the Government have said they will do so

“when the legislation timetable allows”.

How long is that long grass? Why is this not a priority now? There is a cost of living crisis going on, and think of the difference it would make to children.

DWP figures also show that since 2021, when the CMS began, £451.1 million in unpaid maintenance has accumulated. That amounts to 8% of all maintenance due to be paid since the start of the service. The SNP has repeatedly called for effective enforcement action to be taken in the collection of maintenance arrears. Much stronger systems and resources need to be dedicated to tackling parents who attempt to avoid or minimise child support payments, and those who do not pay what has been agreed. Many parents game the system—they know that if they do not pay and are then called to account, they can pay a little and slip off the immediate register, and the children suffer even more.

The CMS simply is not working for some parents, and closer attention has to be paid to what parents are saying. One parent said:

“I tried to claim child maintenance and received a few erratic payments. It had to be collected through earnings arrestment. Every time the dad moved job, payments stopped and wouldn't restart for months. CMS said they couldn't find him and they were not allowed to search for him...I was told I should write him a letter that would be passed onto him. I didn't/couldn't...so I didn't make a new claim.”

Another said:

“I would improve the customer service; those working with communicating with parents using the service can be so insensitive when discussing personal situation and lacking in knowledge about the services provided.”

Another parent said:

“I've had to wait for more than a year for a response on more than one occasion (despite chasing) which is completely unacceptable. Upon phoning, any random person becomes your case worker and as my case is complex this is soul destroying. I've had complaints closed down without my agreement. Calculations performed incorrectly. The actual running total has had technical issues twice, so I don't know how much is owed etc and it's taken months to sort out. If you don't chase nothing is actioned. The portal can be like a black hole.”

Another said:

“Although I am on Collect and Pay the paying 'parent' is still getting away with non-payment and nothing is being done about payment of the arrears. Then they have the audacity to charge me 4% even though none of this is the child's fault and it's the child who is being deprived of what she is owed.”

When will the CMS stop writing off arrears, some still from the Child Support Agency? That money is due and should not be written off as children reach adulthood.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) secured an Adjournment debate on Tuesday on the specific issue of maintenance arrears, which he was correct to raise. He suggested home curfew as a consequence of not paying child maintenance. Although that sounds like a positive thing, it has unintended consequences in cases of domestic abuse and control, so I would urge caution on that. However, at present the DWP does have sanctions, such as confiscation of passports and driving licences. DWP figures show that from the quarter ending December 2019, four passports have been subject to either suspended or immediate confiscation orders, 10 driving licences have been disqualified either immediately or under a suspended order, and 362 prison sentences, suspended or immediate, have been passed. Do any of us really believe that is good enough?

I will not go over the list of asks because I have done that so often. I know the Minister will respond, but I want to reflect on what the organisations that deal daily with parents in the CMS system have said. The chief executive of One Parent Families Scotland, Satwat Rehman, said:

“Parents are facing huge delays in hearing back, poor customer service, and ultimately a failure to collect the payments. At a time when the cost of living is rising to impossible levels, with many families forced to choose between food and fuel, addressing these issues is more important than ever. No child should have to go without because one parent is choosing not to provide them with financial support when they are able to.”

The chief executive at Gingerbread, Victoria Benson, said:

“Child maintenance is not a 'nice to have' luxury, in many cases it makes the difference between a family keeping their heads above water or plunging into poverty.”

She also said:

“It’s clear that urgent changes need to be made to ensure the child maintenance system is fit for purpose and works for those who need to use it. Without reform more single parent families will experience poverty and more children will be exposed to ongoing disadvantage. Single parents and their children should be supported to thrive because of their family make up—not in spite of it.”

Mumsnet founder, Justine Roberts, said:

“Providing for your children is a fundamental responsibility, and it’s genuinely surprising that the Child Maintenance Service allows so many adults to evade it. Children from these families deserve better than to be treated as collateral damage when relationships break down.”

In this debate, I have tried to raise some of the issues expressed by those who use the service, because it is important that their voices are heard. The Child Maintenance Service has not been working effectively for years. I know there are huge numbers of parents who use direct pay, who are involved in collect and pay services, and who pay on time, but I am not here to press their case. I am here to make the case for children affected by parents who do not face up to their responsibilities—indeed, I think all hon. Members are here for that reason. Let us try to make the CMS work for the children who need it.

1.49 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing a debate on a service that is not often seen as a priority despite the essential issue that it should tackle.

When the Child Maintenance Service replaced the Child Support Agency in 2012, it was done under the guise of creating a more efficient system that would foster more collaboration between parents and ensure that children are properly supported financially. The Government are bringing forward further legislative reform to the service, and although that reform is absolutely necessary and long overdue, it must be done right. We cannot let another decade pass with problems going unaddressed. Parents have to pay to access the service, but the level of satisfaction is appallingly low.

In Scotland, about 92% of lone parents are single mothers. The poor accessibility of child maintenance is intrinsically gendered. Thirty-nine per cent. of children who live in single-parent families live in poverty, which is much higher than the average for all Scottish children. Research shows that if child maintenance were being paid as it should be, some 60% of those children would be lifted out of poverty. There is no excuse for that not to be immediately addressed.

In September last year, 59% of new claimants were recognised as victims of domestic abuse, as the hon. Lady said. Those women and men—they are overwhelmingly women—have been through some unimaginable things. We live in a society that tends to blame victims, whether consciously or not. We ask, “Why doesn’t she leave him? Why does she allow it to happen? Why isn’t she doing the right thing to protect her kids?” In most cases, domestic abuse happens slowly, so a victim might not realise it is happening until it is too late. There are so many barriers to leaving such situations, but they would not occur to someone who had not been through it.

When a victim does leave and manages to get the children out as well, she is further victimised by a system that allows her ex-partner to continue to exert

his control without consequence. She is left to pick up the pieces and become the sole provider to children they both created. Too many see child maintenance as some unjust tax that they have to pay to fund their ex’s lifestyle. They do not see it for what it is: their financial responsibility towards ensuring that their children have what they need to survive.

My office is no stranger to CMS complaints, and each complaint is as frustrating as the next, with the same problems and the same inadequate response. Most commonly, constituents come to me after receiving a mandatory reconsideration notice prompted by a request from their ex-partner to the CMS to lower payments. Sometimes, those payments are not even being made when a parent requests such a review. The notice invites the custodial parent to submit any evidence that they have in their favour. It does not explain on what grounds the reconsideration has been requested, however, and if the receiving parent does not know what the paying parent’s argument is, how can they provide evidence to counter it?

At the moment, I have two almost identical open cases that are completely unrelated. They both concern single mothers to two young sons and ex-partners who were working full-time until child maintenance was calculated. In a successful effort to avoid payment, the fathers went under the radar by claiming universal credit while working full-time for cash in hand. Both women have extensive evidence of that, which they have shared with the CMS and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs only to be told, “Sorry—nothing we can do.” In one of those cases, a CMS adviser even told a member of my staff over the phone that it was really frustrating and unfortunate because although my constituent had done everything right—everything she possibly could—it just would not change the outcome. That cannot be right.

I have seen parents’ statements showing that the paying parent owes them thousands in unpaid maintenance, yet the CMS has no power to address that—the same CMS that custodial parents are paying to provide that service. We have now reached a point whereby many parents do not even bother making a claim for child maintenance because it is more stress than it is worth for the pitiful amount that they will receive if they are lucky enough to receive any at all.

The National Audit Office’s March report found that there was no clear change in the number of families with functional maintenance arrangements, including those made outside the CMS. It estimated that for only one in three separated families—one third—is the agreed level of maintenance being paid in full. That is shocking. The NAO found the following:

“As at September 2021, 38,000 paying parents (around one in four) with an ongoing arrangement had not paid any maintenance on their Collect & Pay arrangement for more than three months, and 22,000 (around one in seven) had not paid for more than six months”.

The report also highlighted the issues about enforcement, and that enforcement of arrears did not necessarily impact on future compliance. There is really no consequence for avoidant parents.

Although reform of the system is of course hugely welcome, it must get to the root of the issues; it cannot be another plaster over the cracks. The DWP must be sure that it fully understands the heart of the issues, and



[Margaret Ferrier]

any proposed solutions must work for the receiving parent. It is categorically wrong that the receiving parent, who already shoulders the overwhelming burden of providing for their children, is charged to use the service. One Parent Families Scotland reports that the minimum cost of raising a child in the UK is £190,000 for single-parent families. That is £30,000 higher than for couples. It is no secret that child maintenance is rarely equitable. The custodial parent will almost always pay significantly more. They should not be charged for the small amounts that they are able to recoup, especially in the worst cases. Although victims of domestic abuse are not charged the 4% on the collect and pay service, that exemption requires disclosure, which can be incredibly difficult for victims.

Ministers must also create strong cross-agency measures that change the way enforcement works, creating faster and better means of sharing intelligence and for how intelligence is then, more importantly, acted on. The CMS needs to be better resourced to respond to the needs of the parents using the service—both receiving and paying parents. I have spent a lot of time dwelling on the worst kind of avoidant parent, but there are many paying parents out there who are compliant, or would like to be, but need some adjustments. Cases need to be reviewed individually; it should not be one size fits all. Communication by the CMS in the round—both to constituents and to MPs' offices—needs to be much, much better.

I have spent so much of my speech talking about the impact on parents. It is important to remember that at the heart of this are innocent children who are missing out, many having already been through the trauma of the breakdown of their family unit, often exacerbated by a deteriorating relationship between the parents where maintenance is an ongoing issue. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will keep those children at the forefront of their minds when looking at the CMS and what it could do better. A child should not be living a poorer quality of life than they have to because the parent they live with cannot access the support to which the child is entitled.

1.58 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): May I apologise to you, Ms Rees, for being a few minutes late to the Chamber? I was in the Pass Office. It has moved, which I did not know, and there was a queue, so I apologise for not being here for the whole introduction to the debate.

This subject is very close to my heart and one that I am very pleased to speak on. I spoke, in the form of interventions, in the Adjournment debate on this issue the other night, and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) was also there. I thank the House of Commons Library for its notes and advice. It always gives us lots of good information.

I think I should start by saying that I understand that the figures show that an estimated one in three separated families in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a child maintenance arrangement that is paid in full. That is good news, and something to say before we start. As elected representatives, we will always be the ones people come to with their problems. People do not come to us all the time—as you know,

Ms Rees, and I know—to say, “That’s a great job. Well done.” They come to tell us their complaints, so unfortunately, Minister, although I am not being negative, I want to say some things about where the fall-downs are.

The NAO report stated that the aim of increasing the number of effective maintenance arrangements overall was based on a wider, cross-Government set of policies on separated families. However, that broader set of cross-Government actions have yet to emerge as the chances that we hoped to see. In most of the cases that people bring to me, it is often the man who controls the money and that is where the problems lie. It is a fact of life that relationships break up. I am always sorry that it happens, and I do not like to see it, but sometimes it does happen, for various reasons. We are not here to condemn or identify why that is, but relationships do break down.

The DWP research does not explain why take up of the CMS is lower than expected. The CMS has improved its maintenance calculations and was designed to limit fraud and error, but the DWP has not estimated how many calculations are incorrect due to fraud and error. When an MP is presented with the case as the elected representative, it is very hard, especially when there is a lady sitting across the desk who is in absolute floods of tears and does not know what to do next. There are probably two or three children who are outside in the office, or maybe with their mummy. We can see the pressure on that lady in the office at that time.

CMS debt money is not collected, and outstanding arrears will continue to grow indefinitely. They are forecast to reach an eye-watering £1 billion. I find that quite hard to understand. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what is being done to collect the arrears. I know the Minister is a man who understands the issue very well, and always responds to MPs in a way that gives us some hope for the future. We are looking for that same consideration today, and I want to make some constructive comments.

I want to give some examples of real difficulties from my office. As I mentioned in the Adjournment debate on Tuesday night, the inconsistency of not being able to get the same person at the end of the phone to speak to about a constituent's case is infuriating. I know that during covid people were ill and that meant changes every day, but even before covid, it was difficult to speak to the same one person about a constituent's case. Then, when I got put on to somebody else, what happened? It all started again—the process just started with each new person. The timescale it took for things to happen was infuriating. Perhaps the Minister can give us some indication of what is happening in that regard.

There are also the pressures of the job. In Belfast, even before covid-19, many staff were moving on. I hope the Minister can give us some reassurance on what can be done or needs to be done to retain staff. Can the Minister give us some figures for the internal movements in civil service jobs? I do not expect him to have all the answers today. The DWP is under the control of Westminster, so will the Minister give us figures for movement on child maintenance within the DWP Belfast office in particular?

I have had mothers come to see me at the end of their tether with children under their care and without the wage and income that they once had. I have witnessed blatant attempts to not make child maintenance payments.

In almost every case—99.9% of cases—it is the man, although sometimes it may be the lady who has the bigger income. In all those cases, it was husbands who had closed their businesses, transferred moneys and removed moneys from bank accounts prior to those accounts being checked, and who had handed valuable properties to parents or new partners. I know that marriages and relationships break down, but that anyone should try to walk away or abandon their children is outrageous.

I am aware of people who are property millionaires on paper and had large bank accounts, yet the hesitancy of the CMS to pursue them effectively was truly frustrating. They returned financial accounts showing a profit of less than £15,000 per year, when they are driving a car worth more than 30 grand and are sitting in properties that show their income is higher than that. If someone is withdrawing moneys from the bank account before a relationship break-up, there is a case to answer.

Why is it so important? Ladies are squeezed financially. They cannot pay their mortgage when they are left with all the bills. They cannot pay the electric. In some cases, they cannot even buy food for the house. They are desperate.

My constituents have given me lots of examples. In my office, as I am sure is the case in everybody's office here, we quite regularly get such cases. We find it frustratingly difficult to negotiate through their process with constituents. I want to raise some points to the Minister. First, is it possible to put urgency into the request from us, as elected representatives, to the CMS? There is real urgency to get things done quickly and to, importantly, have a process at the end of it. Secondly, can we assign one officer or staff member to look after each case? I am ever mindful that officers might be off sick, but there should be someone who knows the case, so that we do not have four, five or six people. Thirdly, checking the bank accounts before the breakup would give an indication, I suspect, of where the process is.

We should listen to the wife in those cases, the lady who knows. She knows where the dead bodies are buried. She knows where her husband's moneys are. She knows what property he owns. She knows about the bank accounts. She knows. We should be looking towards that evidential base. It is not right that husbands can abscond or ignore CMS letters. The legal authority to investigate must be central to the obligations. I know that the Minister has great understanding and that he wants to assist. I ask him to hear the four requests and others have made. I appreciate the evidential base that they have, but I do feel that the DWP can do better and must do better.

I am probably old fashioned. I am a traditional person, and I believe in the sanctity of marriage and commitment. That is just me. A man must remember his obligation to his wife and children. We need the law of the land tightened, thereby ensuring impartial treatment for men and women. There is much to do, Minister—much to achieve and change. I value the Minister's help and commitment to trying to make changes that ensure we have a system that really works for the lady. I think that is the way it should be.

2.7 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell

and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing the debate. She has campaigned on the issue for many years now, and I hope that much of what she has said will be taken on board by the Minister and that action will be taken.

The SNP is clear that, at a time of a cost of living crisis, child maintenance matters even more to protect children from poverty. We are calling for a long-overdue root-and-branch review of the Child Maintenance Service so that it can work more effectively for the children it is supposed to serve. I also want to take the opportunity to ask the Minister about the 91,000 civil service jobs that are supposed to be disappearing. I know you will appreciate this point, Ms Rees, as a friend of the worker. A press release last Friday said that 91,000 civil jobs will disappear. I would hope that not one of them is from the Child Maintenance Service, because it seems to me they need more workers. No worker in the Child Maintenance Service should find themselves out of work as a result of those changes.

What we want to focus on today are the clear, systemic errors that happen and affect so many people. That is why in the root-and-branch review, we have to come back first to the fact that the Government introduced charges for parents seeking support from a former partner through the child maintenance service. There is a fee of £20 for using CMS, unless someone is under 19 or has suffered domestic or violent abuse. The paying parents must pay an additional fee of 20% to use the service, and the receiving parent 4%. The fees imposed on receiving parents using the child maintenance service include the 4% surcharge for using collect and pay and the original £20 charge. I believe that that unfairly penalises receiving parents who are not receiving proper payments, and charging lone parents to access their right to support for their child is deplorable. We would certainly demand an end to that tax on child support, and we should continue to demand an end to Child Maintenance Service fees for parents receiving the payments.

A recent National Audit Office report, which was touched on earlier by previous speakers, exposes the failures of the Child Maintenance Service and shows that it simply is not working for far too many lone parents. The report found that the UK Government do not appear to have learned one of the key lessons from the now defunct Child Support Agency about preventing arrears from building up, and that enforcement can be too slow to be effective. The report suggests that unless the UK Government write off more CMS debt, outstanding arrears will grow indefinitely. As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, they are forecast to reach £1 billion by March 2031 at current rates, and the Department for Work and Pensions does not yet fully understand why those without an effective arrangement do not use its service. It could do more to help prevent around half of direct pay arrangements failing and leaving maintenance unpaid. There seem to be significant problems with its customer service, which undermines trust in its service, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) identified in their contributions.

The latest DWP figures are for the quarter ending in December 2021. Of the 158,400 paying parents due to pay the collect and pay service, 51,300 paid no maintenance and 107,100 paid some maintenance—and of those,

[Chris Stephens]

36,500 paid up to 90% of the maintenance due for the quarter, and 70,600 paid over 90%. The Department for Work and Pensions figures also show that since 2012, when the Child Maintenance Service began, £451.1 million in unpaid maintenance has accumulated. That amounts to some 8% of all the maintenance due to be paid since the start of the service. The SNP has made it clear that we are calling for effective enforcement action to be taken in the collection of maintenance arrears.

Like the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, I am grateful for the excellent briefings that we have received from One Parent Families Scotland, Gingerbread and Mumsnet. In the survey that Gingerbread and Mumsnet did in England in 2020, 86% of Child Maintenance Service customers said that the service had allowed their ex-partner to financially control or abuse them post separation. Some 83% said they would likely never receive what they were owed in arrears, and just 11% of those parents described their experience of using the Child Maintenance Service as positive. That really cannot continue, and people need more confidence in the Child Maintenance Service going forward.

Lone parents and their children are facing increased hardship as a result of the combined effects of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, which is why it is vital that family income must be protected for over 800,000 children across the United Kingdom who rely on it. Some 803,000 children are covered by Child Maintenance Service arrangements—an increase of 5,000 since September 2021—with 510,000 covered through direct pay arrangements and the rest covered through the collect and pay service. The number of children covered by Child Maintenance Service arrangements has increased steadily over the last two years.

Lone parents of children are more likely to be in poverty, so any reduction in income is likely to be particularly harmful, which means that, in the face of the cost of living crisis, maintenance matters even more for protecting children from poverty. That is why the SNP is calling on the Government to introduce a minimum maintenance payment to provide parents with care and their children a guaranteed income, in order to prevent hardship and ensure a dignified standard of living. We are also clear that a long-overdue root-and-branch review of the Child Maintenance Service is needed—not only to enforce the payments, but to ensure that the process does not put vulnerable families through additional stress. It is ultimately the children who are being permanently disadvantaged.

The Scottish Government are using their devolved powers to ensure that children and families are supported during this difficult time and prevent them from being pushed into fuller hardship. The Scottish Government have invested £770 million per year in cost of living support, including in a range of family benefits not available elsewhere in the UK, doubling the Scottish child payment, mitigating the bedroom tax and increasing Scottish benefits by 6%, which was the figure in April. The Scottish Government are putting money into the pockets of families now and helping them to deal with that cost of living crisis.

I look forward to the Minister's remarks and response. I would hope that he can confirm that there will be a root-and-branch review, and that he will give us some positive news on staffing and other matters.

2.15 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing this debate. All of us constituency MPs deal with child maintenance cases on a regular basis, and we owe her a debt of service for bringing this extremely important debate. To pay back a little bit, I am going to be brief, because she set out the case for reform very well, as did other Members who have contributed. I want to make three very brief points on behalf of the Opposition to ask the Minister a few questions. I know that we will all be keen and enthusiastic to hear what the Minister has to say. The case for change is broadly accepted and has been well made.

I will briefly respond to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He says that he is a traditionalist; I am a progressive. We differ on very many things, but I feel sure that we agree, as will every Member of this House, that what matters in this discussion is the children who should be supported by this money. I am sure that we will all put them first.

First, hon. Members who have spoken in this debate have been right to highlight the connection between being a single parent and the risk of poverty. We know that that is true. It has held true for a very long time in this country. That is why we believe that children are entitled to support from both parents, and that the Government ought to play their role in making sure that that happens, but also that children should not grow up poor in this country. It is anathema to all of us that there has been an increase in children needing support via food banks and other emergency charities. Every pound we can get into the pockets of their parents helps, whether it comes from this source or the welfare state.

This debate matters because this country should have a mission to end child poverty. Many of us still believe that. What we do with the Child Maintenance Service can make a real contribution to that. I put on the record my thanks to Gingerbread and two other charities that work very hard, year round, to stand up for single parents and make sure that the specific and different challenges they face as families are recognised in the system. As the NAO report pointed out, in the quarter ending September 2021, paying parents moving from direct pay on to collect and pay owed an average of £1,100—around five months of maintenance. Given the price hike of basics such as bread, putting petrol in the car or buying bus tickets, I can only imagine what that £1,000 means to a single-parent family. It is huge. Single parents are at the frontline of making ends meet in this country. We must put this debate in the right context, which is about stopping families from suffering the inequity and indignity of poverty.

Secondly, as other Members have already said, every Member of Parliament knows only too well what happens when the service goes wrong. The problems in my own case load have two features: the time taken to resolve issues is simply too long, as people find the length of time they are waiting incredibly stressful, and the enforcement action taken by the service is often not effective—a point that has been very well and amply made. That is frustrating and, as has been said, often dissuades people from using the service at all. I cannot



believe that a Government of any colour or hue would want an important public service such as this one to put people off.

I am anxious to hear from the Minister about the plans for reform. I hope that we can move quickly to get a better service, not least given that the NAO found that it could take years before payments are made. The NAO also uncovered the issue of enforcement, and said that it “has not been properly built into the Universal Credit system”.

I think the Government will want to address that.

Finally, I agree with fellow Members on the issue of domestic abuse. Unfortunately, I know only too well from my own constituents that parents who are victims of domestic abuse often see that abuse continued via the officers of the state. Again, I do not believe that a Government of any kind would wish their own services or operations to be used by perpetrators of abuse to continue their abuse once a relationship has come to an end. I simply do not believe that any Government would want that.

We are learning much more about how this continuation of abuse is done and how institutions of the state can protect against that. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, it is crucial that we have a trauma-informed service in every function of DWP work and that we continually look to reform, given that we now know more about how domestic abuse is perpetrated. I hope the Minister will respond to those three points about poverty, improving the service so that it actually does what we want it to and making sure that it is informed by the suffering and trauma of victims of domestic abuse, and I look forward to listening to what he has to say.

2.22 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley):** It is an honour, as always, to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on championing this cause and bringing this debate before us today. She is a recognised and well-respected champion on these matters.

Notwithstanding her strong loyalty to Motherwell and to Wishaw, I am sure she will join me in congratulating Rangers Football Club on their achievements this season which, despite the vagaries of the penalty shoot-out, were magnificent.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**David Rutley:** I give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister and, as my constituency takes in Ibrox stadium, I associate myself with his remarks. I inform the House that an early-day motion will be tabled, praising the Rangers team for their achievements in the Europa League this season.

**David Rutley:** I give way to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw.

**Marion Fellows:** I have never said this in public, but my late husband was a Rangers fan, man and boy, and I could feel his presence when I watched the match last night. It was such a sad ending.

**David Rutley:** I give way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

**Jim Shannon:** I loved the comments made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and, in particular, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I also associate myself with the Minister's comments. I have been a Rangers supporter since I was a wee boy. Rangers may not have won last night, but they made this great kingdom of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland better together. It was a showcase for us all.

**David Rutley:** I agree. Other hon. Members may not quite agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman just said, but I think we can all agree that it was a remarkable achievement.

We can all also agree that this debate is important. Even though my current ministerial brief does not cover this area, it is vitally important. The Child Maintenance Service plays a valuable role in ensuring that children are supported in instances where parents do not live together and where they come to a private arrangement. We know that the vast majority of separated parents quite rightly take their responsibilities extremely seriously, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out. Our aim is to help parents to support their children and we are sensitive to the needs of both parties. The CMS is designed to promote collaboration between parents, and it offers a statutory scheme where collaboration is not possible.

The central focus in all of this is that the children are supported. The intent of child maintenance reform is to encourage parents to meet their responsibilities and provide their children with the financial support they need to get a good start in life, and that intent is well supported by the evidence. I will come on to that point in a second.

We are committed to maximising the positive impact of the Child Maintenance Service and ensuring that good arrangements are put in place for children, no matter where they are growing up. As the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, parents need to honour their responsibilities to their children. We believe the CMS has made substantial improvements in the pre-covid period, notwithstanding that there is further room for progress, and the statistics support that. The compliance rate for parents on the collect and pay service has increased significantly, with the percentage of parents paying something rising by eight percentage points between the quarter ending March 2018 and March 2020. From March 2016 to December 2021, the percentage of CMS cases where no maintenance is being paid fell by about 30%, from 46% in March 2016 to 32% in December 2021.

CMS investigators have the power to deduct directly from earnings and to seize funds owed in child maintenance payments where requests for payments are consistently refused. For example, the CMS has the ability to seize funds held by a third party that they owe to the paying parent. Over 800,000 children are now covered by the Child Maintenance Service arrangements, up from 700,000 in mid-2019. We are making a difference to the support that children have been receiving: since 2019, over £1 billion in child maintenance has been arranged each year through the direct pay service and the collect and pay service. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern)

[David Rutley]

made an important point about poverty. She and I have regular debates on this subject, but it is important to note that around 140,000 fewer children are growing up in poverty as a result of child maintenance payments. That is good progress, but clearly more work needs to be done.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw rightly raised points about the fee for an application to the Child Maintenance Service, which is set at £20 for all CMS participants. That fee is intended to encourage parents to consider whether they really need a statutory scheme case, but it is not so high that it creates an insurmountable obstacle. Applicants who are victims of domestic abuse or under the age of 19 are exempt from paying the application fee. It is not our intent to create a barrier for vulnerable customers; in fact, around 60% of applicants do not pay that fee. Collection charges, which are 20% for the paying parent and 4% for the parent with care, only apply to the collect and pay service, and are intended to provide both parents with an incentive to collaborate. The collection charge for the receiving parent is deducted only when maintenance is paid, so the receiving parent does not owe money to the Child Maintenance Service if maintenance is not paid. If there were no charge for receiving parents, there would be no incentive for them to use the direct pay service.

The Child Maintenance Service may also review the income of a paying parent if earnings decrease or increase by 25% over a year—a point that was raised by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw. That 25% threshold ensures that liabilities remain stable so that both parents can budget with certainty, which aims to provide ongoing certainty for the child as well.

**Marion Fellows:** Will the Minister give way?

**David Rutley:** I will, but can I just make one further point, which I think might answer the hon. Lady's question? Most people's income does not change to that degree over the course of one year. The threshold also ensures that minor changes in income do not interfere with the efficiency of the system, thereby increasing costs for the taxpayer. I recognise that there is an important issue here, and I assure hon. Members that DWP Ministers will keep that tolerance under very active review.

**Marion Fellows:** I just wanted to thank the Minister for that, because it is a very important point. I know those changes are not frequent, but they can prevent money from going to children, which is the issue that this debate is all about.

**David Rutley:** I underline for the record that that issue is kept under active review.

Within the CMS, arrears are written off in exceptional circumstances only. With regard to CSA arrears, the Department carried out its compliance and arrears strategic review. Over the course of that review, 250,000 receiving parents were written to, explaining the situation. There are fewer than 60,000 cases remaining with CSA debt, and more than 35,000 of those are undergoing collection and enforcement activity. In instances where the receiving parents ask, the CMS undertakes further action to seek to recover the funds. Crucially, this exercise has allowed the CMS to focus its effort on parents who

told us they wanted us to try to collect the money that they are owed and the money that will benefit children now.

We are determined to go further and not content to stand still. We are always looking to improve the way we deliver this vital service. The Department continues to keep child maintenance policy and our operational delivery under review. Those who have met Baroness Stedman-Scott will know that she is also a redoubtable champion on these matters and not somebody to be messed with. She is very keen to drive further action forward.

We are also considering how other countries arrange child maintenance. We are gathering examples of good practice and looking at what can be learned from other systems. This includes researching what interventions are used to encourage parents to make their own maintenance arrangements without Government involvement. The CMS has introduced new digital services such as the apply online service that allows parents to make an initial application more easily. That option is available 24/7 and allows greater flexibility for separated parents to use the CMS and manage their child maintenance arrangements in a way that suits them.

That brings me to the standard of service that customers receive when they go to the CMS—a point raised by numerous colleagues today. The CMS is committed to delivering service to the highest standard and has created a more customer-focused culture over the years. In the past, the CMS has experimented with personal caseworkers—a point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford—but it was found that that does not offer the best service. Instead, the CMS organises caseworkers into more tightly formed teams, which allows for knowledge and expertise sharing, so any caseworker can deal with any of their team's cases. We find that that is the best way forward, but I will gladly pick that point up separately with the hon. Gentleman later.

The hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised the incredibly important issue of domestic abuse survivors. The CMS takes domestic abuse very seriously and has substantially strengthened its procedures to ensure customers can use the CMS safely. The CMS updated its domestic abuse training programme to give clear guidance to caseworkers on how to support victims of domestic abuse. The Department also commissioned an independent review of ways in which the CMS supports survivors of domestic abuse, including those facing and suffering from financial abuse.

The review was conducted by Dr Samantha Callan, who consulted a range of domestic abuse stakeholders and leading charities, as well as CMS customers who have, sadly, experienced domestic abuse. The Government will, of course, carefully consider the findings of the review and any recommendations.

Moving on to the issue of unearned income, we are also looking to take new measures to ensure that income gained from sources other than earnings is distributed fairly. The CMS compliance and arrears strategy 2018 introduced powers that allowed notional income from assets such as coins and gold, income derived from capital, and any foreign income to be used in the assessment, but we want to go further. We propose making changes in legislation that enable the child maintenance calculation to include unearned income that is not currently captured—for example, savings and investment income, and dividends.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister very much for what he has said so far. I think that each and every one of us here today—and, indeed, those who are not here—have the very same issues, particularly that of men trying to hide their incomes. For instance, before a couple separates, money could be moved out of bank accounts and properties could be shoved sideways into the ownership of parents, brothers, sisters or new partners. Does the DWP have the power to investigate such cases in a thorough, almost forensic way? That is really what is needed.

**David Rutley:** I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes—with conviction, as always—but until an application is made to the CMS, it has no jurisdiction to investigate finances. It is important that applications are put in place so that that sort of action can move forward.

**Jim Shannon:** Does that mean that there is going to be a review of the system and that it will lead to such action? If it does, that is a giant step forward.

**David Rutley:** That is a point on which the redoubtable Baroness will need to come back to the hon. Gentleman. I will write to him on that point.

**Jim Shannon:** Will the Minister give way one further time?

**David Rutley:** The hon. Gentleman is very persuasive. I will allow him one last intervention, because he is a good man, but then I think we better move on.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for giving way, and I thank you as well, Ms Rees, because I would not be able to intervene without your say-so.

I also made a point about the evidential base. The ex-wife has great knowledge of where the money is. I referred to her knowing “where the dead bodies are buried”. She knows everything. Discussions with the wife are really important. Can that also be part of the process that the Baroness is considering?

**David Rutley:** I will ensure that the Baroness hears these views. We have all had cases as parliamentarians that have shown us that there are real challenges. We want to lean into this and tackle the challenges appropriately. I have a couple of concluding remarks, which I hope will give Members some confidence.

We have talked about dividends and unearned income. This addresses the point raised by the hon. Gentleman, to some extent. Including that income will reduce the scope for parents to organise their financial affairs in such a way as to reduce their financial liability for their children, which is the situation that we need to stop. Parents need to honour their responsibilities. I also recognise the current cost of living pressures as a result of rising prices around the world and the impact of the Ukrainian war. We will strive to introduce this change as soon as possible.

On enforcement, between January 2020 and December 2021 we arranged a total of 14,300 deduction orders, which represents about 33% of non-paying collect and pay parents. We also referred 15,000 parents to enforcement agents, which represents about 35% of non-paying collect and pay parents. These enforcement actions are taken before sanctions are considered.

During the same period, where further action was needed the CMS initiated almost 6,000 sanction actions against non-paying parents, which represents about 13% of non-paying collect and pay parents. That led to 249 prison sentences—244 suspended of them and five immediate.

We are always looking for new, innovative and effective ways to encourage paying parents to provide the financial support that their children need. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has set out, we are aiming to introduce curfew powers before the end of the year—I understand the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw—and changes to the measures on unearned income after that, which will increase the range of enforcement measures available. Having listened to today’s contributions, I think that those changes will meet with the approval of the hon. Members in attendance.

I thank hon. Members for their participation in this important debate and I hope they will join me in agreeing that the CMS provides an important service. We will continue to keep under review options with regard to CMS policy and operational reforms. Hon. Members can be assured that we will strive to continue addressing the needs of separated parents and producing better outcomes for children—it is a clear priority.

2.38 pm

**Marion Fellows:** I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I know that this is not a particularly popular time, so I really appreciate them being here. I thank the Minister for his response, although I will be investigating it further. I did not want to say this, but I think I have to. The noble Baroness plays an important role—I have had meetings with her and she is redoubtable—and also speaks well of her Department and tries to move things forward, but it is a pity that she is in the other place and is therefore unable to be directly scrutinised in the Chamber of the House of Commons. That often makes it difficult for Ministers to respond directly to folk like me and other Members present. I am well aware that there was a push on enforcement last year, but I will be writing to the Baroness directly to ask whether that push is going to be continued. I still do not think I have had an answer to, “How long is the long grass?” regarding when legislation will appear. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is indicating “quite short”, but I think everyone involved would like some more surety about that.

I thank you, Ms Rees, for presiding over today’s debate so well, and I thank all the organisations that have helped us to have it. We are all concerned, and the Minister can take it that we will remain so and will keep a very careful watch on folk in the DWP. The staff in the Child Maintenance Service work hard and do their best. They do not need to be reformed; what needs to be reformed is the systems, and the way in which they are enforced.

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered reforms to the Child Maintenance Service.

2.41 pm

*Sitting suspended.*



## Dialysis Care Outcomes

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered dialysis care outcomes.

I thank you for chairing this debate, Sir George, and thank those who are here to participate—they are colleagues, but also friends. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), in her place and am especially pleased to see the Minister in her place, too. I am not being condescending when I say that; I am encouraged because the Minister understands the issues very well. I look forward to her response—no pressure, Minister. We are pleased to have this opportunity.

I thank our guests in the Gallery, particularly Fiona Loud, who has been instrumental, through me, in achieving this Westminster Hall debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate. I applied for it some time ago, but the Queen's Speech meant that those applications to the Committee fell. It was originally supposed to take place on the Thursday before recess, but we are having it at the same time, 3 o'clock, as it would have happened on that day.

Dialysis is an important issue to raise, especially at this time of rising daily costs that directly impact people who choose to receive their treatment in their own home. In a question to the Prime Minister yesterday, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) referred to Phoenix Halliwell and the cost for those receiving dialysis treatment at home. There might have been a bit of confusion around how the question was asked and how the answer came through—I know that others will speak to that—but it pinpoints a key issue for this debate, which is the impact of the cost of electric and energy on people receiving dialysis treatment at home. That is of particular concern to me and others at this time of rising costs. There are global pressures on the price of energy. This is not a debate on energy, but on what is happening to those who have dialysis treatment.

It is not just adults who are affected by this issue. Fiona and I spoke to the Minister beforehand; we appreciate that very much. It seems that not every postcode covers children. Local providers have discretion as to whether they reimburse the utility costs for children. I know that Fiona, who I spoke to beforehand, is concerned about that, and I certainly am. One person who contacted us said that her son has been on peritoneal dialysis since January. It used to cost £115 per month for combined usage, but it is now up to £350—a massive increase of 220%.

Although this debate covers a health issue, it also focuses on the predicaments of those people in the health system. We need to review that and think about it again, so that we can understand it better. It is important for those we are concerned about that we understand where the pressures are—financial pressures are coming from all sides.

Others will refer to this, but even on the warmest day of the year—we experienced the highest temperature of the year on Wednesday—a person receiving dialysis will feel cold. Cold weather puts even greater pressures on

household energy costs, but people who receive dialysis at home are being very adversely affected by rising fuel and heating costs. I will refer to that later, but I wanted to put those two issues on the record. They have been brought to my attention and are of deep concern.

I know that this is not the Minister's responsibility, but I will give some facts from Northern Ireland, where attempts are made for every patient to be given approval to receive dialysis at home at first. It does not always happen, because sometimes patients are sent to the renal department at the Ulster Hospital, which is my nearest hospital and which I have visited on a number of occasions over the years.

Analysis by the UK Renal Registry showed the rate of home dialysis in areas of deprivation at the end of 2020. Unfortunately, however, there was no data available for patients treated in Scotland. My colleagues and friends from Scotland may have some figures. Overall, the rate of home therapy was lower for patients from the more deprived areas of England, Northern Ireland and Wales. In England, 22.9% of patients in the least deprived areas were able to access home dialysis, compared with 15% in the most deprived areas. The rate of home dialysis for patients in Northern Ireland was 7.2% in the least deprived areas, whereas it was 9.8% in the most deprived areas. I am alarmed at these figures. If someone has a certain amount of income, it means that they have to pay for their energy. However, someone who is deprived is under pressure to ensure that the energy, electric and heating levels in their house are at a certain level, so the impact on those in deprived areas is much greater than it is anywhere else.

Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are affected by renal failure in the same way as anybody else, but they do not have equal access to home dialysis and the freedom that that choice offers. I look to the Minister, as I always do, for a positive response on how we can take things forward constructively in a way that can deliver for dialysis treatment patients across this great United Kingdom. We need to address this issue on a UK-wide basis, and greater equality must be achieved. I am my party's health spokesperson, so it is always a pleasure to speak in these debates and to highlight issues that are brought to my attention by people such as my friend Fiona Loud from Kidney Care UK.

Kidney disease costs the NHS more than breast, lung, colon and skin cancer combined. It has a greater financial impact. It is estimated to cost £1.4 billion a year—equivalent to £1 in every £77 of NHS expenditure. That is a massive figure and a significant expense, with 21 people developing kidney failure every day and almost 30,000 people on dialysis in the UK. Unfortunately, it shows no signs of slowing.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Acute kidney injuries usually come about as a complication from another illness, and they are more deadly than a heart attack. As the hon. Gentleman said, research indicates that about 30% of acute kidney injury deaths could be prevented with better care or treatment. Does he agree that this is an area that requires urgent attention, looking at kidney disease outcomes in the round?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for those wise words, and I absolutely agree with her. She is right. We should never be guided entirely by finance, but we

cannot ignore the financial implications. If we—by which I mean the NHS—could better use the moneys for early intervention, early diagnosis and early medical action, and reduce the cost, that would be beneficial to the NHS.

The clinical and cost benefits of home dialysis are well established, but despite 17 years having passed since the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence first highlighted its ambition for just 15% of patients to take advantage of home haemodialysis, as many as eight out of 10 dialysis patients are still treated in centre. That is a big challenge, but it is something I believe in, and I am confident that the Minister can embrace that challenge and give us some idea of how we can move forward in a positive fashion to deliver even better.

Some of those people will have successful transplants, although a transplant is only a form of treatment, not a cure. I have a particular interest in this matter because I have a nephew called Peter Shannon, born with a kidney the size of a peanut, or the wee nail on my finger. I remember when my boys were running about—obviously, young boys or young girls are always full of life, but he never had the energy. He was always a terrible colour—yellow, the colour of a bowl of custard—and he never really moved forward physically until he had a transplant at the age of 16. When he had that transplant, his life transformed; if only that were possible for everybody, but it is not. I have been a great supporter of organ transplants all my life, and I am very pleased that the Government accepted the legislative change to make everybody a donor unless they opt out. I was always in favour of that legislation. In Northern Ireland, my party—the Democratic Unionist party—had perhaps not truly embraced it in the past, but it has now. I cannot say I am a pioneer in the party, but I am pleased that that legislation has also been endorsed by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Many other dialysis patients will have no choice but to dialyse to replace their kidney function and to stay alive. The majority will do so three times a week at a hospital or clinic, every week for the rest of their lives, because once a patient starts dialysis, they are on it forever unless they receive a transplant. Across this United Kingdom there are nearly 30,000 people, from young to old, on dialysis. They come from all walks of life and are united by a remarkable strength and resilience to continue with this long-term, gruelling, life-saving medical treatment.

When dialysis is needed, in an ideal world the patient and their care team will consider and decide together whether to dialyse at home or in-centre. There are two forms of home dialysis therapy, with haemodialysis being the most common. Tubes are attached to needles in the arm or via a line to the neck, with blood passing through an external machine that filters the toxins and water from the blood before returning it to the body—it is almost like a cleansing process, but medically. Suitable patients can safely undertake that procedure themselves at home, carrying out sessions that meet their clinical needs to a routine that fits their lifestyle, including overnight while they sleep. In peritoneal dialysis, which is the other form of therapy, a catheter is placed into part of the abdomen via a surgical procedure.

Since its introduction in the 1960s, most dialysis care is delivered in-centre, with patients required to travel to a hospital three times a week for four hours of treatment. Many patients who dialyse in-centre benefit from the

care of the UK's excellent nephrologists, nurses and support staff, and from a sense of community with others receiving dialysis. However, that treatment is more intense over a shorter period of time, which might not suit everybody. It can be extremely draining, and it often leaves patients feeling physically exhausted as the body is pushed so hard during those treatments, and their toxin and fluid levels build up again immediately while they face a long wait until their next dialysis session. As a result, those patients must adhere to strict fluid and diet restrictions, and they must also travel to and from their dialysis centre, which is a time-consuming and often exhausting experience.

I visited the dialysis renal unit at Ulster Hospital in Dundonald some time ago. It is a new centre, and I met many of the people there. I knew two of those people personally. One was Billy McIlroy, who passed a few years ago. He went there for his dialysis treatment three days a week, which I know kept him alive. Another guy called David Johnson also attended that dialysis unit. He got a kidney transplant eventually, so his life changed greatly. I had already been given the details of what happens in dialysis, but actually seeing it showed the reality—it gave a physical understanding—of what those people were going through three times a week. For them, travelling from home and going home again was six hours of their day.

**Margaret Ferrier:** On that point, the impact of kidney disease and treatment on patients' mental health is huge. Good mental wellbeing can make a big difference to a patient's recovery and ability to withstand difficult treatment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that ensuring patients have access to mental health support is paramount to improving outcomes, and that the NHS must be better resourced to provide that?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us all of that. We often focus on the physical aspects of this condition, as we should, but we must also remember the mental health and anxiety issues that come alongside it. Patients suffer with uncertainty about how they are going to feel the next day, uncertainty about their future health, and uncertainty about their personal and financial issues and their family. The hon. Lady is right to remind us of that point.

By comparison, home dialysis therapies offer flexibility and have been shown to have a positive effect on a patient's health. When patients dialyse more regularly, they are more effectively replicating the natural function of the kidneys. Studies have shown that longer, more frequent dialysis sessions, undertaken at a schedule of the patient's own choosing, achieve better results than a thrice-weekly in-centre schedule. People doing alternate-day dialysis have been shown to experience fewer symptoms, such as shortness of breath, high blood pressure and left ventricular heart damage. People on home haemodialysis have an up to 13% lower risk of death than those on in-centre haemodialysis. That shows that if people can do more home treatment, we can improve their longevity. NHS England has acknowledged the limitations of standard in-centre haemodialysis, and in particular the increased risk of hospitalisation or death after the weekly two-day break between in-centre sessions.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) is right about the importance of mental health. Depression is the most prevalent psychiatric

[Jim Shannon]

illness in patients with end-stage kidney disease, and she made that point powerfully. One study shows that rates within the dialysis population vary from 22.8% to 39.3%. Wow—those are big figures, and they show what the condition does. Studies have also shown that depression is a significant predictor of mortality in dialysis patients. That is particularly important for younger people on dialysis, who report a lower quality of life than young adults in general.

People who have the choice of dialysing for as long as they need and at a time of their choice have freedom and control. They can also better respond to their body's reaction at that time, in the comfort of their home and with the reassurance of their family around them. Home treatment probably addresses some of the issues of depression and mental health issues as well. It enables patients to have a life outside their dialysis schedule and hold down a job. It allows them to have a normal life and pursue the dreams and ambitions that should be the right of any person, young or old. I can attest to that through my nephew, Peter Shannon, who has had an organ transplant. I have seen his life change. He bought his first house just last week, incidentally, at probably the highest time for house prices in the whole United Kingdom.

In the last 18 months, covid-19 has exaggerated the negative impact of differences in dialysis care, and heightened the need radically to increase home therapy provision. Analysis from the UK Renal Registry has demonstrated that the relative risk of death associated with covid-19 among in-centre dialysis patients was much higher than that of the general population in England, especially among those of a younger age.

The UK kidney community has been calling for patients to be provided with greater choice in their dialysis care, recognising the need for increased awareness and education around home therapies and greater equity of access across the country. In the UK, however, the overall percentage of dialysis patients receiving home therapies has increased only from 3.4% in 2011 to 7% in 2022. Although that has doubled, it is a long way off the figure of 15%. It needs to double again, and I think, respectfully, that the Government should set a higher target.

In 2021, the NHS's Getting It Right First Time programme recommended that a minimum of 20% of patients in every dialysis centre should be on home dialysis. It set that target, and NHS England's Renal Services Transformation Programme is working to increase the provision of and access to home therapies, in line with recommendations made by Getting It Right First Time.

Although there are dialysis centres exceeding the target, which we welcome—it is not all negative; many are trying to achieve those targets and goals—GIRFT's own report highlighted that 33 out of 52 centres in England have not yet met the target. Again, I respectfully ask the Minister—she knows I do this constructively; I just want to get the stats so that we can understand the problems and how to do things better—to tell us what has been done to increase the number of those 33 out of 52 centres that have not yet reached the target. The Getting It Right First Time target of a 20% prevalence rate for home dialysis compared to in-centre care could

be transformative for patients, and could deliver considerable cost savings for the NHS at a time when they are desperately needed. We can do the treatment better, deliver the medication and dialysis better, and we can do it for a better price. That seems to me to be good value.

To address adequately the low uptake of home care, a review of dialysis reimbursement should take place to ensure that training and educational needs can be met, and to incentivise higher frequency dialysis at home, such as alternate day treatments to support all dialysis centres to meet the 20% target. What steps are the Government taking to reach that 20% target? It is essential that clinicians are offered the tools needed for them to meet the GIRFT targets in an effective manner, such as providing staff and patients with detailed, unbiased education to empower them to make informed decisions about their dialysis. I see it—as I often do—as a partnership, with clinicians working alongside Government policy and patients to do better.

One of the most pressing issues facing people who receive treatment at home rather than in hospital is the rising cost of fuel and energy. I referred to that at the beginning, and there are three points that I wanted to make. People receiving dialysis at home are at particular risk from rising energy costs. The figures that I cited, and the question asked by the Leader of the Opposition at yesterday's PMQs, gives an indication of the issue. There seems to be an uncertainty, and perhaps a postcode lottery, as to where there is help for energy costs, but the figure that I gave of £118 per month for a child, or whatever it is, but that now costs £350, indicates that there is a way to go yet. Dialysis machines, with their high energy consumption, keep people alive. Dialysis treatment at home adds between £593 and £1,454 to utility costs per year, and that is before this year's 54% energy bill rise.

One effect of dialysis treatment is that many patients frequently feel cold due to the associated anaemia and the process of dialysis, so they need to heat their homes more often and for longer during the year. When we feel warm, they feel cold. When we feel exceedingly warm, they might feel normal. There are not many times in the year in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland when we have Mediterranean heatwaves, so for the dialysis patient, feeling cold is almost an everyday occurrence. We do not want people to have to decide between giving up the freedom and independence that home dialysis gives them, and going into a hospital setting just to save costs. Again, I ask the Minister urgently to address that matter, because the barriers to employment for people on dialysis, posed by frequency and length of treatment, and the physical toll and intense fatigue, already compound financial insecurity for home dialysis patients.

The NHS service specification advises that NHS trusts reimburse the additional costs of home dialysis, but reimbursement is inconsistent across the country, and many patients receive no or very little financial support to pay for the additional costs of treatment. For most home dialysis patients, the £200 repayable relief on energy bills and council tax deduction will simply not be enough, and a special, specific provision is needed. It is regrettable that the spring statement was a missed opportunity for the UK dialysis community. Consistent reimbursement, longer-term capped tariffs



for vulnerable groups and immediate financial support are urgently needed. Again, I look to the Health Minister and the discussions that she has with her Secretary of State for Health, and ultimately with the Chancellor, to ensure that we can deliver extra, specific financial help for those on dialysis treatment.

Many in the kidney community feel that their voices have been unheard in Westminster for too long, and when a friend from the kidney charity asked me to secure this debate, I was very pleased to do so. I think that today's debate does two things. It raises awareness—that is No. 1—but it also directly asks the Minister to become involved and address some of the anomalies. I welcome the re-establishment of the all-party kidney group. Its work, led by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith), aims to promote improvements in the health and care services that are available to improve the health of people with renal failure.

I call on the Minister to respond to calls from voices in the renal community to support them, and ensure that a straightforward, accessible system is in place to enable people on home dialysis to be reimbursed for the additional cost of utilities, as set out in the UK Kidney Association guidance. Would the Minister perhaps be agreeable to that request? If I may, I would ask for a meeting on behalf of the APPG—perhaps the chair of the APPG, our friend and colleague, would do that—because then we could look at some of those issues. Those who are involved in this debate might wish to attend that meeting as well. NHS tariff payments for home dialysis must be sufficient to cover all associated costs, including reimbursement for additional utilities usage that should and must reflect current price increases. Again, I look to the Minister to pledge to work with energy companies, and the Chancellor to develop capped tariffs for people on medical treatments at home, such as dialysis.

Renal units should proactively offer support to all patients undergoing dialysis, to build their confidence and ensure that they are dialysing in the right way for them at the time. Again, Minister, we need to address the low uptake of home dialysis by implementing a review of the dialysis reimbursement tariff—I think we referred to that in the discussion that we had outside the Chamber, and I look forward very much to the Minister's response. We must also ensure that training and educational needs can be met, and incentivise higher-frequency dialysis at home, such as alternate-day treatments, to support all dialysis centres to meet the 20% target. Let us meet that target. Let us do it here and back home as well, and achieve the significant cost savings that home dialysis can bring.

I will close with this comment: it is vital that all renal unit staff receive updated training to build their home dialysis knowledge, in order to help find solutions to the issues facing patients, and so that information for patients about transitioning to home therapies is standardised and includes details on the practical and financial support available. I place on the record my thanks to all renal staff. They do magnificent work; they are saving lives and they are keeping people alive. It is wonderful, and we thank them for it. The support available should also include a consistent approach to utility bill contributions from the NHS, in order to ensure equality for every renal dialysis patient across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Government

must ensure that educational resources are also provided to local authorities and trusts, enabling them to respond appropriately to the needs of people in their area who want to choose home therapies.

Thank you very much, Sir George, for the chance to raise the issue of dialysis treatment and bring it to Westminster Hall in a way that, I hope, both raises awareness and lets people out there on dialysis treatment know that we in this House care for them—I believe we do—and that we are seeking change. I look forward very much to other contributions in the Chamber today, but I look forward particularly to the response from the Minister.

3.28 pm

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. First, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate and for putting forward such an eloquent statement, including the passionate and compassionate testimony. There is something about oral testimony. Whether it is as an elected Member or, indeed, a Minister, if we can actually see something, or hear or feel it, that is much more powerful, no matter how good a briefing may come from an individual, a member of our staff, or indeed an able civil servant. The comments regarding Peter Shannon and his family hit home.

I think that we were all aware, even before we were briefed on this issue or became elected Members, that people with kidney and renal disease suffer greatly. It is life threatening. Clearly, once someone is on dialysis, that is a significant issue. Not only is it life threatening if they do not obtain the treatment, but the treatment itself is life changing, not only for the individual—their life circumstances change in deeply restrictive ways, including through a loss of employment, as the hon. Gentleman said—but through its impact on other members of the family. Treatment can require family members to change their employment situations, and it can affect youngsters who perhaps do not get the same parental attention that would be available to others.

The hon. Gentleman eloquently put forward many points that I support and sustain. We are all largely on the same side in the debate. Nobody enters party politics or, indeed, comes to Westminster, to make their constituency worse off or endanger the livelihoods of their constituents. I will make some points on which I have differences with the Government, however. There are Governments in other countries who do not share my political hue or perspective—they are probably closer to right-of-centre than the UK Government—but who have policies that I will suggest later. I want to touch on two aspects of the debate: first, the difficulty people have in obtaining treatment for themselves or their children, and secondly, the difficulties faced by those undergoing home dialysis treatment, who the hon. Gentleman correctly mentioned.

The travel problem is a constituency issue, as the hon. Gentleman said in his speech. A constituent of mine—a Polish woman trying to sustain her life and her family—came to see me because her child requires dialysis treatment. In Scotland, it is difficult enough to get dialysis treatment for adults, but for children it can take place only in Glasgow or Aberdeen. She lives in East Lothian, and taking her child to Glasgow would mean travelling a considerable distance. He cannot go on his

[Kenny MacAskill]

own; he has to be taken by his mother or father, who would have to take time off work. That affects the wider family and creates costs.

That is not a matter for the Minister but for the Scottish Health Secretary, and I have written to him and await a reply. At the present moment, treatment is a postcode lottery. Some health boards are particularly generous; others are entirely lacking. For my constituent in Musselburgh, trying to get treatment is financially draining, extremely difficult, and traumatic—not just for her son, but for her whole family. These matters have to be addressed along the road. I have no doubt that similar issues in England must be considered, and the Minister will no doubt consider them.

Home treatment has been worsened by covid—in mental health terms—and by the fuel crisis, which is causing real difficulties. At the moment, there is an entirely spurious euphemism about people “self-disconnecting.” There is no such thing as self-disconnection. People are not saying, “I’m going to save for a holiday in Marbella, so I won’t put my power on”. As is often said, they have to choose between heating or eating.

For people on dialysis, the issue is far worse. It is not simply about access to heating, which is necessary—as the hon. Gentleman said, people feel the cold more when they are ill—but about access to power. Power means that people can charge their mobile phones so that they can call 999 if there is a significant problem; it means that they can wash their clothes in the washing machine if they have to go to the doctor’s or to hospital and want to uphold their decency and values by looking smart and presentable; and it means that they can afford to keep their dialysis machine on when it is ratcheting up the costs. The euphemism of “self-disconnection” is an entire fraud. There are significant issues for those who are on dialysis.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, people in deprived areas tend to have treatment elsewhere rather than at home. There is a reason why: most people on prepayment meters are unable to access a dialysis machine. I can understand why restrictions are imposed and why it is difficult, but that is fundamentally wrong. They should be able to access machines. The way to solve the problem is to level the charges for those on prepayment meters—not just the most deprived, but those who live in private tenancies and who have those meters forced on them. At the moment, those on prepayment meters pay a higher standing charge and a higher tariff even though they have lower incomes—that is perverse. There is no technical impediment to power companies levelling the charges, and it could be dealt with. It requires Ofgem to take action and the Government to impose it, so that is my point on prepayment meters.

I subscribe to aspects of work done by other countries, even by those that do not have a left-of-centre position. Other countries bring in social and disability tariffs, so that those who have least or who are sick can be charged at a lower rate. Belgium, for example, operates a system where the third of people with least are charged at a lower rate, and other countries have circumstances where people who receive dialysis can get financial support.

At present, the financial support provided in this country is haphazard and goes nowhere near meeting the costs required to run and operate a dialysis machine.

On that basis, there has to be political change and the Minister has the power to provide that. It is not a matter of blaming Ofgem, because Ofgem takes its directions from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It is those decisions that have to change.

We all agree that we have to provide greater sympathy and mental health support, as well as better access for people to get to treatment centres, but, fundamentally, those being treated at home have to be able to pay for the treatment they require.

3.36 pm

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and on his continued advocacy on the issue. He is a voice for issues that often do not get enough time in this place.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing the experience of his nephew, Peter, because experiences help to paint a picture of how these conditions impact on real people’s lives. Yesterday, I was delighted to meet two kidney patients, Dale and Tejal, through Kidney Research UK, who told me about their experience of suffering with kidney disease and of dialysis, and about the impact that is having on their life.

I praise the important contributions made by the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill). It is a pleasure to have the Minister in her place. It is the first time we have had an exchange in a debate in Westminster Hall, so I welcome her today.

I pay a huge tribute to the fantastic advocacy undertaken by charities such as Kidney Care UK and Kidney Research UK. They are great champions for patients and will no doubt have been a support to colleagues in their preparation for the debate.

As we have heard, today’s debate is particularly timely, given that tomorrow marks the second anniversary of the law that changed organ donation to an opt-out system. That change has made, and will continue to make, a massive difference for patients with kidney disease and other conditions, and it is right that we recognise that.

In the UK, some 3.5 million people, and rising, are living with kidney disease, so we cannot afford to ignore the issue. We know the debilitating effect that living with kidney disease and undergoing dialysis can have on patients. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said, it is not just the disruption that it causes to their everyday lives that we must consider, but the physical and mental consequences of living with a long-term condition.

Unlike treatments for conditions such as cancer and heart disease, treatments for kidney disease, such as dialysis, have barely changed in the last few decades. For patients living day in, day out with the effects of dialysis, that lack of progress is simply not good enough. Research led by Kidney Research UK has shown that new developments in treatment, such as high doses of intravenous iron, can make a real difference to patients.

Sadly, such new developments are not being delivered uniformly across the UK, leading to the kind of postcode lottery that affects so many long-term conditions. It is no surprise that those who are already the most vulnerable are the worst-off when it comes to being able to access

treatment at home. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted that point, and we place further emphasis on it because of the stark health injustice facing people in this country. The rate of patients receiving at-home treatment was almost 23% in the most affluent areas of England, compared with 15% in the most deprived areas.

We know that people from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to develop and die earlier from chronic kidney disease. We also know that when people from those groups experience kidney failure, they have poorer survival rates on dialysis and fewer are treated with peritoneal dialysis. That inequality extends to lower rates of kidney transplants and increased rates of transplants being affected by episodes of rejection.

Those inequalities are stark and cannot and should not be tolerated. We can and must do more to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, can access the treatment that works best for them, including being able to dialyse at home. For too many people, at-home dialysis is just not an option.

People with chronic kidney disease, for which there is no cure, already experience financial difficulties because of barriers to employment and additional costs of disability. With utility bills soaring, people have to shut off their heating or skip meals just to be able to afford to continue their vital treatment, as colleagues have mentioned. Figures from Kidney Care UK show us that the additional cost for a dialysis patient doing five overnight sessions a week is £1,454. That was before the energy price cap increased in April. As hon. Members have already set out, that is a stark increase in bills. Energy prices are already soaring and are set to rise even further when the cap rises again in October. What assurances can the Minister give to dialysis patients who face those added pressures that they will be protected from the cost of living crisis, here and now? Some 30,000 people in the UK rely on dialysis to stay alive. They cannot afford to wait.

Just yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, we heard the Prime Minister reassure patients that the NHS is responsible for covering the costs for at-home dialysis patients. Sadly, that simply does not chime with the experiences of dialysis patients up and down the country. Although the NHS service specification advises that NHS trusts reimburse the additional costs of home dialysis, reimbursement is inconsistent across the country. Many patients receive no or very little financial support to pay for the additional costs of carrying out treatment at home. Some do not even have the luxury of having the option of a reimbursement scheme discussed with them; they are simply left to fend for themselves.

There are some wonderful charities supporting patients living with kidney disease and on dialysis. The work they do to support patients is incredible and invaluable. Kidney Care UK handed out more than half a million pounds-worth of grants to patients and their families in 2021. In that time, they saw a rise in demand of 47% for their immediate hardship grants of £300. Patients are having to rely on charities to be able to fund their bills to pay for treatment, because the Government are not implementing their own policy properly. This is simply not acceptable and it must be changed.

Millions of our disabled, elderly and vulnerable neighbours are at the sharp end of this crisis. They simply cannot afford to live with dignity. Many are living through this nightmare, feeling like they have

been totally abandoned by the Government. Labour's plan for a windfall tax on oil and gas companies would take up to £600 off household energy bills and put it back in people's pockets. I am sure the Minister will have heard yesterday, and many times before, that that will make a real difference to people on dialysis. It will make a difference now.

Many Ministers have been asked this, but I am asking the Minister today: will she back Labour's plan for a windfall tax? Patients on dialysis deserve better security and the respect of the support they are entitled to. It is time for the Government to deliver. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.46 pm

**The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I would like to begin by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing a debate on this important issue and for his kind words.

I heard his impassioned case for improving outcomes for patients receiving kidney dialysis treatment. I also appreciate how kidney health is an issue of personal importance to the hon. Gentleman. It was very moving to hear the story of his nephew, Peter, who required a kidney transplant and happily got one when he was 16, after being born with posterior urethral valves. The hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) mentioned how important it is in this place to share those stories. It really brings the debate to life. It shows why we are here, and why this matters.

We heard other moving stories from across the House. We heard about the stresses and strains that chronic kidney disease and dialysis treatment put on lives. We heard about Billy McIlroy and David Johnson from the hon. Member for Strangford, and about Dale and Tejal from the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark). They spoke about the impact the treatment has on the lives of those around the patients. I would like to thank all Members for giving those patients a voice and making their stories real to us all.

I also recognise the fantastic work being done by charities, including Kidney Care UK, Kidney Research, the National Kidney Federation and the Polycystic Kidney Disease Charity, on behalf of people living with chronic kidney disease and their families. They are ensuring that issues such as those covered today are kept at the forefront of our thinking. That is why such debates are so important. I would particularly like to commend those charities for their recent work supporting World Kidney Day, which raised awareness of the issues faced by those with chronic kidney disease. I also commend Kidney Care UK's campaign on the impact of the rise in energy costs on those who undergo dialysis at home. It is a very important matter.

I would like to reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that the Government remain absolutely committed to improving both access to and the quality of dialysis treatment that many kidney patients across the UK depend on, in particular to ensure that treatment at home is available to those for whom it is suitable, which we heard about today. The Government are working closely with NHS England to implement the renal services transformation programme, which was commissioned in September 2021, following specific recommendations



[Gillian Keegan]

published in Getting It Right First Time's national report on renal medicine mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford.

The aims are to reduce unwarranted variation in both the quality and accessibility of renal care, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. One of the key priorities of the transformation programme is to increase the provision of home dialysis, with the aim of increasing the percentage of patients per renal centre receiving home therapies to 20% in each renal centre. That target of 20%, which was mentioned, is still in place, but several centres have actually exceeded that target and gone beyond 30%.

However, the Government acknowledge that there is a concentrated drive within the renal community for increasing access to at-home dialysis treatment, and for good reason. We heard some of those reasons. Home dialysis has the potential to deliver significant benefits for patient experience and outcomes, giving patients both flexibility and autonomy in their treatment. By investing in home dialysis so that patients do not need to make long and disruptive trips to hospital for regular treatment, local systems will be able to deliver better experiences and outcomes for patients and reduce spending on the transportation of patients to hospital dialysis centres. That makes sense, and we will of course ensure that those services are available to all people from all backgrounds. It is very important that they are equally available across the country.

A range of guidance, produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, is available for commissioners and clinicians to support patients' access to home dialysis treatments when appropriate for the individual. Patients and their family members or carers should be involved in the decision-making process, alongside healthcare teams, when considering treatment options, and should be offered regular opportunities to review their treatment and discuss any concerns or changes in preferences. That includes a choice of at-home or in-centre dialysis modalities to ensure that the decision is informed by both clinical considerations and patient preferences.

In support of that, NHS England has set up 11 renal clinical networks, which are working closely with integrated care systems to determine local priorities. Providers of renal services, ICSs and regional commissioners will continue to monitor uptake of home dialysis via the UK renal registry and NHS England renal datasets. The transformation programme has also appointed a national clinical adviser specifically for dialysis, to develop and share best practice. The programme will provide recommendations to all renal services to support achieving the 20% prevalence rate.

The Government know that the impact of rising energy costs is a concern for many. I share the concern, raised in today's debate and by patient charities, that those undergoing dialysis treatment at home may be particularly vulnerable to the impact of rising costs due to the high energy consumption of the dialysis machines that they rely on for their treatment.

I am pleased to be able to provide reassurance, as the Prime Minister did in PMQs yesterday, that provisions are already in place for patients receiving haemodialysis treatment at home to be reimbursed for additional direct energy costs as a result of their treatment. The arrangements are outlined in the "Haemodialysis to

treat established renal failure performed in a patient's home" service specification, and the NHS meets those additional direct utility costs through the payment of the national tariff to the patient's usual dialysis provider.

There is no national policy on determining the amount to be reimbursed to patients, with costs to be agreed between the provider and the individual based on the amount of energy used and charged. However, the amount reimbursed is expected to match increases in the patient's utility tariff. We fully expect providers of at-home dialysis services to inform patients about that financial support available to them, and I have asked my officials to keep me informed about rates of reimbursement over the coming months, to ensure that the policy is working well. I would also be delighted to meet with the APPG, where we can discuss this further and ensure that that progress is being made.

NHS England is working closely with renal networks to support consistency of approach regarding the reimbursement arrangements. That work has already commenced, with NHS England providing clinical networks with examples of formulas to calculate electrical outputs from dialysis machines to support that reimbursement for patients. Examples of good practice in supporting utility costs from dialysis centres have also been shared across renal networks during April 2022, so very recently.

NHS England has also agreed to communicate directly to all commissioned providers of home dialysis, and renal clinical networks, to remind them of the reimbursement arrangements within the adult service specification and that they should proactively alert eligible patients to the arrangements.

The hon. Member for Strangford also mentioned support for children on home haemodialysis.

**Feryal Clark:** I thank the Minister for giving way. The issue with a lot of the reimbursements is that renal patients are having to wait months—three or four months, in some cases—for that reimbursement. They are being treated as if they are a company that has put in a claim to the trust. Will the Minister ask NHS England to look into that and see if it can reduce that wait, or have a set time, so that people are not having to wait three or four months to be reimbursed? In this cost of living crisis, they need the cash back in their pockets quickly.

**Gillian Keegan:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. Hopefully the best shared practice includes that reimbursement should be paid very quickly. Clearly, the billing systems that are in place across the various providers will differ. It is important to state that best practice when it comes to reimbursement is to do it as quickly as possible.

We were talking about home hemodialysis support for children. That applies to about 20 children, as of February 2022, and it is currently at the discretion of individual providers. However, the renal service clinical reference group has begun an urgent review of the reimbursement process for children. Hopefully that will give some comfort to the hon. Member for Strangford.

If people with chronic kidney disease and their families need further information, there are a range of resources available on the excellent Kidney Care UK and National Kidney Federation websites, including information on treatment options, financial support and other support

services to help people live well. NHS England will continue its work with those charities and others to engage their support in promoting awareness of reimbursement options available for those on home hemodialysis. In terms of wider ambitions, the renal services transformation programme is developing optimal pathways, tools and resources that will transform the delivery of renal services across England. That will support better healthcare outcomes for patients undergoing dialysis treatment, and provide integrated care systems with a whole-patient pathway approach to commissioning renal services.

The hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and for Enfield North both mentioned the importance of providing suitable mental health support for dialysis patients. The Government acknowledge that this is very important. There can be a detrimental impact on an individual's mental health when undergoing complex dialysis treatment. To address that, the national adult renal services transformation programme has identified psychosocial support in renal services as a key theme for improvement. Work is being taken forward with clinicians, patient representatives and other subject matter experts to identify best practices that can support patients' psychosocial needs, as well as the steps that are needed to spread those best practices. Those suffering with renal issues can also access mental health support via self-referral to Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, which the Government have invested £110 million in to expand access.

As the hon. Member for Strangford is aware, health policy is a devolved matter, and I understand that there are different arrangements for Northern Ireland, although commissioners and trusts remain equally committed to excellent care and better outcomes. The transformation programme has established a multi-agency programme board with representation from key stakeholders, including regional commissioners, patient charities and relevant national bodies, to ensure that a full range of views are considered. It has also established five expert-led multi-disciplinary clinical workstreams, including workstreams on improving access, identifying best practice and developing solutions in chronic kidney disease. All transformation programme workstreams intend to make key deliverables available by April 2023. That will include documentation outlining best practice, a data dashboard outlining key metrics to support better decision making, and support for the review of the renal service specification led by NHS England's renal clinical reference group.

I was asked earlier what the Government are doing to fund research into kidney conditions and their treatment. We are committed to supporting research and funding it through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. For the financial years 2016-17 to 2020-21, the NIHR spent £113.2 million on kidney research. That research includes kidney disease, but also explored why people with kidney disease are at an increased risk of death and disability following a heart attack, the relationship between covid-19 and kidney disease and whether aspirin reduces the risk of major vascular events in patients. There is a full research programme ongoing.

Once again, I extend my continued gratitude to all charities working to support improved outcomes for people with chronic kidney disease. We are very happy to continue to work with them; we all have the same objective.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to promote the vital schemes that are available to support patients with chronic kidney disease, to make sure people know what is coming next and are aware of the financial support available to them, and to outline the strong programme of work we are undertaking across the country to transform these services. I urge all patients receiving dialysis at home to speak to their provider so that they receive the full NHS support they are entitled to through their care.

4 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank all hon. Members who have spoken, and I thank the kidney charities that the Minister and everybody else referred to very much for what they have done.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made some very pertinent points about depression, mental health and the psychological impact that dialysis treatment has on people. The Minister very kindly referred to that in her response, and she outlined the case.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) referred to the travel costs of taking children to the few centres, and he talked about the impact that has on families. He said that dialysis patients have higher levels of treatment. He also referred to prepayment meters, which can prevent people from accessing home dialysis treatment to start with. I know that is not the Minister's responsibility, but the hon. Gentleman highlights an issue. We all know the Minister is very thorough, and that she will pass on the issues that have been brought up but are not her responsibility to the relevant Departments.

The shadow Minister referred to the two kidney patients she met yesterday. She also thanked the charities and referred to the 3.1 million people living with kidney disease in the United Kingdom. As we all did, she underlined the need for equal treatment, access and cost reimbursement across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I thank the Minister very much for her comprehensive, detailed response to the issues. She referred to the 11 renal networks and the regional care systems that feed into the transformation programme recommendations.

All hon. Members referred to rising costs. Energy tariffs are not the Minister's responsibility, but perhaps she will be able to refer that to the right person, whoever it may be. Hon. Members also referred to proactivity and the need to reimburse people. As we were sitting here, Fiona Loud, who is in the Public Gallery, sent me a wee note that said that at least some of the people are getting their money. Perhaps people are taking note of the fact that this Westminster Hall debate is happening, because people are getting their money out—there is a commitment.

All NHS trusts must act and respond better. We need to address the reimbursement of moneys as soon as possible. The shadow Minister referred to that. It is great that the Minister and the Government are setting a target of 20% for home dialysis. We want to see that target achieved.

I welcome the chance to communicate with the Minister outside with the kidney charities, to understand better what the real problems are. We have to thank the charities for their campaigns. The reason I have knowledge

*[Jim Shannon]*

is half the time because of them. Without them, none of us would be able to deliver the details, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West has done.

I always look forward to the future. We bring forward issues to the Minister, and then we look forward to the response. The response we have listened to today sets out a programme of events, strategies and visions for the future. We want to see things improve. We will probably regularly come back to the Minister—I hope we do not have to, but we may have to. If we do, we will do that collectively in a positive fashion. In my life, I always try to do things positively. We bring things to the Minister and say, “Here’s where the shortfalls are. Here’s where we can do better.” What we heard today from the Minister has given us some heart, hope and confidence

for the future. On behalf of all kidney charities, on behalf of the patients out there and on behalf of us all, we thank the Minister. I thank you, Sir George, as always, for the excellent way you chair these debates. I appreciate it very much.

**Sir George Howarth (in the Chair):** I thank the Front Benchers and the Back Benchers for the constructive and consensual way in which this debate has been conducted. It is a model of how we should conduct all our debates.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered dialysis care outcomes.

4.6 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 19 May 2022

## DEFENCE

### Ajax Update

#### **The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):**

As part of my commitment to keep Parliament informed on the programme, I wish to provide a further update on the Ajax equipment project being delivered as part of the armoured cavalry programme.

#### *Programmatic issues*

Work continues on the noise and vibration issues.

The independent Millbrook trials have now concluded. The initial findings informed the consideration by the safety panel on the next step of conducting user validation trials.

The aim of the user validation trials is to help establish the effectiveness of the modifications to address the noise and vibration problems and thereby deliver a safe system of work under which we could conduct reliability growth trials on the modified vehicles.

Following agreement by the safety panel, user validation trials by Army personnel resumed at the Armoured Trials Development Unit on 12 May, supported by the independent Millbrook trials team. Data was successfully collected during the trials for analysis. In particular, as a result of the trials, an issue has been raised on the effectiveness of the internal communications system which requires additional analysis.

The safety panel have set cautious parameters within which the user validation trials are to be conducted. This included the temporary use of Crewgard headsets to allow the modifications proposed by General Dynamics to be trialled. Hearing checks were conducted on all personnel before and after the trials took place. These checks identified hearing anomalies in some personnel (including personnel not involved in the trials who were part of the “control” sample). We intend to resume trials once these anomalies are understood.

User trials are required to allow Millbrook to continue to gather additional data to provide an independent assessment on the effectiveness of the modifications proposed by General Dynamics. We will then analyse the data, alongside feedback from the Army crews involved. This analysis will help define a safe system of work for the reliability growth trials on the modified vehicles.

These reliability growth trials are planned to commence later this year. As with any armoured vehicle procurement, the aim of the reliability growth trials is to test the vehicle more thoroughly over an extended period. This will identify any issues beyond noise and vibration that need to be addressed before we can be confident that the vehicle meets the Army’s contractual requirements. Identifying and resolving a range of such issues is a normal part of the acquisition process for all military equipment.

Once we are satisfied that there are long-term solutions to the noise and vibration problems, we will need to agree with General Dynamics a realistic schedule to initial operating capability and full operating capability.

We will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose and we are continuing to take all steps necessary to secure our contractual and commercial rights under the contract with General Dynamics.

#### *Update on personnel*

It remains the case that of the 310 people identified as working with Ajax, 13 individuals have had long-term restrictions on noise exposure recommended, potentially requiring a limitation in their military duties. The majority of these had pre-existing hearing issues prior to working on Ajax; some did not. A further five individuals remain under specialist outpatient care for hearing and other ear, nose and throat issues. In addition, it remains the case that four individuals who worked on Ajax have been discharged on health grounds, in some cases for reasons wholly unrelated to hearing loss.

Assessments continue for both hand-transmitted and whole-body vibration. To date, fewer than five individuals have been identified with conditions which could be aggravated by vibration; these individuals have been recommended for a limitation in their military duties whilst they undergo further investigation and treatment. It is not possible to determine clinically whether Ajax exposure has caused or aggravated the clinical conditions of any of these individuals. I am withholding a more precise breakdown because, given the small number of service personnel involved, individuals could be identified resulting in a potential breach in medical confidentiality.

#### *The Sheldon review*

Following parliamentary clearance of the associated contingent liability, I am pleased to announce that we have now formally appointed Clive Sheldon QC. The review will have full access to all relevant MOD papers and personnel. I encourage all those who wish to provide evidence or other input to the review to contact the independent review team at [Ajax-Review@mod.gov.uk](mailto:Ajax-Review@mod.gov.uk). Copies of the terms of reference of the review are available in the Library of the House. I will update Parliament in due course on the likely duration of the review once Mr Sheldon has had the opportunity to consider the issue in detail.

#### *Conclusion*

The focus for the MOD and General Dynamics remains on developing and delivering long-term solutions for noise and vibration and vehicles that comply with General Dynamics contractual obligations. We want Ajax to succeed and to deliver what the British Army requires. We have a robust firm price contract for the delivery of 589 vehicles at a cost of £5.5 billion. We will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose.

[HCWS42]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Commonwealth Chair-in-Office Report Addendum 2020 to 2022

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):** My noble Friend the Minister for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, has made the following written ministerial statement:

The UK has been Commonwealth chair in office (CiO) since hosting the 25th Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in April 2018, during which Heads committed to a range of ambitious actions to build a fairer, prosperous, more sustainable and more secure Commonwealth. In September 2020, we published a comprehensive report detailing our work with Commonwealth member states and partners to deliver against the 2018 Commonwealth summit commitments, entitled “UK Commonwealth Chair-In-Office Report 2018-20”: this document was deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

CHOGM is normally convened every two years and the 26th CHOGM was due to be held in Kigali, Rwanda, in June 2020. Due to the pandemic, it has been postponed twice and the UK’s tenure as CiO subsequently extended. Having now served four years as CiO, the UK will pass on the baton to Rwanda as CHOGM host this June. Given these developments, I am pleased today to give notice to the House that a further short report entitled “UK Commonwealth Chair-in-Office Report Addendum 2020-2022” has been deposited in the Libraries of the House.

The report sets out the UK’s continued delivery and achievements against Heads’ commitments under the CHOGM18 themes. It highlights specific action taken on health security given the critical need to adapt and respond to the pandemic, which included the UK supporting the delivery of over 1.4 billion vaccine doses to 52 Commonwealth countries.

The UK has prioritised the strengthening and renewal of the Commonwealth and remains the largest single donor to the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations and their programmes. It has worked to boost the voice of the Commonwealth on the world stage: in October 2020, the first Commonwealth statement in the UN Human Rights Council was delivered on behalf of all member states by the UK’s international ambassador for human rights, Rita French.

As chair-in-office, the UK has aimed to build a fairer Commonwealth for all its citizens, highlighting member states’ collective commitment to the shared values of human rights and the rule of law, as enshrined in the Commonwealth charter. Through the UK’s continued funding of dedicated human rights advisers at the Commonwealth small states office (CSSO), we have helped to strengthen the capacity of small and developing Commonwealth member countries to participate more actively across a range of human rights fora.

The Commonwealth has an important role to play in supporting global growth, creating employment, and reaffirming commitment to a rules-based, free, open and fair multilateral trading system. In this regard, the UK has been an unwavering advocate for intra-Commonwealth trade and has worked to remove trade barriers and deepen economic partnerships. For example, the UK-funded SheTrades Commonwealth programme has helped over 3,500 women-owned businesses become more competitive and generate over £32 million in sales.

At CHOGM18, Heads recognised the unprecedented impacts of climate change across the world, and launched the Commonwealth Blue Charter to respond to the existential threat posed by the deteriorating health of the ocean. The UK has been a consistent champion of the Blue Charter over the last four years and co-funded the Commonwealth climate finance access hub (CFAH), which has mobilised over \$38 million to support some of the most climatically vulnerable Commonwealth countries.

Heads pledged to build a more secure future for all citizens at CHOGM18. Backed by over £15 million of programme funding, the UK has worked with all Commonwealth countries to strengthen their cyber security in support of an open, democratic, peaceful and secure cyber space.

The UK looks forward to the gathering of the Commonwealth family in June, falling in between the celebrations of Her Majesty’s Platinum Jubilee and the Birmingham Commonwealth Games. We remain steadfastly committed to our partnership

with this unique association of 54 equal and independent member states, which continues to deliver robust benefits to Commonwealth citizens across the globe.

The attachment can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-05-19/HCWS37/>.

[HCWS37]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### David Fuller Case: Independent Inquiry

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** Following earlier statements by Department of Health and Social Care Ministers, I would like to inform the House that the independent inquiry into the issues raised by the David Fuller case has today published a progress update on its work to date. This can be found at:  
<https://fuller.independent-inquiry.uk/announcements/>.

The progress update sets out the transition from a local, independent investigation initiated by the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust to the current independent inquiry that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced in November of last year. It describes how the work already undertaken as part of the independent investigation is feeding into the inquiry, as well as the important common themes that emerged from families and other interested parties which gave rise to amendments to the inquiry’s terms of reference. The independent inquiry published its final terms of reference on 23 February 2022.

Although the local investigation was constrained from taking evidence while the criminal prosecution of David Fuller was under way, Sir Jonathan Michael does set out some urgent, high-level themes and areas of concern arising from the investigation at the time in his progress update:

- Responsibilities between NHS trusts and contractors/subcontractors
- Security and access
- Policies and procedures versus practice
- Oversight of regulated activities
- Management of areas and services not covered by regulation.

These themes had been shared with the trust in August 2021 and subsequently with NHS England and NHS Improvement. The trust has been putting its own steps in place regarding its mortuary practices ahead of the substantive, initial report of the inquiry. NHS England and NHS Improvement has continued to work with trusts to provide assurances against current guidance from the Human Tissue Authority (HTA), and on the additional measures that have been taken to improve the effectiveness of security in place for all their mortuaries and post-mortem activities.

The progress update makes clear that the first phase of the independent inquiry is firmly under way and describes the rapid progress that it has so far achieved. Also, from the inquiry’s engagement with witnesses so far, it has experienced a high degree of co-operation and expects this to continue. Both are testament to the hard work of Sir Jonathan and his team.

The progress update also sets out the next steps, including a revised timing for the initial report on matters relating to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. Due to the volume of evidence that is emerging, the initial report will now be available later this year. This will be followed by a final report next year, looking at the broader national picture and the wider lessons for the NHS and for other settings. While there is real urgency in understanding how Fuller was able to carry out his shocking and unlawful actions, and why these went unnoticed, the inquiry must be allowed the time it needs to fully consider all of the relevant evidence and assemble its findings. The inquiry continues to liaise with Kent police to ensure that if it identifies possible criminal conduct, this is referred swiftly for further investigation, in line with its terms of reference.

The HTA was asked by the Secretary of State to provide advice on its regulatory framework following the conclusion of the murder trial of David Fuller and the public revelation of his sexual offending against bodies in a hospital mortuary at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust.

The HTA advice, received in December 2021, along with a short progress update, has been published today. Both can be found at:

<https://www.hta.gov.uk/news/december-2021-advice-published>

The HTA has focused on three areas since December 2021; preparation for the inquiry, working with stakeholders on licensed mortuary security, and starting the revision of HTA guidance for licensed mortuaries in the post mortem sector, with implementation planned later this year.

Further details are available on gov.uk via the following link.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-fuller-inquiry-update-to-the-secretary-of-state-19-may-2022>.

[HCWS41]

## JUSTICE

### Modernising Lasting Powers of Attorney: Response to Consultation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Tom Pursglove):** Today I am launching the Government response to the consultation on modernising lasting powers of attorney.

A lasting power of attorney (LPA) is a legal agreement that helps people plan for their future. It lets someone (the “donor”) choose people they trust (“attorneys”) to support them and make decisions for them if they lose the mental capacity to make their own decisions in the future.

The LPA was introduced by the Mental Capacity Act 2005 (MCA) in 2007 to improve safeguards from the old enduring power of attorney. The MCA also created the Office of the Public Guardian (OPG), an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice. OPG is responsible for registering LPAs so they can be used and investigating concerns about an attorney’s use of the LPA.

LPAs are reliant on an outdated paper system, which increasingly does not meet the needs of society. In our day-to-day lives we expect more and more services to be available digitally, more so with the effects of the covid-19 pandemic which has changed the way many people think

and act. Modernisation provides us with the opportunity to improve safeguards against fraud, abuse and undue pressure by using technological advancements to strengthen the overall security of the LPA service.

The introduction of a digital channel is necessary to find the right balance between increasing protection against abuse and ease of use for people legitimately creating LPAs. Automation of OPG’s processes will allow the OPG to carry out identification checks to protect against fraud. Reducing the resources needed for administrative tasks could allow an increase in those involved in supporting donors and investigating abuse.

It was for this reason that the MOJ launched its consultation last summer; to increase safeguards, improve access and achieve sustainability for the OPG. The consultation closed on 13 October 2021 and received 313 responses. It has allowed us to identify some of the key changes needed to address the aims of modernising LPAs which are covered in more detail in the Government response published today. While it is clear to me that digitisation is needed, it is important that a paper channel will remain to ensure access for all.

Publication of the Government response is a significant step forward on the journey to reform the LPA service for the public. Today, I therefore lay in Parliament this Command Paper that sets out the views of the stakeholders that engaged in our consultation and how the Government propose to move forward to implement changes to the LPA service. These changes will make the service safer, easier to access and more efficient to administer.

[HCWS40]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### Northern Ireland Abortion Services

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis):** Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2019 places me under a legal duty to ensure that women and girls in Northern Ireland can access abortion services. I am determined to ensure that women and girls in Northern Ireland can access abortion services in the same way as those living in the rest of the United Kingdom.

On 22 July 2021, I gave a direction to the Northern Ireland Department of Health, and to the health and social care board, to commission and make abortion services available by 31 March 2022. The Department of Health has not met that deadline, and it is now clear that no progress will be made towards the provision of these services.

It has always been my preference that, as a devolved matter, the Department of Health delivers these services. However, with over two years having passed since the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 established a framework, women and girls are still unable to access high-quality abortion and post-abortion care in Northern Ireland. This is entirely unacceptable.

Today, I am therefore laying regulations that:

remove the need for Executive Committee approval before services can be commissioned and funded by the Department of Health. The regulations will do this by providing that directions under the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021, which require action to be taken to implement the



recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Report), must be complied with irrespective of whether the matter has been discussed or agreed by the Executive Committee; and

confer on a Secretary of State the power to do anything that a Northern Ireland Minister or department could do for the purpose of ensuring that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report are implemented. For the purpose of determining what a Northern Ireland Minister or department could do, any need for Executive Committee approval will be disregarded. Whilst the regulations will also provide a Secretary of State with the power to provide financial assistance for the same purpose, as a devolved matter it remains the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive to fund abortion services in Northern Ireland.

This means that the Department of Health will have no further barriers to commission and fund services. I am steadfast in my belief that the Department of Health should drive forward the commissioning of abortion services without further delay in Northern Ireland.

If the Department of Health does not commission and fund abortion services as directed, I will intervene further. To ensure I have all the information required in those circumstances, a small team that I am establishing in the Northern Ireland Office will work alongside the Department of Health and take this forward.

[HCWS39]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley):** Fraud is an ever-present challenge in both the private and public sector.

Fraud committed against the welfare system—whether by individuals or criminal gangs—is not a victimless crime. It is felt throughout society, upon the services people rely on and by honest, hard-working taxpayers who expect to see public money spent on the purpose for which it was intended, rather than going into the hands of fraudsters.

Our fundamental approach has always been to prevent fraud from entering the system in the first place, to detect and root out fraud when it does, and to deter would-be fraudsters through a robust penalty system, including recovering the debt owed. These principles were bringing fraud down before the pandemic.

During the early months of the pandemic, we took a decision to implement temporary easements to ensure we could prioritise payments to those who needed help

during a difficult time. It is regrettable that some unscrupulous people sought to exploit these extraordinary circumstances for their own illegitimate gain.

Later today, I will publish a paper on fighting fraud in the welfare system which sets out our plan to address the challenge of fraud, to stay ahead of evolving threats, and to reduce the levels of fraud and error in the welfare system.

This plan sets out how we are investing £613 million over the next three years in our frontline counter-fraud professionals and in enhanced data analytics. This funds 1,400 more staff in our counter-fraud teams, a new 2,000-strong team dedicated to reviewing existing universal credit claims and an enhanced data analytics package to develop new ways to prevent and detect fraud. We estimate this will stop £2.1 billion of loss in fraud and error over the next three years.

When parliamentary time allows, we will bring forward new powers to investigate potential fraud and punish fraudsters. We will:

Bring the Department in line with counter-fraud functions elsewhere in Government, by creating powers to enable our officers to undertake arrests, and to search and seize evidence.

Bolster our penalty system—creating a new type of civil penalty to ensure that those who commit fraud face punishment.

Create new powers that will require organisations, such as banks, to securely share data on a larger scale to find and prevent fraud.

Establish new powers to improve the Department's access to information from a wider range of organisations and to assist counter-fraud and compliance activity into all payments made by the Department, modernising our ability to drive fraud out of the system.

Technological advances give fraudsters new opportunities to find ways to attack. To make sure we stay ahead of the fraudsters, we need to bring together the full force of Government and the expertise of the private sector. We are creating a new Fraud Prevention Advisory Group to bring together Government and external experts to identify and develop innovative ways to crack down on fraudsters, including through more flexible and proactive use of data. We will work hand in hand with the new Public Sector Fraud Authority to ensure all of Government step up their efforts to reduce fraud and error and bring fraudsters to justice.

This plan will help us to defend the welfare system against those who seek to take advantage of it. It will allow us to dig deeper in rooting fraud out wherever it occurs in the welfare system, to catch and punish fraudsters and to protect taxpayers' money.

[HCWS38]









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