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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 8 June 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Regional Inequality

1. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps she is taking to help reduce regional inequality. [900367]

4. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What steps she is taking to help reduce regional inequality. [900370]

8. **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What steps she is taking to help reduce regional inequality. [900375]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government's central mission is to level up the UK by spreading opportunity more equally across the country. In February we published our levelling up White Paper, which provides a clear plan to level up every corner of the UK. It will address regional disparities across the country, put more money in the pockets of those who need it the most, and transform our economy by generating higher paid jobs and new investment.

Selaine Saxby: Regional inequalities exist even within large counties such as Devon, so what is my hon. Friend doing to tackle those disparities? For example, Ilfracombe in my constituency has the lowest life expectancy in Devon—10 years lower than Kingskerswell, which has the highest. Child poverty in Heavitree, Exeter, stands at 8.1% compared with 20.3% in Ilfracombe West.

Kemi Badenoch: Ilfracombe has been awarded more than £3 million to deliver a marine leisure centre at Larkstone cove, which will provide community facilities for local clubs and groups. More broadly, North Devon has been awarded £9.8 million of levelling-up funding to date. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the UK shared prosperity fund will also support our ambitions on levelling up, and that will provide £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025.

Tom Randall: In places such as the east midlands, we sometimes feel that we fare slightly less well than other areas. Can my hon. Friend tell me what the Government are doing to make sure that levelling up is genuinely driven by data and evidence?

Kemi Badenoch: My officials are delivering the equality data programme, which is examining how access to opportunity is affected by a range of factors, including geography and socioeconomic background. For example, an employee in Wales, Northern Ireland or the north-east of England earns more than £3 less every hour than a similar employee in London, and this geographic pay gap exists even when the cost of living is accounted for. Data from this programme will support our levelling-up agenda, and we encourage Departments to take focused, evidence-based action on those findings.

Julian Sturdy: I welcome the Government's move to improve access to cash in the Queen's Speech. It is an issue that affects regional imbalance, as, sadly, more rural banks close. Will the Minister act to ensure that cash is more accepted more widely after the pandemic, as it is still the preferred option for many older people and, more importantly in my constituency and I am sure in others, for carers who are spending their clients' cash?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. We do understand how difficult the trend away from cash and towards cards and digital payments can be. I have seen that in my own constituency with repeated closures of rural bank branches, which force vulnerable customers into more difficult situations, so I thank him for raising it. The ability to transact cash remains important to millions of people. We cannot force the rural branches to remain open, but we will legislate to protect access to cash. The Government plan to introduce legislation in the Financial Services and Markets Bill to support the continued use of cash in people's daily lives, but he will be pleased to know that it will also help local businesses to continue accepting cash by ensuring access to deposit facilities.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My constituents will have listened with bewilderment to the Minister's replies to other Members. This Government have been in office for 12 years now. She talks about tackling regional inequalities. Over those 12 years, child poverty has increased, pensioner poverty has increased, the gap between the richest and the poorest has increased, and life expectancy has stalled and in some areas gone backwards. Which of those achievements is she most proud of?

Kemi Badenoch: I am proud of this Government's achievements. The hon. Gentleman has been very selective in picking data that requires a different baseline of years. I am afraid to say that he is wrong. We have been levelling up the country, and, as we announced in the levelling up White Paper, the Government will continue to do so—for example using the £1.4 billion global Britain investment fund to attract major investments, such as the new £2 billion Britishvolt gigafactory in Northumberland. We are doing a lot across the country to level up and we will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her responses. When it comes to regional inequality in Northern Ireland, I have some concerns over the geographic pay gap to which she referred. In discussions with the Northern Ireland Assembly, what specifically can be done to ensure that the wages that ladies get here on the mainland are reflected in the wages offered to those in Northern Ireland?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, it is disappointing to see those figures. They do in fact take into account the cost of living. When the data programme is finished, we expect that proposals will be put forward to address those specific issues. I would be very keen for the hon. Gentleman to provide any particular insight that he has from his own constituency, because we do need MPs to bring their regional knowledge into the policymaking agenda.

Levelling Up

2. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support the Government's levelling-up agenda. [900368]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Our levelling up White Paper calls time on the postcode lottery and sets out far-reaching action to break the link between geography and destiny. To support that, we are delivering the equality data programme, which is our biggest and best analysis of the barriers that people face.

Jerome Mayhew: One of the biggest problems in rural communities such as Broadland is low expectations, both academically and economically. Can my right hon. Friend explain what she is doing to take on that soft bigotry and ensure that people have an equal opportunity to succeed wherever they live, particularly in rural communities?

Elizabeth Truss: We have appointed Katharine Birbalsingh as chair of the Social Mobility Commission. She has taken on the soft bigotry of low expectations at her fantastic school, the Michaela Community School in Brent. We want her to help the whole country, including rural areas and places such as Broadland. Tomorrow, she will lay out her vision in a speech at Policy Exchange entitled "Bucking the trend: a fresh approach to social mobility".

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Secretary of State Anneliese Dodds.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that her Government have levelled women down, with women's real wages now £226 less per year than when Labour left office?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not agree with that at all. We are entirely focused on tackling the causes of the gender pay gap by making it easier for people to afford childcare, normalising flexible working and helping women to get into the top jobs, particularly in areas such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics where they can earn more money.

Mr Speaker: I call SNP spokesperson Kirsten Oswald.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Women's Budget Group has pointed out that women are being hit the hardest by this Tory cost of living crisis, and research from the Resolution Foundation has highlighted that the UK Government's welfare reforms will push 500,000 children into poverty. The reality is that the UK Government are pushing communities down, not levelling them up. Will the Minister ask the Chancellor to follow

the example of the Scottish Government and provide families with the support they need to get through the Tory cost of living crisis?

Elizabeth Truss: What we are doing is helping more women to get into higher-paid jobs and set up enterprises. We have just set up the taskforce on women-led high-growth enterprises, led by Anne Boden, the chief executive of Starling Bank. We want to help women by giving them opportunities, including to set up new businesses.

Endometriosis

3. **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support women with endometriosis. [900369]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): This Government take very seriously the challenges women face in getting a diagnosis of endometriosis and in living with the symptoms. That is why it will be a priority area in the women's health strategy.

Claire Coutinho: My constituent Claire Ciano suffers from endometriosis. It has had a hugely detrimental effect on her career, thanks to the difficulty in getting diagnosed and the lack of treatment available. I commend the Minister on putting forward the women's health strategy, but will she set out in further detail the steps she will take to raise awareness and improve treatment for sufferers of endometriosis?

Maria Caulfield: The case of my hon. Friend's constituent is unfortunately only too common. We know the average wait time for a diagnosis is around eight years. Unfortunately, while the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's published guidelines suggest how women should be diagnosed and the treatment they should receive, they are not mandatory. However, in the women's health strategy we will strongly urge that they be followed.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments. One of the biggest issues for women suffering from endometriosis is the lack of access to fertility treatment. She will know that I have been campaigning heavily for better access to, and regulation of, in vitro fertilisation treatment. Can she confirm that that will be a key priority in the women's health strategy, and when can we expect an update to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, which is woefully out of date?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady has campaigned very hard on IVF. I can say that IVF will be in the women's health strategy; IVF services are commissioned at a local level, but there is disparity in how they are commissioned in local areas, and we want to see consistency of service offered to women and partners.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Endometriosis South Coast does brilliant work supporting women suffering from endometriosis, but it

is seeking reassurance from the Minister that, when the women's health ambassador is appointed, she will be a real champion for those affected by this condition and other women-only conditions that are so impactful on their to continue work. Can the Minister update the House on when the women's health ambassador will be announced, given that we have been expecting the post since December?

Maria Caulfield: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that the women's health ambassador will be key in driving change, not just by raising awareness and confidence among women in coming forward for help, but by improving the services women receive, and she will have to wait only days, rather than weeks, before we release the name.

Women's Health Strategy

5. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on the delivery of a women's health strategy. [900371]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): As I have said in answer to previous questions, the women's health strategy will be forthcoming. We have had over 100,000 responses to our call for evidence. We published the vision document in December, and the full strategy will be published shortly.

Jeff Smith: The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has just released figures to show that gynaecology waiting lists have soared by over 60% to half a million people—a bigger proportion than in any other area of medicine. What are the Government going to do to sort this out and get waiting lists down so that women get the healthcare they need?

Maria Caulfield: It is true that the backlog caused by covid is having an impact on gynae procedures. The roll-out of our community diagnostic centres will help significantly with that because GPs will be able to refer women straight to them, and they will be able to get some of their gynae procedures done there without having to have secondary care referrals. We hope that will make an improvement for women.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): To be clear, the backlog is not caused just by covid. Figures published by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists shows that the number of women waiting over 12 months for healthcare in England ballooned from 66 women two years ago to 25,000 women today. They include a constituent of mine who recently wrote to me stating that the earliest available gynaecological appointment offered to her was in October 2023—over a year from now. Given that the Government's long-delayed women's health strategy still does not exist, what action will the Minister take now to reduce these unacceptable waiting times? After all, this week is meant to be the Government's Health Week.

Maria Caulfield: I think the hon. Lady has answered her own question. She says that cases have risen in the past two years; that is precisely because of the pandemic. If we were under a Labour Government we would still be in lockdown.

Women in STEM Apprenticeships

6. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase the number of women in STEM apprenticeships. [900372]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): We are supporting more women to access traditionally male-dominated fields such as STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—and those that offer the highest wage returns. Our apprenticeship diversity champion network is championing gender representation among employers and industries where improvement is needed, and we are promoting STEM apprenticeships to girls in schools.

Simon Fell: Providing opportunities in STEM for women is essential, as is showing that there are already women in these roles doing the jobs that they aspire to. I would like to praise two local businesses—that have worked tirelessly on this: BAE Systems in Barrow, responsible for our submarine programme, which has increased female participation in its early years programme from 19% to 32% in just five years; and Oxley Developments in Ulverston, which has a 50% female workforce. Clearly there is something going right in this cluster in south Cumbria. With that in mind, could I invite my right hon. Friend to come and visit?

Michelle Donelan: I would be delighted to take up the opportunity to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and hear more about the work that his local businesses are doing to enhance the opportunities of young people.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Secretary of State Anneliese Dodds.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister for Women and Equalities has just lauded her Government's social mobility tsar. Does the Minister for Higher and Further Education agree with that tsar that

"physics isn't something that girls tend to fancy... There's a lot of hard maths in there"?

If not, will she condemn those remarks and others that put girls and women off careers in STEM because of, to use the words of the Minister for Women and Equalities, the

"soft bigotry of low expectations"?

Michelle Donelan: Conservative Members believe in free speech and the right to have a view, but of course we want all people to aspire to go into their chosen careers, including in STEM.

Children with Autism: Classroom Support

7. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Education to improve classroom support for children with autism. [900373]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): The SEND—special educational needs and disabilities—and alternative provision Green Paper aims

to create a more inclusive education system to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND. We are providing nearly £12 million to help the schools and further education workforce to support children with SEND, including autism, ensuring that their needs are met early and effectively.

Mr Dhesi: After a decade of per-pupil funding cuts and with staff workloads soaring, mainstream schools are too often unable to provide places for children with special educational needs and disabilities, including children in my constituency who are unable to access speech and language therapy sessions. Does the Minister think that is acceptable, and what is she going to do about it?

Michelle Donelan: This Government are investing £74 million in the first year alone of our autism strategy to promote a straightforward route to diagnosis and the correct support, and we will shortly be detailing our implementation plan for year two. The Department has been funding the Autism Education Trust since 2011.

Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting

9. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting. [900376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): In “Inclusive Britain”, our response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report, we accepted the recommendation to publish guidance for employers to support a voluntary approach to ethnicity pay reporting. Work on this is already under way.

Janet Daby: According to the Resolution Foundation, in 2018 the ethnicity pay gap cost black workers over £3.2 billion in the loss of wages. Following the pandemic, the gap is getting wider. As the Minister will know, the Women and Equalities Committee said in February that businesses

“are ready for Ministers to follow through”

on the Government’s manifesto commitment to bring in ethnicity pay gap reporting. Can the Minister therefore explain what the hold-up is, and when the Government will do that?

Paul Scully: We remain committed to supporting businesses with pay reporting. There are significant technical challenges to it, and it may not be the most effective intervention for some employers in some areas, but we are working on guidance to make sure it can be as effective as possible.

Menopausal Women in the Prison Estate

10. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on access to support and treatment for menopausal women in the prison estate. [900377]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I can reassure the hon. Lady that Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation

Service is working with NHS England to improve the treatment and support available to women in the prison service, including menopausal women, as part of the national women’s prison health and social care review.

Carolyn Harris: The latest figures show that 39% of female prisoners are over 40, and a further 38% are aged between 30 and 39. Many of them will either be menopausal or perimenopausal already, or reach that stage during their sentence. As we know that menopause can have a significant impact on physical and mental health, including influencing behaviours, does the Minister agree that a menopause strategy within Her Majesty’s prisons would be both productive and beneficial?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the co-chair of the menopause taskforce. We discussed this in our taskforce meeting yesterday, and we have agreed to invite Ministers from the Justice team to work on this issue. The Secretary of State for Justice is sitting beside me, and I am sure he has heard the hon. Lady’s words.

Sign Language

11. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve public knowledge and awareness of sign language. [900378]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): The Government were delighted to support the private Member’s Bill to recognise British Sign Language as a language of Great Britain. We will improve public knowledge and awareness of BSL, including through guidance that will help to promote and facilitate the use of the language, and much more.

Ian Levy: I welcome the introduction of the British Sign Language Act 2022, recognising BSL as an official language in England, Scotland and Wales. However, families in Blyth Valley still feel discriminated against in such areas as free sign language classes and educational opportunities for deaf children in schools. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is still much more to be done to improve the lives of people in our communities?

Chloe Smith: We are passionate about improving opportunities for deaf people who use BSL and increasing general public understanding of deaf people’s language and culture. Linguistic exclusion is a problem and can affect education, jobs and more.

Topical Questions

T1. [900358] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): I commend the women’s organisations, such as Women’s Aid, that have come out in recent months to support single-sex services for women who have suffered violence and abuse. Service providers know that single-sex spaces are crucial to recovery from abuse and violence for many women and children. The Equality Act 2010 recognises this and allows for the restriction of single-sex spaces on the basis of biological sex. The law is clear, it is on their side and we will defend it.

Scott Benton: Reducing inequalities is about much more than protected characteristics. Outcomes for education, health and prosperity in Blackpool are among the lowest in the entire country, and they are particularly poor for men. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that those who live in Blackpool can enjoy exactly the same life chances as those who live in more prosperous areas?

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): In March, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced that Blackpool would be a transformational regeneration place, which means that the Government will partner with Blackpool to address social inequalities, improve productivity and deliver co-ordinated cross-Government support for local priorities. We have already announced measures to support that, including cracking down on rogue landlords and Homes England partnering with Blackpool Council to find exciting new opportunities for regeneration.

T2. [900360] **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): According to an equalities assessment undertaken by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the UK Government were aware that women and girls were more likely to be harmed by cuts to the UK foreign aid budget. The Tories' recent international development strategy lists their new approach as being framed around education, empowerment and ending violence against women and girls, but it does not detail any explicit funding commitments for that. What discussions has the Minister had with her colleagues in the FCDO about the impact of the aid cuts on women and girls?

Elizabeth Truss: I was very clear in my appearance at the International Development Committee that we are restoring the budget for women and girls for development, including providing 12 years of education for all girls.

T4. [900362] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): Last week, I held a reception in Parliament to launch the first female-only veterans charity in the UK, Salute Her UK. Although there are more than 1,800 veterans charities, this is the only one run by women for women. We know that female veterans have specific needs, so what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Office for Veterans' Affairs to better support female veterans?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her championing of female veterans. She is absolutely right that we need to deliver services to female veterans that meet their needs and honour their fantastic contribution to the armed forces. That is why the Office for Veterans' Affairs will commission new research to understand why female veterans need support and the barriers they face.

T3. [900361] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Last year, the Ministry of Defence pledged to develop a strategy on rape and serious sexual assault, which is long overdue. What conversations is the Minister having with colleagues in the MOD about the strategy and the wider treatment of women in our armed forces?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working very closely on this issue. It is vital that female service personnel are treated fairly and with respect.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): One of the most unequal workplaces in the land is the other place, where an eighth of the seats are reserved for men only. Will the Minister support a rapid change in the law, so that hereditary peerages go down through the first and oldest child, as the Crown does, rather than the oldest son?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is referring to the reform of succession to the hereditary peerage, to which I am sympathetic, but which raises a variety of complex issues. Various approaches have been proposed in both Houses to address the issue of male primogeniture for hereditary peerages, but there is not yet a consensus on the way forward. I am happy to work with her to look at the issue.

T5. [900363] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): This week is Carers Week, and I hope the Minister will agree that unpaid carers make an invaluable contribution to our society but are often unseen. Will she commit to making being an unpaid carer a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, as Carers UK has called for?

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): I cannot give that commitment, but I look forward to joining the hon. Lady and others at the reception this afternoon with Carers UK, because there are many important issues regarding how we can support unpaid carers.

T6. [900364] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The cost of a full-time nursery place for children under two has risen by 16% in the past five years, and for the first time in decades, the number of women leaving the workforce has increased. Does the Minister for Women and Equalities think that this Government's failed approach to childcare, which is pricing some women out of work and others out of parenthood, is remotely acceptable? What recommendations is she making to the Treasury and the Department for Education to sort out the problem?

Elizabeth Truss: We are absolutely determined to bring down the cost of childcare and to fix the regulations that make the costs so high. We will be bringing forward proposals very shortly.

T7. [900365] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The Government promised that a comprehensive women's health strategy would be published last year, but we are still waiting. Meanwhile, waiting lists continue to soar. Given that the number of women on waiting lists for gynaecological services is in excess of 570,000—a 60% increase on pre-pandemic levels—is it not time that the Government stopped constantly trying to protect the job of a lame duck Prime Minister and got on with resolving the day-to-day issues affecting women in our country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): As I have said in answer to many questions this morning, the women's health strategy will be published shortly. We had over 100,000 responses, we published our vision document in December and we will be publishing the women's health strategy in the coming weeks. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900308] **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 June.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This week is Carer's Week, and I am sure the whole House will want to join me in thanking the millions of carers across the UK for all they do to support their loved ones. We have seen the vital role that carers have played in our communities during the pandemic, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude. Through our reforms on adult social care, this Government are committed to continuing to support carers.

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

Dame Angela Eagle: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the importance of carers in our country.

This week's events have demonstrated just how loathed this Prime Minister is—and that is only in his own party. As his Administration is too distracted by their internal divisions to deal with the challenges that we face, can he explain, if 148 of his own Back Benchers do not trust him, why on earth the country should?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her question, and I can assure her that in a long political career so far—but barely begun—I have of course picked up political opponents all over the place. That is because—[*Interruption.*] That is because this Government have done some very big and very remarkable things that they did not necessarily approve of. What I want her to know is that absolutely nothing and no one, least of all her, is going to stop us from getting on with delivering for the British people.

Q2. [900309] **Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will unite behind the Prime Minister on his determination to hold Ukrainian war criminals to account, but is he aware that there are five alleged Rwandan war crimes perpetrators living freely in the UK, who have been doing so now for 16 years and have neither been extradited nor put before the British courts under our existing laws? As he prepares to go to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda, will he look carefully at this issue, because it is bound to be raised with him? Will he reassure the House and the Rwandan Government that he takes these matters extremely seriously, and that what has so far been justice massively delayed for 16 years will not be grotesquely denied?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He raises an issue on which the UK has campaigned for a long time, and no country is more

committed than we are to bringing war criminals to justice. I know that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has raised the subject recently with the International Criminal Court. However, as he knows—and I will certainly, of course, study the case and take it up appropriately—it is the subject of an ongoing investigation, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on it further.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Leader of the Opposition. [*Interruption.*]

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I could not make out whether that introductory noise was cheers or boos. [*Interruption.*] The trouble is, I do not know whether it is directed at me or the Prime Minister.

I join the Prime Minister in his comments about carers. Why did his Culture Secretary, who I think is hiding along the Front Bench, say that successive Conservative Governments left our health service “wanting and inadequate” when the pandemic hit?

The Prime Minister: Everybody knows that when the pandemic hit, it was an entirely novel virus for which the whole world was unprepared. Nobody at that stage knew how to test for it and nobody knew what the right quarantine rules should have been. But, as it happens, not only did the UK Government and our amazing NHS approve the first vaccine anywhere in the world but we were first to get it into anybody's arms and we had the fastest roll-out anywhere in Europe, none of which would have been possible if we had listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister just agreed with the Culture Secretary. He did not deny it. Perhaps she said it because it is true.

It starts with GPs. People were unhappy with the service that they were getting before the pandemic—there were not enough GPs and it was too hard to get an appointment—and that is why he promised 6,000 new GPs, but his Health Secretary admits that he will not keep that promise. Despite the hard work of doctors, people cannot see a GP in person, and they are unhappier than ever with GP services. If GP provision was “wanting and inadequate” before the pandemic, what is it now?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is simply wrong. He is wrong about what we are doing. Of course, we have got to clear the covid backlogs. Everybody understands that, and everybody understands the pressure that the NHS is under, but it is responding magnificently. I can tell him that, thanks to the investments that the Government have put in, we now have 4,300 more doctors and record numbers in training, we have 11,800 more nurses this year than last year and 72,000 in training. That is because of the investment that we put in, which was opposed by the Opposition. The only reason why we were able to make that investment is because we have a strong and robust economy thanks to the decisions we took.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister talks big but I have a letter here to the Prime Minister from the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) in which he said, “under you”—that is you, Prime Minister—

“the Government seems to lack a sense of mission. It has a large majority, but no long-term plan.”

The Prime Minister’s “big plan” act is so tired that even once-loyal MPs do not believe him.

It is not just about waiting for a GP appointment but waiting for all NHS treatment. Take cancer: for over a decade, waiting times for cancer care have been going up. The Prime Minister’s solution was supposed to be diagnostic hubs. The Health Secretary has been on a victory lap this week, but here is the rub: since those hubs were opened last year, 135,000 extra people are now waiting for scans and tests. Can the Prime Minister think of a better way to describe soaring cancer waiting lists than “wanting and inadequate”?

The Prime Minister: It is entirely right that, after the pandemic, people are now coming forward to get their cancer tests. We have actively encouraged that, and that is the right thing for people to do. But as a result of the community diagnostic hubs that we are bringing in—100 of them across the country—we are able to cut the times for cancer diagnosis and help people to get their scans and tests faster. Above all, we can do that because we are hiring more radiographers, we are hiring more nurses and we are hiring more professionals in our NHS because of the investments that we made, which, as I say, the party of Bevan tragically opposed.

Keir Starmer: The problem is that the cancer waits have been going up for 10 years and they are even higher now, so blaming the pandemic just will not wash.

Perhaps the Culture Secretary was talking about the state of NHS buildings. Before the pandemic, the National Audit Office said that they were a risk to patients. The Government’s response: paint jobs and fix-ups, pretending that is the same as building new hospitals. The Treasury and the Cabinet Office apparently do not think the refurbishments will even be delivered. Take University Hospital of North Tees: the ceiling is falling in, the roof leaks and staff have to hose down the pipes to stop them freezing over. Failure to fix “wanting and inadequate” NHS buildings is putting patients at risk, isn’t it, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: This line of criticism is satirical coming from Labour, attacking our hospital building programme when the Labour Government were the authors of the PFI scheme that bankrupted so many hospitals. *[Interruption.]* They were. What we are doing instead is building 48 new hospitals—*[Interruption.]* Yes, we are—thanks to the biggest capital investment programme in the history of the NHS. From memory, we put in £33 billion as soon as we came in, then another £92 billion to cope with the pandemic, plus another £39 billion in the health and care levy. Labour Members opposed that funding. They opposed the health and care levy. They do not have a leg to stand on. We are building the foundations of our health service’s future and they should support it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to both of you that you need to calm down? And there are two over here as well. The four of you could have a very nice cup of tea if you wish.

Keir Starmer: Oh dear. Prime Minister, dear, dear me. *[Interruption.]* Pretending no rules were—*[Interruption.]* He chunters on. Pretending no rules were broken did

not work, pretending the economy is booming did not work and pretending to build 40 new hospitals will not work either. Conservative Members want him to change, but he cannot. As always with this Prime Minister, when he is falling short he just changes the rules and lowers the bar. In March, he proposed changing the NHS contract. He wants to double the length of time patients can be made to wait for surgery from one year to two years. On top of that, he scrapped zero tolerance of 12-hour waits at A&E. “24 Hours in A&E” used to be a TV programme. Now, it is his policy. Well, it is health week and he is telling all of them—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Cleverly, we have a tea party gathering. I am sure you do not want to be part of it. I want to hear the question. The problem is so do our constituents. *[Interruption.]* I would not if I were you, and I think one or two of you might be going early. Look, I need to hear the question in the same way that I expect to hear the answer, so please.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, I bet they wish they had been this organised on Monday.

It is health week and the Prime Minister is telling Conservative Members that he is going to turn over a new leaf, so why does he not start by scrapping his plans to green-light “wanting and inadequate” NHS standards?

The Prime Minister: I have to tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that I just think this line of attack is not working—*[Interruption.]* It is not working because they refused to approve—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I think the two of you need to calm down. We do not want to see empty Front Benches.

The Prime Minister: Not only have we raised standards in the NHS, and not only are we reducing waiting times for those who have had to wait the longest, but more fundamentally, we are doing what the people of this country can see is simple common sense: using our economic strength to invest in doctors and nurses and get people on the wards, giving people their scans, screens and tests in a more timely manner and taking our NHS forward. We are on target to recruit 50,000 more nurses, thanks to this Government—*[Interruption.]* I am just going to repeat this, because the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not seem to have heard it so far—and thanks to the investments that the Labour party opposed. Perhaps he can explain why they opposed them.

Keir Starmer: Raising taxes because you have failed to grow the economy is not a plan for the NHS, and everyone sitting behind the Prime Minister knows it. Members of his Cabinet admit that the Conservatives left our health system “wanting and inadequate” when the pandemic hit. He has been in power for three years and things are getting worse, not better. There are fewer GPs, more waits for cancer tests, buildings are still crumbling and he is changing the rules to cover up his failure.

There is real human pain as a result. Today, I spoke to Hamza Semakula. He is 20 and plays semi-professional football for Hendon. He tore his anterior cruciate ligament earlier this year and, because of the two-year wait for

surgery, he had to crowdfund for a private operation. I also spoke to Akshay Patel. Last year, his mother woke up unable to breathe. Akshay called 999 six times. In his last call, he said:

“I rang an hour ago for an ambulance as she had difficulty breathing, and now she’s dead.”

Even the Prime Minister must admit that Akshay, Bina and Hamza deserve better than a “wanting and inadequate” Government, utterly unable to improve our NHS.

The Prime Minister: I think everybody in the House has sympathy with Akshay and the other constituents, and their families, that he mentions. I share their feelings, but when we look at what this Government are doing—I must say this to the right hon. and learned Gentleman—we see that we are making colossal investments in our NHS. We are cutting waiting times, raising standards, paying nurses more and supporting our fantastic NHS. By the way, he continually came to this House—I will just remind him of this—and said that we had the worst covid record in Europe. It turned out to be completely untrue; he still has not retracted it. We can make those investments because of the strength of the UK economy, because of the fiscal firepower that we have to deploy. We have the lowest unemployment now since 1974 and we are going to continue to grow our economy for the long term.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks about the mission of this Government. It is to unite and level up across our whole country, to unleash the potential of our entire country. We have the biggest tutoring programme in history for young people and are raising literacy and numeracy standards for 11-year-olds from 65% adequacy to 90%—that is the highest objective that a Government could achieve. We are expanding home ownership, as the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and I will do for millions of people who currently do not have it—[*Interruption.*] No. We are cutting the costs of business to make this the enterprise centre of Europe. That is our vision, creating high-wage, high-skilled jobs for this country. As for jobs, I am going to get on with mine and I hope he gets on with his.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Oliver Heald—[*Interruption.*] I didn’t know you were so popular!

Q3. [900310] **Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Changing the subject completely, in North East Hertfordshire we are very concerned about sewage overflows into our precious chalk streams. This is damaging to the flora and fauna, and also restricts the use of these precious streams for leisure. The Environment Act 2021 includes some important measures, and I welcome the fact that the Government have consulted on their reduction plan for storm overflows, but when can we expect to see meaningful improvements and real reductions in the amount of sewage going into our rivers?

The Prime Minister: I share my right hon. and learned Friend’s concern. Our sewage plan is the biggest investment by any Government. We have made it clear that water companies must do more. Actually, we are already seeing improvement, but the regulator is ensuring that the water companies do more to deliver on their obligations, and we will not hesitate to take further action as needed.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the SNP, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in supporting our carers?

Week after week, when I have called on this Prime Minister to resign I have been met with a wall of noise from the Tory Benches. I thought that they were trying to shout me down—[*Interruption.*]—but all this time it turns out that 41% of them have been cheering me on! Let us be clear. At least the numbers do not lie: 41% of his own MPs have no confidence in him, 66% of MPs across the House do not support him, and 97% of Scottish MPs want the Minister for the Union shown the door. We now have a lame duck Prime Minister presiding over a divided party and a disunited kingdom. How does the Prime Minister expect to continue when even Unionist leaders in Scotland will not back him?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his characteristically warm words. And actually, the biggest and most powerful and effective advocate of the United Kingdom over my time has been that man there. I do not know how long he is going to last as leader of the SNP here, but long may he rest in place. He is the Araldite that is keeping our kingdom together, and I thank him for what he is doing. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]

Ian Blackford: I can say to the Prime Minister that I will be standing shoulder to shoulder with our First Minister as we take our country to independence.

The Prime Minister is acting like Monty Python’s black knight, running around declaring, “It’s just a flesh wound!” No amount of delusion and denial will save the Prime Minister from the truth. This story will not go away until he goes away. For once in his life, he needs to wake up to reality. Prime Minister, it’s over, it’s done.

The Prime Minister has no options left, but Scotland does. Scotland has the choice of an independent future. It is not just the Prime Minister that we have zero confidence in, but the broken Westminster system that puts a man like him in power. Can the Prime Minister tell us how it is democratic that Scotland is stuck with a Prime Minister we do not trust, a Conservative party we do not support, and Tory Governments we have not voted for since 1955?

The Prime Minister: We had a referendum, as I have told the House before, in 2014, and I think that the right hon. Gentleman should respect the mandate of the people. He keeps saying that he wants independence for his country. Our country is independent—though the Leader of the Opposition tried 48 times to reverse it—and the only way that independence would ever be reversed is if we had the disaster of a Labour-SNP coalition to take us back into the EU.

Q4. [900311] **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): Earlier this week, the Prime Minister wrote that

“you cannot just spend your way out of inflation, and you cannot tax your way into growth... We will cut the costs of government.”

Hear, hear—I completely agree. May I suggest that, as a strong start, he scraps the inflated white elephant that is HS2, saving the Government tens of billions of pounds from a budget that is spiralling out of control?

The Prime Minister: In case my right hon. Friend missed what else I said, we are cutting taxes for everybody who pays national insurance contributions by an average of £330 just next month. As for HS2, it will deliver long-term growth and prosperity for the whole country, unite and level up, deliver more revenues and put us in a better position to cut taxes in future.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): We have heard reports today that the Prime Minister refused to consult the First Treasury Counsel on his plans to rip up the protocol. This question might be a bit redundant, as the Prime Minister might not be around for very much longer, but given his record of casual lawbreaking, will he give a commitment to the people of Northern Ireland that he will not break international law any time soon?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the reports that he has seen this morning are not correct. I can also tell him that the most important commitment that I think everybody in this House has made is to the balance and symmetry of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is our highest legal international priority, and that is what we must deliver.

Q6. [900313] Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The north Wales mainline railway has had little investment for more than a century. In practice, that means that jobs at Manchester airport are poorly accessible to many of my constituents: they face a two-hour commute, whereas a similar journey in the south-east of the country takes just 45 minutes. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the north Wales line features in the updated rail network enhancements pipeline at the decision-to-develop stage?

The Prime Minister: Listen, I am a great enthusiast for this project. We are looking at it, and I can tell my hon. Friend that Network Rail has received funding to carry out feasibility work on improving north Wales mainline journey times. Travellers in north Wales could have no more effective advocate than my hon. Friend.

Q5. [900312] Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Despite the Prime Minister's promises of new hospitals and more doctors and nurses, the Brontë birth centre at my local hospital in Batley and Spen is temporarily shut and is at risk of permanent closure due to staff shortages and lack of resources. The reality on the ground is that after 12 years of Conservative mismanagement, the NHS is broken. Can the Prime Minister explain to expectant parents in my constituency why, despite his promises, they are now forced to travel miles to give birth, and why his Government voted against the effective long-term workforce plan for the NHS proposed by his right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt)?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look into what has happened at the centre in Batley and Spen that the hon. Lady mentions. What I can tell her, though, is that across the country we are investing massively in staff, in premises, in technology and in diagnostic centres. For Opposition Members to carp and criticise is frankly absurd, because they voted against the health and care levy that is putting billions into our NHS. They need to sort out their position: either they support it or they do not.

Q8. [900315] Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in complimenting Bradford on becoming the 2025 city of culture? Will he also praise the team from Durham, who gave a fantastic representation of what County Durham had to offer? Bradford must really be extraordinary to have beaten us.

In 2025, Durham will celebrate the bicentenary of the Stockton and Darlington passenger railway, which of course will distract people from Bradford. I believe that my right hon. Friend is the best person to lead on delivering levelling up for the north-east. To that end, will he encourage progress on the Ferryhill station development, reinvigorate the Leamside line and help to deliver a great county deal for County Durham?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. He and I have campaigned on this, and I have been following his campaign for a long time. I am told that the Department for Transport is currently reviewing the business case for exactly what he has just requested. We are putting the funding in, which is unlike anything that the Labour party could ever have delivered.

Q7. [900314] Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): In Monday's confidence vote the Prime Minister secured the support of just two of Scotland's 59 MPs, which means that, from the massed ranks of his Scottish Conservative colleagues, he secured as much support as there are pandas in Edinburgh zoo. The Prime Minister is an intelligent man, and he must know that that position is untenable. If he is not going to do the decent thing and resign as Prime Minister, surely it is past time that he wrote a letter of resignation to himself to stand down as Minister for the Union.

The Prime Minister: I redirect the hon. Gentleman to what I said to my friend the leader of the SNP, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). The more SNP Members campaign, in the current circumstances, for breaking up our United Kingdom—with all its strength and all its merits—the more damage they do to their own case.

Q11. [900319] Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Last week, the Princes Centre in Princes Risborough, which supports adults with a variety of mental health challenges, learning disabilities and conditions such as dementia, celebrated 10 years as an independent daycare provider. It was clear to me from my recent visit what a happy, welcoming and supportive atmosphere had been created for all service users. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking and congratulating the manager, Kim Challoner, and her whole team of staff, volunteers and trustees on delivering this first-class service, and as Chequers is but a hop, skip and a jump from Princes Risborough, will he deliver those congratulations in person?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who, among his many other distinctions, is my Member of Parliament, and I join him in thanking the entire team at the Princes Centre for everything that they do. I will certainly keep his kind invitation in mind.

Q9. [900316] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I would have more sympathy with the words "get on with the job" if it had actually started in the first place.

Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister told the House:

“To the best of my knowledge, everybody is getting their passport within four to six weeks.”—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 287–288.]

However, the Passport Office is currently quoting a 10-week service time, and many of my constituents are waiting considerably longer than that. Cancelled summer trips could cost families more than £1 billion. Does the Prime Minister accept that the Passport Office's backlog is placing additional pressure on families who are already struggling with the cost of living crisis?

The Prime Minister: Actually, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 91% of people are getting their passports within six weeks, and we are putting hundreds and hundreds more staff members into the Passport Office. The strength of demand, by the way, is a sign of the robustness of the economy, because everybody is wanting to go on holiday, and quite right too.

When it comes to travel chaos, may I ask whether we have yet heard any condemnation from the Opposition of the RMT and its reckless and wanton strike? What about that?

Q14. [900322] **Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, my constituency is facing unrealistic housing targets, which is putting pressure on the council to try to develop a local plan that would close a successful working docks and mean the loss of beloved open spaces such as Deangate Ridge, all in the name of meeting an arbitrary target. Can he reassure my constituents who are facing this level of over-development that there will be greater flexibility in respect of housing numbers, so that the council can produce a local plan that delivers appropriate housing while protecting important sites such as those?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend speaks for colleagues up and down the country. We want to make sure that councils are able to build in the right place and sensitively to local needs. That is what we insist on, but I want to make it absolutely clear that part of the genius of levelling up is that it will encourage us to take some of the pressure and heat out of the south-east of England, which has been overburdened for decades, and we can do it.

Q10. [900317] **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent Mark is trying to sponsor two sisters from Ukraine to come to the UK. These two sisters were housed in dangerous temporary accommodation in Montenegro for several weeks while the UK Home Office refused to process the application of the younger sister because she is 13 and travelling without her parents, even though she had her 18-year-old sister with her. The 18-year-old sister is now in London but the 13-year-old sister has been sent back to her home town in Ukraine, which is under siege. Will the Prime Minister tell me, hand on heart: does he think sending vulnerable children back to a war zone is the right policy?

The Prime Minister: Of course I understand the hon. Lady's indignation about the case she mentions, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be looking into it, but the record of this country in processing I think well over 100,000–120,000—visas for Ukrainians so far is very creditable and I thank all the staff who have been involved in that effort.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will remember that, in March, I asked him about increased research funding for aortic dissection, as called for by the Aortic Dissection Charitable Trust. Will he update me on the progress on that? Will he also recognise the immense value of the patient awareness videos that have been introduced by the trust, featuring “Whispering” Bob Harris, survivors and relatives of patients to help those going through this awful condition for the first time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her fantastic work on this, and I know the personal circumstances that give her an understanding of that campaign. I can tell her that the National Institute for Health Research is looking at what more we can do to support research on aortic dissection, and I know that she is meeting my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary shortly.

Q12. [900320] **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra and the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra are due to visit the UK this summer to perform at the BBC Proms, the Edinburgh Festival and other venues. Other European countries are waiving their visas, but to get to the UK, the musicians are facing visa delays and prohibitive visa costs of £18,000 and £10,000 respectively. We should be doing all we can to support these Ukrainian musicians, so will the Prime Minister match our European neighbours and enable these Ukrainian artists to tour to the UK this year by expediting their visa applications and waiving their visa fees?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Lady needs to bring this particular case to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but I can tell the House—[*Interruption.*] I know, by the way, that many hon. Members are showing a lead by having Ukrainians to stay in their own homes, and I thank all hon. Members who are doing that, thanks to the scheme that the UK Government have put in place. I think we should be very proud of what we are doing.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): The Prime Minister knows from his visits to Redcar and Cleveland that we enjoy miles of beautiful, uninterrupted coastline. However, since October last year, we have seen thousands of dead and dying crustaceans being washed ashore. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs conducted an investigation into that, leading to the theory that algal bloom is the primary cause of these deaths. However, the report does nothing to support the fishermen left devastated by this freak event through no fault of their own. Will the Prime Minister look at how he can support this vital industry to get them back on its feet?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and I were walking together on the seafront in Redcar—eating a lemon top, actually—when somebody raised that very point with us. I can tell him that we have ruled out chemical pollution, but we are making another £100 million of investment, including in communities such as his, and working with the fishing industry to help it to recover from this problem.

Q13. [900321] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): The poorest in this country currently pay the highest fuel costs through prepayment meters that have higher standing charges and higher tariffs. Belgium ensures a social tariff for the poorest and most vulnerable. As the perverse and pernicious euphemism of self-disconnection enters the lexicon—when in fact it is a politically imposed choice, not something chosen by individuals—is it not time that we provided a social tariff and ended the injustice of prepayment meters?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member and I can tell him that what we are doing right now is helping 8 million households across the country with £1,200 of

support, £300 for pensioners who are in receipt of the cold weather payment, plus £400 for every household in the country. That is the support we are giving right now to help people with the cost of energy. The only reason we can do it, as I have said before to the House, is because of the strength of the economy and the brave, tough calls we got right during the pandemic.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member has been here long enough to know that points of order come after statements. We do not need to tell him the rules of the House.

Health and Social Care Leadership Review

12.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the independent leadership review of health and social care.

This is an important report that comes at a critical time. This Government are embarking on a huge programme of reform to tackle the covid backlogs, to improve people's experience of the NHS and social care, and to place this system on a sustainable footing for the future. But we cannot seize this opportunity and deliver the change that is so urgently needed without the best possible health and care leadership in place, because great leaders create successful teams, and successful teams get better results. So a focus on strong and consistent leadership at all levels, not just on those who have the word "leader" in their job title, will help us in our mission to transform health and care and to level up disparities and patient experiences.

This review, which I have deposited in the Libraries of both Houses, was tasked with proposing how to deliver a radical improvement in health and social care leadership across England. It sets out a once in a generation shake-up of management, leadership and training, as well as how we can make sure that health and care is a welcoming environment for people from all backgrounds, free from bullying, harassment and discrimination.

The review was led by General Sir Gordon Messenger, former Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff, and Dame Linda Pollard, the chair of Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. I thank them both for taking on this role and providing their varied experience of leadership, along with everyone in their review team who has contributed to this important review.

Before I turn to the recommendations of the review, I shall update the House on its findings. The review found that, although there are many examples of inspirational leadership within health and social care, from ward to board, these qualities are not universal. The report states that

"there has developed over time an institutional inadequacy in the way that leadership and management is trained, developed and valued."

As a result, careers in management are not viewed with the same respect and prestige as clinical careers. The review also found

"too many reports to ignore"

of poor behaviour, and that the acceptance of bad behaviours like discrimination, bullying and responsibility avoidance has become "almost normalised" in certain parts of the system.

We must only accept the highest standards in health and care, where failures in culture and leadership can make the difference between life and death. So we must do everything in our power to share and promote brilliant, innovative management and to act firmly where standards fall short. This means culture change from the top of the system to the frontline. The review identifies a number of areas where improvement is needed, and it makes seven transformative recommendations. I will quickly update the House on each of them in turn.

First, the review recommends new measures to promote collaborative leadership and to set a unified set of values across health and care. This includes a new national entry-level induction for new joiners to health and care, and a new national mid-career programme for managers.

Secondly, the review recommends that we should agree and set uniform standards for equal opportunities and fairness, with more training to ensure that the very best leadership approaches become ingrained. The Care Quality Commission must support this work by measuring progress through regular assessments. This does not mean more people working in diversity but fewer. In my view, there are already too many of these roles and, at a time when our constituents are facing real pressures on the cost of living, we must spend every penny with care. Instead of farming out this important work to a specific group of managers, it must be seen as everyone's responsibility, with everyone being accountable for extending fairness and equal opportunities at work.

Thirdly, the review recommends a single set of unified leadership and management standards for NHS managers. These standards will apply to everyone, including those who work part time and flexibly, with a curriculum of training and development to help people meet them. This modernisation is well overdue, and completing the training should be a prerequisite for advancing to more senior roles.

Fourthly, the review recommends a more simplified, standardised appraisal system for the NHS, moving away from variation in how performance and career aspirations are managed towards a more consistent system that takes into account how people have behaved, not just what they have achieved.

Fifthly, the review identifies a lack of structure around careers in NHS management. It proposes a new career and talent management function for managers at a regional level, to oversee and support careers in NHS management and to provide clear routes to promotion, along with training and development.

Sixthly, the review recommends that the recruitment and development of non-executive directors needs to be given greater priority due to their vital role in providing scrutiny and assurance. It proposes an expanded specialist appointments team in the NHS, tasked with encouraging a diverse pipeline of talent.

Finally, there is currently little or no incentive for leaders and managers to move into the most challenging roles, as the barriers are often seen as simply too high. I want leaders in the NHS to seek out those roles, not shy away from them. It is essential that we address that and get great leaders into areas that feel left behind. The review proposes an improved offer, with stronger support and incentives to recruit top talent into those positions.

We will be accepting these comprehensive, common-sense recommendations in full. The recommendations have been welcomed by groups representing people who work throughout the NHS, including by the NHS Confederation and NHS Providers. By taking the review forward, we can finally bring how we do health and care leadership into the 21st century, so that we have the kind of leadership that patients and staff deserve, right across the country, and so that we make sure that some of our country's most cherished institutions can thrive in the years ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Wes Streeting.

12.48 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has picked quite the week to talk about standards in leadership.

I give a huge thanks to NHS staff and leaders for the work they are doing against the most extraordinarily difficult backdrop. I also thank General Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard for carrying out the review. Its seven recommendations are sensible, and I am pleased the Secretary of State has already committed to implementing them.

As this is a rare example of decisiveness from the Health Secretary, can he tell us when he intends to publish his implementation plan? All too often, the senior leadership of the NHS still does not represent the diversity of the population it serves. Instead of throwing red meat to his Back Benchers, for reasons that will probably be obvious to everyone, I would like to hear how, in particular, he intends to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion will be improved, so that the best leaders are incentivised into the most challenging roles and are able to provide inclusive healthcare for the breadth of diversity in our great country. Can he explain why the review has not covered leadership in primary care or social care in any detail? Surely this is a missed opportunity. Let us face it: although he is trying to dress this up as the biggest shake-up in history, I am not sure that giving staff an induction on joining the NHS is a revolutionary development, and it hardly meets the scale of the challenge.

The NHS faces the biggest crisis in its history. NHS staff are in a system under pressure like never before, and there are simply not enough of them. There are currently 106,000 vacancies across the NHS, and staff are leaving in droves. In some specialties, such as midwifery, they are leaving faster than we can recruit them. I do not know how the Health Secretary expects NHS managers to demonstrate good leadership and deliver the best outcomes for patients when there are no staff to lead. For an organisation the size of the NHS, one of the biggest employers in the world, not to have a plan for its workforce is unbelievably negligent. What is the NHS meant to do until he eventually delivers his long-term workforce strategy, which he has been promising for some time? How are managers meant to lead effectively when instead of thinking about patient care as their primary driver, they have become buildings and facilities managers, because the ceilings are falling in? The only place where more than 40 new hospitals really exist is in the Prime Minister's imagination.

The Health Secretary said that we should accept only the highest standards in NHS management, so let me ask him not about the generalities, but about the specifics. Last month, it was reported that North East Ambulance Service bosses oversaw cover-ups of negligence, leaving about 90 families not knowing how their loved ones died. He said yesterday that he is still considering whether to launch a review. Is he seriously considering protecting managers who cover up bad practice, instead of standing up for grieving families? Staff in that service were reportedly paid to sign gagging clauses, and I understand that attempts to get them to sign such clauses are still under way. In a written question, I asked

how many non-disclosure agreements had been signed in the NHS since the Government said that they would be banned in 2014. He does not know and he is refusing to investigate the use of gagging clauses in the NHS. So how can he claim to be shaking up NHS culture and dealing with bullying when he has no interest in what is going on under his nose?

Of course the NHS needs good leaders, but when it comes to examples of poor leadership in the NHS, the Health Secretary did not need the Messenger review; he just needed to look in the mirror. This is the man who described the NHS as Blockbuster Video

"in the age of Netflix",

as if it was the greatest revelation since Moses received the 10 commandments. Who has been in government for the past 12 years? On his watch, on this Government's watch, we have the highest waiting times in the NHS's history; the lowest patient satisfaction since 1997; longer waiting times for cancer in every year since 2010; heart attack and stroke victims left waiting for about an hour, on average, for ambulances; and patients at risk of serious injury because the hospital is crumbling around them. He kicked off his own Health Week expecting applause for the fact that, despite his best efforts, there are still 9,000 people waiting for more than two years for treatment. He knows, I know, NHS staff know and the public know that with this Government, NHS staff are lions led by donkeys, wanting and inadequate.

Sajid Javid: I am not surprised by the typical response from the hon. Gentleman: not really engaging with the real issues and showing once again that he is more interested in theatrics than in the real issues facing our NHS. He started his comments by trying to make some kind of joke about the leadership news this week, but we all know that he is only interested in one leadership review in a political party in this House, and it is not the Conservative party's.

Let us look at the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised. He rightly talked about the importance of the workforce overall and how we need more doctors and nurses. He should know that we have more doctors and nurses than ever before and that we are recruiting at a faster rate than ever before, with 10,000 more nurses and over 4,000 more doctors in the past year, and more in training than ever before. However, he will know that dealing with the challenges of getting more workers and building those hospitals, all of which are on track, requires proper funding, yet he and his party voted against the funding that the NHS needed to achieve that.

The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about when things go wrong in the NHS. Of course they need to be properly investigated, as they were in Telford and Shropshire, when we learned about the terrible things that had been going on under successive Governments in that trust. When there is a need for other investigations to take place, including independent ones, such as the one I have just asked for in Nottingham, that will be done. But the hon. Gentleman should understand that the best thing, which is far better than doing a review when things go wrong, is not having things go wrong in the first place. That is why he should have welcomed this report.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): This is an important review. There have been regular radical changes in the management of the NHS throughout my 25 years

[Mrs Theresa May]

in this House, so may I suggest that my right hon. Friend proceeds with care? He rightly says that good leadership of the NHS is important, for example, to ensure that we can deal with the covid backlogs, and that includes consultants. Too many experienced consultants are leaving the NHS because of problems with their pensions, so will he now commit to an urgent review of this issue, including looking at the change in the abatement scheme?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. I always listen carefully to what she has to say, given her important experience. On the pension issue, she will know that in the 2020 Budget, I believe it was, significant changes were made, especially to where the taper rate kicks in—it went from £110,000 to £200,000. That benefited the top 5% of earners in this country, but it was the right thing to do to encourage and incentivise doctors, in particular, to work more. She is right to talk about what more we can do. We are looking precisely at what further flexibilities we can offer on pension arrangements.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Health and Social Care Secretary talks about strong leadership and culture change. I point out to him his Government's and his Department's dismal record in meeting the pledge to close the in-patient units that are being used to trap more than 2,000 autistic people and people with learning disabilities rather than support them in their own homes. We have just passed the 11-year anniversary of the scandal at Winterbourne View. Not only has his Government failed in their pledge to close down these units, which was the original promise made after that scandal, but 560 people in those in-patient units do not need to be there at all, a quarter of them are more than 50 km from their own home, people are spending longer in units now than they were seven years ago, and more people have been admitted to the units year on year from 2015-16. This is one of the biggest scandals and the worst failures of his Department and Government. When is he going to act on it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of this issue and she will know that my predecessor had asked for a review on it. It was done and we have accepted its outcome, and it is being implemented. I hope she will understand that in implementing the outcome of that review it is important that we listen to clinical advice from within the NHS and make sure that we put the interests of each patient first.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Jeremy Hunt.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I thank the Health Secretary for this excellent report and commend Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard for all their work in putting it together. It has some very important recommendations. People who run hospitals are doing one of the most difficult jobs in Britain today, and anything we can do to give them better support in their careers will help all of us.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the elephant in the room is that one thing that makes their job most difficult: we have more national targets in the NHS than any other health system anywhere in the world? That

means not only that there is a risk of patients turning into numbers, but that we remove the autonomy from managers to show the leadership that Sir Gordon is advocating in this report. So as my right hon. Friend implements the recommendations, will he look at the role of national targets in the NHS and whether we need to simplify and reduce them?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support of the report. Of course he speaks with incredible experience. He is right to raise the issue of the importance of targets, and sometimes targets can have unintended consequences. The report does talk a bit about the importance of that issue. I can assure him that as we make changes and work with our colleagues in the NHS to make reforms, we will certainly be taking that into account.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): As the Secretary of State will have seen over his years as an MP and a Minister, there are managers and leaders who are excellent and outstanding and there are others who are not so good. Is not part of the problem, as the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) mentioned, the continual structural changes, which add to instability, the massive recruitment and retention problems and the record numbers of people using the hospitals? No matter what he does to improve leadership, it will not solve all those problems. Part of the problem is that we do not have enough people coming forward to take up leadership roles. At what point in the next five to 10 years does he expect to have solved the leadership crisis in the NHS?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the importance of recruitment in the NHS—bringing in the right people in the first place and then retaining them—but I hope that he will also recognise that good leadership plays an important part in that. This morning, I went to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, which is an outstanding and incredibly well run hospital, and heard from the leadership team about the important role that they play in attracting and retaining talent. I hope that he recognises that point as well.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why is the Secretary of State's departmental leadership team advertising for a deputy director, delivery, for the Covid Pass programme? What is that about?

Sajid Javid: The reason why the Department keeps that under review is that, although the pass has stopped and there is absolutely no prospect that I can see of its ever coming back into place, it is right that, as we wind things down and work on the digital resources, all things are looked at appropriately.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): On Thursday 19 May, I and a group of south London MPs met south London nurses from the Royal College of Nursing. They told us that they are tired. They told us that they are fed up. They told us that they are having to use food banks. They told us that they are seeing their salaries squeezed by the cost of living. They told us that they face bullying, intimidation and abuse at work. This was coming from staff members who work in our hospitals, including at St Thomas's Hospital, in my constituency, which I know the Secretary of State has visited on many occasions.

There is a big gap—an omission—around this leadership issue in social care. We have big retention issues. There are more than 9,000 vacancies. Does the Secretary of State have a plan to address that big omission in health and social care, including retaining the people we need on the frontline?

Sajid Javid: The short answer is that, yes, the hon. Lady is right to talk about the importance of retaining and recruiting more nurses. When it comes to nurses' pay, she will know that we gave a 3% rise last year when there was a freeze for the public sector workforce generally. This year, we will be listening carefully to what the independent recommendation is.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): How many directors and chief executives of health bodies are there in the NHS, and what performance requirements are built into their contracts? We want them to deliver high-quality care with falling waiting times.

Sajid Javid: I cannot give my right hon. Friend the exact number that he is asking for, but I can answer the latter part of his question. I agree that we want to see a massive improvement in appraisal and performance standards; I am sure that, when he gets to see the report in detail today, he will be pleased by what he reads.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that we must accept only the highest standards and act where standards fall short. My constituent, Paul Calvert, bravely exposed the management failures of the North East Ambulance Service and, indeed, the criminal negligence of cover-ups of patient deaths.

Mr Calvert, who gave me his permission to raise this case—I met him in person last week—is being bullied, harassed and blackmailed, but he still refuses to sign a non-disclosure agreement. He was offered £41,000 conditional on his silence and on destroying the evidence that he has of wrongdoing. Tomorrow, we anticipate his employment being terminated. Mr Calvert and grieving families want a public inquiry into the North East Ambulance Service. Does the Health and Social Care Secretary agree, and will he outline how the Messenger review will protect NHS whistleblowers such as my constituent, Mr Calvert?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing Mr Calvert's case to my attention. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), has listened to that carefully. She is meeting some of the families affected by that case very shortly, and Mr Calvert is someone to whom she can reach out directly.

Like the hon. Gentleman and, I am sure, the whole House, I am very concerned about what I have heard about this ambulance service. I am not satisfied with the review that has already been done. We need a much broader and more powerful review. I will have more to say on the matter very shortly.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome this review and thank my right hon. Friend for bringing his statement to the House. Good leadership is important because it drives the culture within an organisation. It was terrible to hear what the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame

Morris) had to say just now. We can see that bullying and harassment in an organisation often come down to how the leadership and the processes are operating.

Whistleblowers need to know that they can rely on the processes within organisations, but who do they go to as well? The National Guardian's Office would be one, as would the local guardians in the hospitals. I recently introduced a whistleblowing Bill to ensure that people are able to go to another body, because they cannot be constricted within their organisation. We need to be able to benefit from whistleblowers who speak out and expose wrongdoing so that we can close down these cultures that we have seen operating in our organisations.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right: it is important that, where people who are working within the NHS or social care see wrongdoing or things that concern them, they have a safe space to report that and to make sure that their concerns are properly addressed. She will know that the Health and Social Care Act 2022 contains new provisions, including one for the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, but I have listened carefully to what she has said and I will consider what more we can do.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might recall that, as a member of the all-party group for management, I have had a long interest in management and good management. I congratulate him on having this review, because the NHS is a complex organisation.

The Topol review that was carried out only two or three years ago showed a world of technology and change that is almost beyond belief for such a massive human organisation. I have not had the time to read the report yet, but is the Secretary of State sure that we have high-quality training for our managers? Many of the business schools and many of the people providing the training in our universities are not training for that kind of environment. We do need first-rate, high-quality management schools with a health bias.

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has a long-standing, valuable interest in this issue. I appreciate that he has not had time to look at the report, but I think he will be pleased when he reads our recommendations around a modern training plan.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The most important thing that happened in Westminster this week was yesterday's reception for Harry's Pledge. Harry is a young boy who needs a lot of care. Harry's Pledge campaigns for the needs of carers and those who are cared for. I am introducing a private Member's Bill to give guidance for that. Will the Secretary of State look at that Bill to see whether the Government could support it? Leaders in care need to have the guidance to judge whether they are succeeding.

Sajid Javid: This is a very important issue for my hon. Friend. I would be happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): NHS staff are exhausted and demoralised, and now we are asking them to deal with the growing waiting lists. We still have a huge vacancy problem within our NHS. Where is the plan to

[Clive Efford]

deal with that issue? If we are to improve our NHS going forward and have anything there for these managers to manage, we need to deal with that problem within the workforce.

Sajid Javid: That is exactly why I have commissioned a 15-year workforce strategy from the NHS.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and congratulate him on the work he has been doing in this important area. Does he agree that for too long there has been a culture of a lack of accountability among NHS senior management, and too often a blame culture, where things go wrong but are not transparently acknowledged? Does he agree how awful that is for the patients concerned? Will he do everything possible to ensure that we tackle the blame culture and the lack of accountability to the public, who the NHS is there to serve?

Sajid Javid: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. She will know from her own NHS trust, particularly the maternity problems there and the terrible cases set out in the Donna Ockenden report, just where that kind of culture can lead. Of course there are fantastic examples day in, day out of great culture and great leadership in the NHS, but there are also poor outcomes. She is absolutely right that we need to tackle those. That is exactly what is in this report.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I cannot really understand why yet another restructure of the NHS is the answer to the crisis we face. The last one diverted billions of pounds from patient care, and millions of people are suffering as a result. Instead of yet another costly restructure, why does the Secretary of State not just get on with building the new hospitals we need, such as the one at North Tees in Stockton, and tackling the health inequalities that blight our communities?

Sajid Javid: This is none of the things the hon. Gentleman claims.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on the review and his strong support for inspirational leadership, which is key for our NHS. Does he agree that relevant training and career development are vital for all staff working in the NHS, to allow them to gain career advancement?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I absolutely agree.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I hope the Secretary of State will agree that it is key that managers in the NHS and local authorities can work together effectively. I give great credit to the leaders in the clinical commissioning group, the hospital trust, the director of public health, the social care directors and the city council, who worked really well together in Sheffield during the pandemic to deliver a joined-up service and have kept us as MPs thoroughly involved.

As we move on to the slightly wider integrated care system and integrated care board, will he give a commitment that the place-based working that has been so effective in the past will be allowed to continue at local authority level?

Sajid Javid: The place-based working that the hon. Gentleman talks about is also at the heart of the integration White Paper that the Government presented recently.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome Gordon Messenger's review, but does the Secretary of State not agree that in the history of the national health service, reorganising senior management has often been a distraction? Will he prioritise the area that would make a real change to health and care—the interface between the two—and focus on career progression and development for care workers in particular, who hold the key to unblocking the awful problems that we have in both sectors?

Sajid Javid: I know my right hon. Friend speaks with experience, and I appreciate that he will not have had time to look at the report in detail yet, but I think when he does read it he will find that it is precisely what he has just asked for. This is not a reorganisation; it is all about strengthening management, and the report sets out in quite some detail how that can work.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I agree with the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) on NHS reorganisations. I once met a very senior and very able NHS manager who said they had been through 14 restructures of the NHS and they quite liked number five. How will this review better integrate ambulance services with their local hospitals to improve performance standards for local patients?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to ambulance services, an important part of the NHS, this review is just as important. We all want to see good leadership in ambulance services, but if we get better leadership across the board we will see better collaboration and co-ordination—something heavily referred to in the report.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I welcome this statement; leadership is vital and it is something we do not talk enough about in this country, whether in the private or public sector. My right hon. Friend referred to recommendation 6 on non-executive directors. Does he agree that we need to attract a more diverse set of non-executive directors, with regard to their skillset as much as anything else?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the commitment to quality leadership within the NHS. As he said himself, that is so important. The review findings and recommendations are a method to deliver that improvement. Retention of staff—the consultants, the GPs, the doctors and the nurses—is core to any improvement, so what is being done to retain staff and not lose them? Is it the Secretary of State's intention to share the findings with regional Administrations, particularly the Northern Ireland Assembly, to provide betterment across all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that the review specifically looked at the NHS and care in England, but there are important lessons here that can be drawn on by, for example, the health service in Northern Ireland. On the issue of retaining staff, the NHS is undertaking many initiatives to improve that, but I

hope he will agree with me that one key way to retain staff is to ensure we have good leadership and good managers.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The review underlines how vital leadership is to driving change and improvements in care. I put on record my thanks to the chief executive and board of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Kings Lynn NHS Foundation Trust, who have taken that hospital out of special measures, thanks to the hard work of the staff. As my right hon. Friend knows, to continue to improve care and to retain and recruit staff there is a pressing need for a new hospital for the QEH. I urge him to make an announcement on the new hospitals programme and to back QEH's bid.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend rightly never misses an opportunity to make the case for his local hospital. I have heard him carefully and I am happy to meet him to discuss it.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the report. Recommendation 4 talks about a standardisation of appraisal. Does he agree that cutting out variation in performance is key, and will he therefore confirm that the recommendations from Tim Briggs's "Getting It Right First Time" report will be embedded in that standardisation procedure?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend: that recommendation for a standard appraisal system, which, remarkably, does not exist at the moment, is of particular importance, like all of the recommendations. I agree with the emphasis he puts on that.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The focus that the Health Secretary is giving to leadership management training must be right. We all know that in a Care Quality Commission report on a hospital or an Ofsted report on a school, one of the key differences between adequate and outstanding is the quality of leadership. All credit to the report for focusing on that; I think we would all benefit from understanding that it is one of the key characteristics of hospitals whose internal staff surveys show strongly positive morale—often a key leading indicator.

Will the Secretary of State say a word or two about the point raised by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris)? The report and what has come out of the North East Ambulance Service are truly shocking and highlight what I think Sir Gordon Messenger called a need for a change of culture. How can we encourage all our NHS trusts to be open and transparent about what has gone wrong, so that we do not have future scandals like that?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will see when he has had the opportunity to read the report in full that it does rightly talk about the importance of that particular issue: ensuring that people within the NHS and care feel comfortable coming forward when they see wrongdoing, so that we can act much more quickly. That is why we will be implementing all the recommendations. Regarding the North East Ambulance Service, I hope he heard what I said earlier about the need to look at that again very carefully.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): As a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer for 10 years, I welcome this review. However, I put it to my right hon. Friend that at least part of the problem with waiting times and lists is the fact that only around half of all NHS staff are clinically trained. There is an imbalance there. Following my amendment during the passage of the Health and Care Act 2022, which he accepted, I suggest that one thing that could really help would be to get the NHS to focus more on outcomes such as one-year cancer survival rates, as a means of encouraging earlier diagnosis, and less on processes, which are very management-heavy.

Sajid Javid: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I thank the Health Secretary for this vitally important report at this critical time. Is he aware of reports circulating in the media that some NHS health information pages appear to have been de-sexed in their language about conditions affecting women? Is he, like me, very concerned about this, and will he look into it?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn, I hope, that as Health Secretary I think an individual's biological sex is incredibly important when trying to meet their health needs. I have seen the reports. In fact, I do not think they are just reports. With regard to the NHS website on ovarian cancer, I think it is actually has been, as she puts it, de-sexed. That is not something that I agree with. Of course, issues of gender, rather than sex—I distinguish the two—should be approached with compassion and sensitivity, but it is right that when it comes to healthcare, where there are health issues that impact only people of a particular biological sex, such as ovarian cancer and prostate cancer, the health service recognises that.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am very concerned that the review found evidence of a blame culture and responsibility avoidance. We have to be clear that this culture is not just damaging but actually kills patients, because lessons are not learned from mistakes that are actively hidden. What can we learn from the airline industry, which adopted a no-blame culture and, through that, dramatically reduced airline-related deaths?

Sajid Javid: It was precisely because of that important point raised by my hon. Friend that when we had the recent Bill before Parliament—now the Health and Care Act 2022, thanks to the will of this House—we accepted the safe space amendment.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I recognise the importance of leadership and reform of the NHS. Can we now show some leadership and reform in the area of NHS dentistry? The Labour Government wrecked NHS dentistry when they brought in the contracts that have led to dentists leaving the profession in droves. When people up and down the country, including my constituents in North Norfolk, cannot see an NHS dentist, is it not about time that we reformed the rotten contracts that Labour brought in?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right. It is well known how the Labour Government came up with contracts with the British Dental Association that are leading to

[Sajid Javid]

poor outcomes for millions of people across the country. We have already made some short-term changes, and we are in the process, right now, of making some longer-term strategic changes that will create all the right incentives.

Point of Order

1.22 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will remember that I recently challenged the relevant Minister with an urgent question about the poor performance of the Passport Office. A constituent who applied for a passport in February is due to travel next week, so yesterday, after queuing up at Portcullis House, I found out that their extra paperwork has been stuck in the post room at Peterborough for two weeks and not taken forward.

In recent weeks, I have tabled 10 or so written parliamentary questions seeking clarification on the size of the Passport Office backlog, the extra income received by the Department after constituents had to apply for fast-track applications, and how soon the current 10-week turnaround for applications can be brought back down to the normal three weeks. My reasonable questions are being dodged. The Government's incompetence is worrying for families who are afraid that the bedlam will ruin their summer holidays. How can I get these points on the record and get the Government to up their game and help families across our country?

Mr Speaker: The main thing is that the hon. Member has certainly now put that on the record again, and quite rightly. I do not think there is a Member here whose inbox has not seen a problem with the passport situation. I expect questions to be answered quickly and not to be dragged out or lost somewhere in the system. Although it is not a point of order for me, it is on the record. But I do give notice that when questions are laid they should be answered as soon as possible.

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to move the Second Reading, I wish to remind Members of the House's conventions. With a large number of Members seeking to participate today, Members will recall that if they participate in the debate they should be present throughout the opening speeches and the wind-ups, be present for most of the debate, and, as a minimum, remain in the Chamber for at least two speeches after their own. Also, while we appreciate that interventions are an important part of our debates, if Members intervene repeatedly they are likely to find themselves being called later in the day than might have otherwise been the case. This is so that we all respect other and treat each fairly and in the best possible way.

1.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to be able to move the Second Reading of this Bill. The Government are getting on with the job, and no Department is doing more than my own. There are five Bills in the Queen's Speech generated from our Department. As well as the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, there is legislation to improve conditions for those in social housing, to improve the rights of those in the private rented sector, to ensure that business rates can be updated so that our economy thrives, and to get rid of the pernicious employment of boycott, divestment and sanctions policies by those who seek to de-legitimise the state of Israel. I hope that all five pieces of legislation will command support across this House. They are designed to address the people's priorities and to ensure that this Government provide social justice and greater opportunity for all our citizens.

This Bill looks specifically at how we can ensure that the Government's levelling-up missions laid out in our White Paper published in February can be given effect, how we can have a planning system that priorities urban regeneration and the use of brownfield land, and how we can strengthen our democratic system overall.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that perhaps one of the most exciting pages in the levelling-up White Paper is page 238, which announces that there will be a new hospital health campus in Harlow over the coming years. He knows how important that is because of the fact that our current hospital estate is not fit for purpose despite the incredible work that staff do. Can he confirm that the timeline for our new hospital will be announced in the coming months?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Of the more than 400 pages in the White Paper, page 238 is perhaps one of the most important, not least because it contains an image of what we can hope to see and what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be announcing, which is action to ensure that my right hon. Friend's constituents get the state-of-the-art, 21st-century hospital that they deserve. That would not happen, I am afraid,

under the Opposition, because it is only through the investment that we are putting in and the sound economy that has been created under my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's leadership that we are able to ensure that the citizens of Harlow get the hospitals that they need.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) rose—

Michael Gove: I am always delighted to give way to the hon. Lady.

Caroline Lucas: I wonder if there is a page missing in my copy of the Bill, because I was looking for the net zero test, which I am sure the Secretary of State would agree ought to be applied to all planning decisions, policies and procedures, yet it is conspicuous by its absence. Does he agree that if we are serious about using this Bill to really level up, then we need to have that net zero test? Can he commit to that now?

Michael Gove: I will say three things as briefly as I can. First, the national planning policy framework that will be published in July will say significantly more about how we can drive improved environmental outcomes. Secondly, there is in the Bill a new streamlined approach to ensuring that all development is in accordance with the highest environmental standards. Thirdly, as the hon. Lady knows, under the 25-year environment plan and with the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection, the non-regression principle is embedded in everything that we do. The leadership that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has shown, not least at COP26, in driving not just this country but the world towards net zero should reassure her on that front.¹

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am pleased that the Secretary of State believes in more devolution. How much extra devolved power will our councils get to settle the very important issue of how much housing investment we should welcome?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend gets to the heart of two of the most important measures in this Bill: strengthening local leadership and reforming our planning system in order to put neighbourhoods firmly in control.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I follow up on my right hon. Friend's point about local leadership? What more are we going to do about devolving fiscal responsibility to local authorities? Ultimately, if local authorities have true powers of leadership, they must have the means of raising revenue in their own areas in a way that does not increase taxation but offsets it, so that local decisions are funded locally.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend, who was a distinguished local Government Minister, makes an important point—a point that was made just as eloquently and forcefully by Ben Houchen, the Mayor of Tees Valley Combined Authority, when he talked about the vital importance of leaders of combined authorities and others having more control over business rates and other fiscal levers. This legislation and the devolution negotiations that we are conducting with Ben and others are designed to move completely in that direction.

1.[Official Report, 13 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 2MC.]

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): On the subject of metro Mayors, the Secretary of State will have seen that the decarbonisation summit took place this week. Metro Mayors met and made an offer to the Government to work more closely with them on the transition to net zero. Has the Secretary of State seen the detail of that offer, and if not, will he get in touch with Mayor Tracy Brabin and look at what more can be done to work closely with the Mayors on this important agenda?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Across the 12 metro Mayors, we have seen examples of leadership on the environment and the move towards net zero, and indeed on the modernisation of transport systems. I know that the Mayor of West Yorkshire is particularly keen to ensure that transport and spatial planning are aligned to drive progress towards net zero. I will do everything I can to work with the Mayors of West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) *rose*—

Michael Gove: Talking of South Yorkshire, I can see that the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee wants to intervene.

Mr Betts: I want to follow up on the two questions that Conservative Members have asked about transferring powers to local authorities and Mayors. I can see in the Bill welcome proposals to expand combined authorities to more parts of the country, particularly to county areas. What I cannot see anywhere—if I am wrong, the Secretary of State will point me to the precise clause—is the making available of more powers that are currently not devolved to any local authorities. Are any such powers going to be devolved, and if so, in which clause do they appear?

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Select Committee brings me to an important point, which is that this legislation is complemented by other activity that Government are undertaking on levelling up. That activity involves negotiations with metro Mayors, for example in the west midlands and in Greater Manchester, on the devolution of more powers. When my good friend the former Member for Tatton initiated the programme of devolution to metro Mayors, he did so by direct discussion with local leaders. We will be transferring more powers, and we will update the House on the progress we make in all those negotiations. I noted a gentle susurrant of laughter on the Opposition Front Bench, but I gently remind them—I sure the Chair of the Select Committee knows this—that when Labour were in power, the only part of England to which they offered devolution was London. This Government have offered devolution and strengthened local government across England.

As I look at the Benches behind me, I find it striking that in this debate on this piece of legislation, which is about strengthening local government and rebalancing our economy, the Conservative Benches are thronged with advocates for levelling up, whereas on the Labour Benches there are one or two heroic figures—such as the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who are genuine tribunes of the people—but otherwise there is a dearth, an absence and a vacuum.

Talking of dearths, absences and vacuums, may I commend to the Labour Front Benchers the speech given by Lord Mandelson today in Durham—a city with which I think the Leader of the Opposition is familiar—in which he points out that Labour has still not moved beyond the primary colours stage when it comes to fleshing out its own policy? In contrast to our levelling-up White Paper and our detailed legislation, Lord Mandelson says that Labour is still at the primary stage of policy development, but I think it is probably at the kindergarten stage.

We have put forward proposals, and we are spending £4.8 billion through the levelling-up fund and similar sums through the UK shared prosperity fund, to make sure that every part of our United Kingdom is firing on all cylinders—and from Labour, nothing. When it comes to addressing the geographical inequality that we all recognise as one of the most urgent issues we need to address, it is this Government who have put forward proposals on everything from strengthening the hand of police and crime commissioners, to strengthening the hand of other local government leaders, and providing the infrastructure spending to make a difference in the communities that need it.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly makes a powerful case for devolution and increased democracy, but is he aware that under this Bill, a combined authority can be created that transfers powers from second-tier councils to itself, without needing the councils' consent? That is different from the position under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Does he agree that that would be tragic for real devolution to the lowest possible level, and that the consent of district councils to the transfer of any powers must be secured?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to and thank those who work at district council level. As we look at the pattern of local government across this country, it is important to recognise that one size does not fit all. Although I am a strong advocate of the mayoral combined authority model, and it has clearly brought benefits in areas such as Tees Valley and the west midlands, we need to be respectful of district councils and the structure of local government in those parts of the country that do not—and, indeed, need not or should not—move towards that model. I look forward to engaging with him and the Association of District Councils on how we can make sure that our devolution drive is in keeping with the best traditions in local government.

As my hon. Friend reminds the House, the devolution proposals outlined in the Bill extend the range of areas that can benefit from combined authority powers, and they strengthen scrutiny. One criticism that has sometimes been made of the exercise of powers by Mayors in mayoral combined authorities is that there has been inadequate scrutiny, particularly by the leaders of district authorities within those MCAs. Our Bill strengthens those scrutiny powers, and in so doing strengthens local democracy overall. That is in line with the progress that the Government have made, including on the Elections Act 2022, which the Minister for Local Government, Faith and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), brought in.

When we talk about levelling up, and particularly when we think about changes to our planning system, we absolutely need to focus on effective measures to regenerate our urban centres. One challenge that the country has faced over the last three or four decades has been the decline in economic activity and employment in many of our great towns and cities. We need to make sure that people's pride in the communities where they live is matched by the resources, energy and investment that they deserve.

I saw some of that energy on display when I was in Stoke-on-Trent just three weeks ago, under Abi Brown, the inspirational Conservative leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Real change is being driven to ensure that all the six towns that constitute Stoke-on-Trent have their heart strengthened, their pride restored and investment increased.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: I am just about to refer to my hon. Friend. In order to ensure that people have the tools they need, we need to tackle some of the things that generate urban blight. We need to deal with the problem of empty shops, vacancies and voids on our high street, which not only depress economic activity but contribute to a lower footfall and less of a sense of purpose, buzz and energy in our communities. That is why, following on from the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by my hon. Friend, we will be bringing forward compulsory rental auctions, so that lazy landlords who leave properties void when they should be occupied by local community trusts, businesses or entrepreneurs will be forced to auction those properties, to ensure that we have the entrepreneurs that we need and the small businesses that we want on the high streets that we love.

Jonathan Gullis: May I personally thank the Secretary of State? He came to the great towns of Tunstall and Burslem to see at first hand the regeneration of brownfield sites to create hundreds of new homes, and to look at the blight of rogue and absent landlords on our high streets in the town of Tunstall. He has sat down and met me on many occasions to look at this legislation, and it is a big win for the city of Stoke-on-Trent, as well as for Members from across this House. I want to put on the record a "Thank you" on behalf of the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

Michael Gove: The communities of Tunstall, Burslem and Kidsgrove could not have a better advocate than my hon. Friend, and I could not have a better ally in shaping measures on urban regeneration. To drive urban regeneration, we will be increasing the council tax surcharge on empty homes. That is a means of making sure that we deal with that scourge and bring life back to all our communities.

Critically, we will also reform the compulsory purchase rules, because the way those powers operate often thwarts the desire of Homes England and others involved in the regeneration business to assemble the brownfield land necessary to build the houses and to get the commercial activity that we want in those communities. The reform in the Bill will ensure that the assembly of land required for urban regeneration becomes easier, so more of the homes that we need are built in the communities that

need them in our towns and cities, rather than on precious green fields. The legislation also introduces new measures to facilitate the creation of the urban development corporations that have been integral in the past in driving some of the changes that we wish to see.

A significant part of the Bill seeks to reform the planning system, which I know is an issue of concern across the House of Commons. We all recognise that we have a dysfunctional planning system and a broken housing market. There is a desperate need for more new homes to ensure that home ownership is once more within the reach of many. It is more than just the planning system that needs to change: as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will outline later this week, changes need to be made to everything from the mortgage market to other aspects of how Government operate to help more people on to the housing ladder. Planning is part of that.

As well as making sure that we have the right homes in the right places, we must recognise, as the Bill and my Department do, why there has been resistance to new development in the past. Five basic and essential factors have led to resistance to development and our Bill attempts to deal with all of them. First, far too many of the homes that have been built have been poor quality, identikit homes from a pattern book that the volume of housebuilders have relied on, but that have not been in keeping with local communities' wishes and have not had the aesthetic quality that people want.

One of my predecessors in this role, Nye Bevan, when he was the Minister responsible for housing in the great 1945-51 Government, made it clear that when new council homes are built, the single most important thing should be beauty. He argued that working people have a right to live in homes built with the stone and slate that reflect their local communities and were hewn by their forefathers, so that when someone looks at a council home and a home that an individual owns, they should not be able to tell the difference, because beauty is everyone's right. I passionately believe that that is right and there are measures in the Bill to bring that forward.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly references the important role of local people in new developments, but the Osterley and Wyke Green Residents' Association and Brentford Voice have expressed their concerns that the national development management policies in the Bill give the Secretary of State powers to overrule local people and the local plan, and that unlike for national policy statements, there is no requirement for parliamentary approval. In reality, is the Bill not the latest in a long line of power grabs by this Government?

Michael Gove: I am allergic to power grabs. I am entirely in favour of relaxing the grip of central Government and strengthening the hand of local government, which is what the planning reforms here do. The reference to the national development management policies is simply a way to make sure that the provisions that exist within the national planning policy framework—a document that is honoured by Members on both sides of the House, of course—do not need to be replicated by local authorities when they are putting together their local plans. It is simply a measure to ensure that local planners,

[*Michael Gove*]

whose contribution to enhancing our communities I salute and whose role and professionalism is important, can spend more time engaging with local communities, helping them to develop neighbourhood plans, and making sure that our plans work.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May I suggest some powers that the Secretary of State might like to grab?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I suggest that the Secretary of State addresses a problem to which national parks are particularly prone, where a historic lawful development certificate is acquired because a caravan was previously located there, affording huge development on the basis of permitted development rights over which the national park authority and the planning authority have no control. That is a power that needs to be grabbed and given back to local authorities.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): And areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Michael Gove: I hear the important point about national parks, and the echo from my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) with reference to areas of outstanding natural beauty. The environmental protections in the Bill should meet that need, but I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend in Committee to ensure that the protections are there.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My right hon. Friend has referred to the national development management policies. There is great concern that they will override local planning authorities, which spend a great deal of time preparing their local plans that are then approved by Government inspectors. It would be quite wrong if national Government overrode them, and it would destroy the careful balance that has existed since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, in which planning was devolved to local authorities.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend gives me the opportunity to reassert that the NDMPs will not override local plans. Local plans have primacy—that is perfectly clear in this legislation. As a result of strengthening the plan-making system, we will make sure that we deal with the issues and questions that have led particular communities to resist development in the past.

I mentioned the importance of beauty. Specifically, for example, we will strengthen the role of design codes in local plans. Through our new office for place, which is a successor in some respects to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment but even better in its drive, we will be in a position to ensure that beauty is at the heart of all new developments. In particular, I pay tribute to my predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and the late James Brokenshire, who worked to ensure that beauty, quality and higher aesthetic standards were at the heart of new architectural developments and did so much to reset the debate away from where it has been in the past and towards a brighter future.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: Talking of brighter futures—

Mr Betts: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the Secretary of State would not want to inadvertently mislead the House. In response to the question from the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) about the conflict between local plans and national policies, he made a comment—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Is this a point of order for the Chair? I am sure that the Secretary of State would not wish to inadvertently mislead the House, so if that is the point of order, I agree with the hon. Gentleman and that is the end of the matter.

Mr Betts: I am trying to help the Secretary of State so that he does not inadvertently mislead the House.

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman is a senior Member of the House. It does not seem to be a point of order for me, but a point of argument with the Secretary of State, who is willing to give way. Will the hon. Gentleman withdraw his point of order so we can allow the Secretary of State to continue?

Mr Betts: Yes, and if the Secretary of State will give way, that is even better.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for withdrawing his non-point of order. I hand the Floor back to the Secretary of State.

Michael Gove: I understand that the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene; I am delighted to give way.

Mr Betts: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Clause 83(2) proposes a new section 38(5C) to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, which says:

“If to any extent the development plan conflicts with a national development management policy, the conflict must be resolved in favour of the national development management policy.”

That is what it says—it overrides the local plan. It is in the Bill.

Michael Gove: It has always been the NPPF’s function to have those national policies, which have been agreed and which ensure that plans are in conformity with what this House wills our overall planning system to be. It is no more than a more efficient way to make sure that the existing NPPF and any future revisions of it are included in local plans.

Another reason why we sometimes see opposition to development is infrastructure. One of the critical challenges that we must all face when we contemplate whether new development should occur is the pressure that is inevitably placed on GP surgeries, schools, roads and our wider

environment. That is why the Bill makes provision for a new infrastructure levy, which will place an inescapable obligation on developers to ensure that they make contributions that local people can use to ensure that they have the services that they need to strengthen the communities that they love.

Of course, section 106 will still be there for some major developments, but one of the problems with section 106 agreements is that there is often an inequality of arms between the major developers and local authorities. We also sometimes have major developers that, even after a section 106 has been agreed—even after, for example, commitments for affordable housing and other infrastructure have been agreed—subsequently retreat from those obligations, pleading viability or other excuses. We will be taking steps to ensure that those major developers, which profit so handsomely when planning permission is granted, make their own contribution.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On the issue of viability that the Secretary of State has just raised, how does the Bill seek to prevent developers from going back and using viability as an angle to, say, reduce the number of affordable homes that they are expected to build in any new development?

Michael Gove: The reason for the infrastructure levy is that it ensures a local authority can set, as a fixed percentage of the land value uplift, a sum that it can use—we will consult on exactly what provisions there should be alongside that sum—to ensure that a fixed proportion of affordable housing can be created. The hon. Lady is quite right to say that there are some developers that plead viability to evade the obligations that they should properly discharge.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that, at the moment, someone can build tens of thousands of houses but people wait years and years for increased general practice capacity. Those from the Rebuild Britain campaign whom I met this morning tell me that they believe that integrated care boards and trusts will be prevented from requesting section 106 money to mitigate the impact of new housing, and medical facilities are but one of 10 types of infrastructure that there is no duty on local authorities to provide. Is he really confident that this will be better under the current Bill?

Michael Gove: I am absolutely confident it will be better, but my hon. Friend makes a very important point, which is that section 106 agreements—sometimes they work, and in many cases they do not—do need to be improved, and the proposals for our new infrastructure levy should do precisely that. However, the way in which the infrastructure levy will operate is something on which we will consult to ensure that it covers not just the physical infrastructure required but, as he quite rightly points out, the provision of critical healthcare.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: I am anxious to make just a wee bit more progress, because I am conscious that there are lots of folk who want—*[Interruption.]* Oh, all right then.

Rachel Hopkins: The Secretary of State is being generous with his time. This is about the infrastructure levy and the timing of its payment. At the moment, it appears that payment is going to be on completion, which benefits developers, but not the local authorities and place makers that will need to put in the infrastructure up front.

Michael Gove: The way the levy is going to operate will mean that, if the development value—the value uplift—for the developer is greater over time, local communities can get more of it. It is a way of making sure that there is appropriate rebalancing. Again, one of the things I want to stress, because it is important to do so, is that there are strengthened powers in the Bill to deal with some of the sharp practices we sometimes see in the world of development and construction. There are stronger enforcement powers, stronger powers to ensure that we have build out and stronger powers to deal with the abuse of retrospective planning permission within the system. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and others to ensure that all those enforcement powers are fit for purpose.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) *rose—*

Michael Gove: Ah, yes—brilliant! I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer).

Dr Spencer: I thought there was going to be a bit of a fight there over who would intervene. I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I welcome the provisions on planning enforcement. A key intervention, however, is to break the business model of rogue developers. Would he look again at the debate we had last year on my Planning (Enforcement) Bill, so that we can enhance these important powers to break this model and ensure that people cannot profit from gaming the planning enforcement system?

Michael Gove: Yes. The reason I was so pleased to be able to give way to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is that I think his legislation and the arguments he made were incredibly powerful. I am a bit wary about criminalisation, but I am keen to explore with him and others how we can have effective tools—real teeth. We have some proposals in the Bill, but they may not go far enough, which is why I hope we can discuss in Committee exactly what we need to do to ensure that enforcement is stronger.

I should say—I touched on the environment briefly earlier—that as well as making sure we have new development that is beautiful, that is accompanied by infrastructure and that is democratically sanctioned, we need to make sure we have new development that is appropriately environmentally sensitive. Let me repeat—

Mr Robertson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: Oh, yes. I do beg my hon. Friend's pardon.

Mr Robertson: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Just before he entirely leaves the issue of infrastructure, to which he is right to draw

[Mr Robertson]

attention, one of the big problems is that the water companies do not provide adequate drainage systems when new builds are being proposed, so should they not have such systems in place before new developments actually start?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is getting me on to a subject that I have often touched on in the past, which is the role of water companies overall. When I was fortunate enough to be Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I was able to talk to the water companies about the way in which they have privileged financial engineering over the real engineering required to ensure that new developments are fit for purpose, and in particular about how we deal effectively with a lack of investment in infrastructure, such as a lack of effective treatment of waste water. The way in which some of the water companies have behaved, frankly, is shocking, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be bringing forward more proposals to ensure that the water companies live up to their proper obligations, because it is a matter of both infrastructure and the environment.

I mentioned earlier that the environmental outcome reports, which the Bill makes provision for, will strengthen environmental protection, and of course the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is helping to ensure that biodiversity net gain is integrated fully into the planning system to make sure we have the enhanced environment that all of us would want to pass on to the next generation.

As we recognise the need to develop homes in the future that are beautiful, with the right infrastructure, democratically endorsed and with the environmental externalities dealt with appropriately, we also want to ensure that they are parts of neighbourhoods, not dormitories. That is why it is so critical that we deal with one or two of the flaws—I will put it no more highly than that—within the current planning system. Such flaws mean, for example, that we can have developers that, because they do not build out, subsequently exploit the requirement for a five-year housing land supply to have speculative development in areas that local communities object to. We will be taking steps in this legislation and in the NPPF to deal with that.

We will also be taking steps to ensure that the Planning Inspectorate, when it is reviewing a local plan and deciding whether it is sound, does not impose on local communities an obligation to meet figures on housing need that cannot be met given the environmental and other constraints in particular communities. There are two particular areas, I think, where the Planning Inspectorate—and it is simply following Government policy—has in effect been operating in a way that runs counter to what Ministers at this Dispatch Box have said over and over again. That has got to change, and it is through both legislation and changes to the NPPF that we will do so. We will end abuse of the five-year land supply rules, and make sure that, if local authorities have sound plans in place, there cannot be such speculative development. We will also make sure that, even as we democratise and digitise the planning system, we are in a position to make sure that the Planning Inspectorate ensures not that every plan fits a procrustean bed, but that every plan reflects what local communities believe in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: Wow! Yes, I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox).

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend go further for the sake of clarity, and make sure that there is, if not an equation, at least a clear mechanism by which local authorities can net off the contradictory elements—floodplain, green belt—so that they are not asked to build houses in inappropriate numbers simply because of a national target?

Michael Gove: Exactly right—my right hon. Friend is spot-on. We do need to have a more sophisticated way of assessing housing need, and that is something we will be doing as part of revisions to the NPPF, but the protections my right hon. Friend quite rightly points out are integral to ensuring that there is democratic consent for development.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): In Wolverhampton, we have developed right up to my northern boundary, which borders South Staffordshire. That land is currently under proposal for housing, and my residents in Wednesfield and Fallings Park really object to losing their beautiful green space and green belt. Could the Secretary of State reassure them that their views will be taken into account, even though this crosses local authorities and is at the edge of the West Midlands mayoralty?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. First, my hon. Friend's constituents could not have a better champion. Secondly, green belt protection is critical. Thirdly, we will ensure that a local plan protects those areas of environmental beauty and amenity. Fourthly, we will also end the so-called duty to co-operate, which has often led some urban authorities to offload their responsibility for development on to other areas in a way that has meant that we have had not urban regeneration but suburban sprawl.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and then my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely).

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): On the issue of constraints, can my right hon. Friend give us some further detail about whether the local authority could argue for constraints on the basis of economic areas, for example? Could that be an opportunity to save my dockyard from closure, following a proposal for flats to meet a housing target?

Michael Gove: Again, a variety of factors can be part of a sound local plan. Indeed, at the moment, permitted development right provisions that allow us to move from commercial to residential are capped at a certain size to ensure that we recognise that some commercial sites should not be moved over to residential. In a way, that is often sensible, but not always, and certainly not when we are thinking about an historic dockyard that has existed since the days of Samuel Pepys.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a great argument on solving some of the flaws in the system. He may not have been privileged enough to be at the debate that I held yesterday on neighbourhood planning. One of the problems that came out was that, if a council does not have an up-to-date local plan—my Liberal Democrat-run borough council does not have one—neighbourhood plans get ridden roughshod over. What can my community do to stop and prevent the sprawl that happens in my constituency?

Michael Gove: I am shocked—shocked, I tell you—that a Liberal Democrat authority does not have a plan in place and, as a result, housing numbers are spiralling out of control. Imagine what would happen in other beautiful parts of our country such as Devon, in a community such as Tiverton, or Honiton, if Liberal Democrat politicians were in charge. I reassure my hon. Friend that this legislation will ensure that if you have a local plan in place—preferably one put in place by Conservative councillors—you will safeguard your green spaces and natural environment, and you will not have those developers’ friends—the Liberal Democrats—concreting over the countryside.

Bob Seely: On the Isle of Wight, we are separated by sea from the mainland. Our local building industry builds between 200 and 300 homes a year, and we cannot really build more. The standard methodology gives us ridiculous targets of 700-plus, and the nonsense of the mutant algorithm would have given us 1,200-plus. Even in the current consideration, we are forced to offer targets that realistically we cannot hope to build. What reassurance can he give the Island?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I think it is the case that the thinker who coined the phrase “mutant algorithm” is my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), who is now an Under-Secretary in the Department and working with me and the Minister for Housing to address precisely the concerns that he outlined. We need to build more homes, but we also need to ensure that how we calculate need and how plans are adopted is much more sensible and sensitive.

Theresa Villiers *rose—*

Michael Gove: Talking about sensible and sensitive, I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Theresa Villiers: The Secretary of State is saying much that suggests that he believes we should rein in the Planning Inspectorate and give back to local authorities more control over planning, but that is not in the Bill. So is he today at the Dispatch Box saying that he will table amendments to the Bill along those lines?

Michael Gove: I will say two things. First, I hope to work constructively with Back Benchers across all parties to ensure that the Bill is strengthened. I have never seen a piece of legislation introduced to the House that could not be improved in Committee, and I know that this Bill will be. I also look forward to good ideas, if they come, from Opposition Front Benchers.

Secondly, it is also the case that the publication of a revised NPPF and NPPF prospectus will help us to appreciate what the nature of the further amendments

should be. As my right hon. Friend knows, in one or two areas of the Bill, there are placeholders, where more work requires to be done. I am frank about that and I look forward to working with her.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Michael Gove: I am conscious that lots of people want to speak in the debate. I will accept interventions from the four people who are standing up, but I fear that I cannot take any more interventions. I will then briefly end.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Secretary of State has just said what I was hoping he would say, so I do not have to say it. Sixty-two Members wish to speak in the debate. The time limit will be very short for each speech, and every intervention made is stopping somebody from getting to speak later. I have noted who has made the most interventions.

Michael Gove: I give way to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western).

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Secretary of State is being generous. On housing and the constraint of local authorities, in my constituency, we have an over-supply of 4,000, which a previous Housing Minister described as “very ambitious”—in other words, too much development. May I bring him back to the lack of GPs in infrastructure supply through development? Will he make NHS Providers a statutory consultee in any of these developments?

Michael Gove: Let me reflect on that in Committee.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am interested in what the Secretary of State has said about the re-emphasis on the environmental protections. Of course, in urban areas, that is often urban green space rather than green belt. I have a case in Houghton Green in my constituency where the council closed Two Trees high school. When it closed the school, it said that there would be housing on the footprint of the school but that the fields around the school, in a heavily urbanised area, would be protected, so there would be a green doughnut. It now says that it has to build on the entire site to meet the Government’s housing targets. With what he just said, does he give hope to the people of Houghton Green that the council can look at Two Trees again?

Michael Gove: I cannot comment on a specific planning application for reasons that the hon. Gentleman knows well, but I appreciate the strength of his point and will ask the Minister for Housing to engage with him more closely on both that specific issue and the broader policy points that he raised.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, York also has a Liberal Democrat-run council, and the challenge we have is that the council is not building the tenure of housing that my local residents can afford either to rent or to buy. So how will this legislation really shift the dial on affordability?

Michael Gove: I have a lot of sympathy for the hon. Lady and the situation in which she finds herself. I know that she is a doughty champion for York—it is a

[*Michael Gove*]

beautiful city, and a potential home for the House of Lords if it does not want to move to Stoke—and that York needs the right type of housing and commercial investment. I look forward to working with her and with Homes England, and also to consider what we can do in the Bill to deal with some of the consequences of some of her constituents foolishly having voted for Liberal Democrats at the local level.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State was asking for good ideas on things that have been missed in the Bill. On building more social and affordable housing and GP surgeries, there is a missed opportunity here to ensure that public sector-owned assets such as land and buildings, including police stations, can be sold for slightly below market value where a GP surgery is needed or housing associations want to build social housing. He is aware that I have been campaigning for that on Teddington police station in my constituency, which the Labour Mayor wants to sell to the highest bidder for luxury housing, even though the community wants a new GP surgery and more affordable housing. Will he put that provision in the Bill?

Michael Gove: Well, this is a first. It is the first time—certainly in the last seven years—that there has been a Lib Dem policy proposal that makes sense. I am nostalgic for those coalition years when, every so often, there was a Lib Dem policy proposal that made sense—they normally came from people who are no longer in the House—and that one does. Yes, she is absolutely right.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I should probably quit while I am ahead. We have consensus on one particular area where reform is needed. I stressed earlier, in introducing the Bill, that it sets out to ensure that urban regeneration becomes a reality, that our planning system is modernised, that the missions we have to level up this country are on the face of the Bill and that we are accountable to this House. There are so many colleagues who want to contribute, because that mission is so important. I beg leave to ask the House to give the Bill its Second Reading. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will sit down.

2.10 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a born performer and he was clearly having fun today. I was glad for him that he could not see the faces behind him when we reached the planning section. I suspect he may need to reach over to this side of the House a little more in the coming weeks and months than he has just done in that performance today.

Even the Secretary of State cannot perform his way out of this one. The Bill has been brought to the House on the day when the reality of the Government's record on levelling up has been laid bare. New figures published today by the Office for National Statistics show that London alone of the regions of the UK has had a post-pandemic recovery that has far outstripped the rest of us. Our industrial heartlands, once the engine room of Britain, including the west midlands, are performing at 10% below pre-covid levels. That is the brutal reality of a decade of underinvestment, money stripped out of communities and money taken out of people's pockets. This is what it has done to our communities in every part of this country.

So how is it that the Secretary of State has come to the House with lots of jokes, smart phrases and slogans but nothing in the Bill that will turn that around? The only mention of levelling up in this hefty great tome, apart from in the title, is in the 12 missions that will be written into law. But this is a law not worth the paper it is written on because tucked away in clause 5 is the sleight of hand that has become so characteristic of this Government. The cat is out of the bag. Not only will they not back the country, but they will not even back themselves. In clause 5 is a measure that allows the Government to tear up those missions on a whim—their entire levelling up agenda, the promise made to the people of Britain and on which they won the last general election—presumably when they fail to deliver every single one.

The country simply cannot go on like this.

Robert Halfon *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: I will give way in a moment.

In 19 of the last 20 years, only two regions of our country have been given the backing they needed from their Government to succeed. They cannot try to fire the economy on one cylinder and expect it to work. If the right hon. Gentleman would like to tell me how he thinks that can work, believe me, I am all ears.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Lady said that, under the Conservative Government, there has been a lack of investment in the regions. Harlow, as she knows, has a fair bit of deprivation, but under this Government it has been levelling up for the past 10 years: an advanced manufacturing centre, millions of pounds; an enterprise zone, millions of pounds; a new hospital coming, hundreds of millions of pounds; a new road junction on the M11 just about to open up, many millions of pounds; infrastructure improvements; a technical school opened up; and a £23 million town fund. That has not been happening just over the past year; it has been happening over the past 10 years. This Government have been levelling up Harlow for 10 years.

Lisa Nandy: That was a superb audition for the forthcoming reshuffle and I am sure we will hear many more of them. I hope that that gave the right hon. Gentleman a better press release for his local paper than the failure to back the hospital that was promised. Let me tell him the reality of what levelling up has done in Essex: £292.5 million taken by his Government from the people of Essex, even when levelling-up funds are taken into account. That is the reality of levelling up for the people he represents. No wonder he sits there with such a glum face, listening to that record.

Our core cities are still far outpaced by London. We are an outlier across major economies. The inequalities between regions are outstripped by the inequalities within them. And even the winners in this system are losing. London is the region with the highest disposable income in the country, but I do not need to tell any of my London colleagues the reality of overheating some parts of our economy and underinvesting in others. Once we take the crippling housing costs that are holding back a generation into account, disposable income in London falls way down the ranking and people are worse off.

The Secretary of State has presented a Bill today that contains more aimed at dealing with housing and planning than it does on levelling up, democracy and devolution.

Can he not see the problem? We are one of the most geographically unequal countries of any major economy. As someone once said, when levelling up was a thing:

“for too many people in this country, geography turns out to be destiny”.

If this Government continue to write off the opportunities for many parts of the country—to write off the potential and the assets we have, for lack of imagination and investment—they will continue to cram more and more people into small corners of the country, and that in turn will continue to push up housing prices. Surely the Secretary of State can see, even if he cannot admit it today, that one of the chief ways to deal with the over 120 clauses aimed at dealing with pressures on land, planning and development, is to level up the country. The clue is in the title. Why are they not doing it? Any self-respecting Secretary of State would have brought us a plan to get proper resources spent wisely and invested for the long-term recovery of our local economies.

Jonathan Gullis: It is this Conservative Government who have invested £56 million in the levelling-up fund, £31.7 million in Bus Back Better, 500 brand new Home Office jobs, and the £17.6 million Kids Grove town deal that has unlocked the refurbishment of a sports centre that Labour closed in 2017 because it could not be bothered to spend a single pound coin. Labour’s legacy is a PFI hospital with 200 fewer beds than the old one, stealing £20 million a year from the doctors and nurses on the frontline, PFI schools stealing money from teachers in the classroom, and the white elephant council office that wasted £40 million. Why would Labour ever come back in Stoke-on-Trent? I cannot see it.

Lisa Nandy: That was a fantastic audition for the Secretary of State’s job, but I cannot imagine, based on that performance, that the hon. Gentleman will be around long enough to keep his own. Let me tell him why. I was in Stoke-on-Trent the other day meeting some incredible young people at the YMCA—an amazing organisation. Those young people had a lot to say about the record of this Government, and it sounded very different to his. Let me tell him the reality of what has happened in Stoke-on-Trent. Taking into account every single penny of levelling-up money that has been allocated to Stoke-on-Trent, his constituents are £27.7 million worse off as a consequence of this Government. That is the Tory premium. That is the premium we pay for having a Tory Government. If he had an inch of conscience about the plight of some of the young people I met, he would be standing up and challenging this Government on their record of not delivering for Stoke-on-Trent.

Tory Members do not need to believe me. Why do they not read the Public Accounts Committee report that was published today? It is devastating. It says that billions of pounds have been squandered on ill-thought-out plans, forcing areas to compete over pots of money—small refunds for the money that has been stripped from us over a decade. This is not “The Hunger Games”; this is the future of our country and it is no way to treat the people in it. The Chair of the Select Committee said that this

“Government is just gambling taxpayers’ money on policies and programmes that are little more than a slogan, retrofitting the criteria for success and not even bothering to evaluate if it worked.”

This is our money. In case Tory Members have not noticed, as they sit and joke and laugh, and make wisecracks at other political parties, we have not got money to burn in this country right now, so why are they burning it?

Why has the Secretary of State not come here today with a guarantee that every part of this country has a right to the sort of basic infrastructure that we would expect in any modern economy? Since the Conservatives won the election, they have not just refused to make good on that promise, but backtracked on the promises they have already made. They press-released northern powerhouse rail 60 times over seven years and then casually axed it. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) mentions Bus Back Better. Quietly, under the cover of the pandemic, they halved the funding that was available for bus services. I am starting to wonder what they have against Yorkshire in particular. Let me tell him about our record on buses. Right across this country, we have Labour representatives and metro Mayors who are delivering on that promise, such as Tracy Brabin, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), Oli Coppard, Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham. Those are the people who are delivering the bus services that we need. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North might want to go and learn a thing or two from them.

I am starting to wonder what the Government have against Yorkshire, in particular. There has not been a penny for bus services in South Yorkshire. They have cancelled the eastern leg of High Speed 2.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does she share my disappointment about the fact that flooding prevention and mitigation measures have not been adequately addressed in the Bill? If we want a strong future for Yorkshire and areas such as Hull, we need to get serious about tackling flood prevention and mitigation. I hope that the Secretary of State will look at that issue again when revisions are made to the Bill.

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is an outstanding advocate for her community and we on the Front Bench absolutely support her call for proper action to deal with the crisis of flooding around the country. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is here; she knows only too well, too the impact that flooding has on communities up and down the country and the shameful way that we have been treated by the Government, with promises of action and measures. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said during the Secretary of State’s opening remarks, there is not a single mention of net zero in the Bill. What is the commitment, if it is anything at all?

I was starting to wonder what the Government had against Yorkshire, but then I saw yesterday that they had also casually scrapped the Golborne link. That decision appears to have been made in the face of pressure from Tory MPs ahead of a confidence vote in the Prime Minister. It is going to create havoc for people trying to travel by rail across the north-west and it plays into the real problems that we already have with east-west connectivity.

[Lisa Nandy]

Then I saw that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said that he had voted for the Prime Minister to keep his job after receiving assurances that there would be a funding review for his council. Can I ask the Secretary of State—

Bob Seely: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lisa Nandy: I certainly will, but I ask the Secretary of State: did he have knowledge of this? Did he sign it off? Let me say to him: that sounds awfully like corruption to me.

Bob Seely: The hon. Lady completely misunderstands and she gets it completely wrong. Several years ago, the Prime Minister realised that the Isle of Wight was the only island in the UK that does not have a multiplier. The Isles of Scilly get a multiplier of 1.5 and the Scottish islands get the Scottish islands needs allowance. I said to the Prime Minister, “Will you commit to rectifying this wrong, which is a policy flaw?” He said “Yes,” and I reminded him of that promise beforehand. Did I ask for a bag of cash? No, and it is completely untrue for her to say that, so she can get up now and apologise.

Lisa Nandy: Of course I will give the hon. Member the opportunity—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Order! That means sit down. This is a very sensitive point and I want to hear what the hon. Lady has to say.

Lisa Nandy: I of course gave the hon. Member the right of reply, but I am quoting literally and directly a quote on his website. If those are not his words and are not correct, I leave it up to hon. Members to judge. I am simply quoting his words to the Secretary of State and asking whether that is correct, because we have had a report today that says, in stark terms, that the Department—

Bob Seely: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is a very serious allegation. Corruption has been alleged, but there is no basis for it and it should be withdrawn.

Madam Deputy Speaker: This is a serious allegation. I am not in a position right now to weigh up one side of the argument against the other, because I do not have the evidence before me of whatever words were published and whatever words have been said. I ask the hon. Lady—[*Interruption.*] She cannot possibly be looking at her phone while I am speaking to her. No, no, she cannot possibly be looking at her phone while I am speaking to her! I ask her to get us over this part of the debate, and we can come back to this matter at another time. Will she please withdraw the—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] Do not shout at me when I am speaking from the Chair! Will the hon. Lady please withdraw the allegation of corruption, which is a very serious one, and perhaps find some other words to show that she disagrees with what the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said. We can then proceed with the debate and, if necessary, come back to this point at another time.

Lisa Nandy: Out of deference to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, of course I will rephrase my words in a manner that is far more acceptable to you: this looks awfully dodgy to me, Secretary of State. Was this signed off by

him or his Department? I would certainly never disrespect the Chair by reading from my phone, so I will not do it now, but the words are there on the website of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight, and if anybody cares to look at them, they can draw their own conclusions.

I say to the Secretary of State that this matters at a time when councils and our communities around the country have had £15 billion stripped out of them by the Government. That is not what respect looks like. [*Interruption.*] Written into every part of the Bill is a lack of respect, and every single hon. Member who sits there chuntering and heckling, rather than standing up for their own communities, needs to look in the mirror and ask themselves whether they are doing a good job for their communities.

Kelly Tolhurst: I take exception to what the hon. Lady said. How dare she suggest that Government Members are not standing up for their communities when we are quite obviously aggrieved with the allegation that she has just made against a fellow colleague? So yes, we do have a right to chunter at her comments.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Member absolutely has a right to challenge me on my comments, and so have her constituents. They might want to know why Kent has had £276.8 million taken from its budget by the Government over the past decade.

Kelly Tolhurst: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lisa Nandy: No, I will not give way—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Gullis, stop it!

Lisa Nandy: I do not need to dwell on the point about a lack of respect; we have just seen the most stunning display of a group of representatives who will open their mouths but cannot open their ears and eyes to the reality of what is happening in their communities.

In the press release that accompanied the Bill—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps I could directly address the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, who is chuntering again. If he cared one iota for his constituency, he would not be chuntering at me; he would be asking the Secretary of State where the missing £27 million has gone.

Jonathan Gullis *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: No, we have heard plenty from the hon. Member and it is about time that he listened.

We were given a promise of the biggest transfer of powers out of Whitehall, but instead, we have three tiers of powers on offer in the Bill. The upper tier of those powers is still pretty limited. Areas can get priority for new rail partnerships. They can get a consolidation of local transport funding. They can get—[*Interruption.*]

Emma Hardy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your advice on how we can continue to have this debate in a respectful manner and stop the incessant chuntering and rudeness coming from Government Members?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am perfectly capable of working that one out for myself—thank you very much.

Lisa Nandy: Areas can get consolidation of local transport funding. They can get a role in designing and delivering future employment programmes and access to something called a long-term investment fund, but only if they can clear the bar of the upper tier and only if they accept a governance arrangement that is imposed from Whitehall.

I went back to look at what the Prime Minister promised when he made his levelling-up speech last year:

“Come to us with a plan for strong accountable leadership and we will give you the tools to change your area for the better”.

Will the Secretary of State tell me why a kid in Barnsley should have to turn down an apprenticeship because of the lack of a functioning bus service while a kid in Bolton can take one up just because somebody hundreds of miles away in Whitehall, who has never set foot in either of those communities, decided that they liked the look of the local leaders—the local leaders we chose—in one area more than another? Why is there not a right in the Bill for every area to have democratic control over their bus services, if that is what they choose?

The Secretary of State said that the last Labour Government did not devolve power in England, but let me remind him of what can be done, and what was done, with the right level of commitment and imagination. It was the last Labour Government who set up the regional development agencies. In the north-west of England, which I call home, we had the foresight to bring Media City to Salford. That was not just about the economic regeneration of one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country; it was also a key measure that started to rebalance the national debate that determined who had a voice and who got a place and was reflected in our national story.

Under the last Labour Government, the regional development agency in Yorkshire was among the first to see the potential of wind in Grimsby—the Grimsby docks are the windiest place in Europe—and I have met those young people who, a generation later, are powering the world from the Grimsby docks through clean energy and life-changing apprenticeships. It is not just in Grimsby that the Yorkshire regional development agency saw potential; it looked for potential everywhere. It understood the legacy of skills, because of steel cutting from the steel industry, that made Rotherham an ideal location for one of the most incredible advanced manufacturing centres in the world. That is what real power and devolution looks like.

All that potential in our communities, realised by the last Labour Government, has now been collapsed into the spectacle of two proud cities that were at the forefront of the industrial revolution—Birmingham and Manchester—begging for the right to introduce a tourist levy on hotel bedrooms. When they have come to Whitehall, it is not just Ministers’ doors that have been repeatedly closed to them, but their minds as well.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I am listening very carefully to the hon. Lady, who, to be frank, is painting a picture of doom and gloom in the northern part of the country over the past 10 years. Could she explain, then, why unemployment in her constituency is 30% lower than it was when we took office in 2010? Does she not think that that is a good thing?

Lisa Nandy: The right hon. Gentleman talks about doom gloom around the north of England, but I have just told him about the life-changing jobs that were brought to those communities by action taken under the last Labour Government. I have just told him what ambition looks like, and what levelling up looks like in action. If he thinks that that is doom and gloom, I dread to think what he thinks about the legacy of his Government.

In fairness to the Secretary of State—I feel I ought to say something nice to him; if he could see the faces behind him, he would not feel very cheerful—it is not his door and mind that have been completely closed, but the Treasury’s, and it is the Treasury that calls the shots. In fairness to him, he inherited a complete mess in relation to planning, and it falls to him to try to sort it out.

John Redwood: Why did the people of the north-east turn down Labour’s policy of elected regional government, and why did Labour not try it anywhere else?

Lisa Nandy: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could ask the Secretary of State that question, because it was his then policy adviser who led the campaign against it.

In all fairness to the Secretary of State, we were relieved to see the back of a planning framework that seemed to be based on a traffic light system. Our communities deserved far better than that. However, this Bill, as he has heard from colleagues on both sides of the House, allows neighbourhood plans to be overridden when they conflict with a national development management plan. The Secretary of State can make one of those plans at any time—without consultation if he chooses, and without any approval from a single Member of this House—and he can override people in any one of our communities if their plan conflicts with his to any extent. That is not being serious about handing power to local communities, is it?

The press release that accompanied the Bill said that the big idea behind handing power to local communities—notwithstanding that the Bill includes measures that allow Whitehall to override them—is something that the Secretary of State calls “street votes”. Will he explain exactly what those street votes will do to put power in people’s hands and put them in the driving seat of their own communities? The reason I ask is that, if he has a plan, it is not, unfortunately, in the Bill. How is it possible that that flagship idea, which headlined the press release, has not yet been written? Does he not accept that we are entitled to better than plans drawn up on the back of an envelope after horse-trading has taken place, usually to his detriment, behind closed doors in Whitehall?

The Secretary of State says that he wants beautiful communities that work for people, and I agree with him, but that means that we have to put power back into people’s hands, because people who have a stake in their own communities and who have skin in the game will do more, try harder, work for longer and be more creative in order to build thriving communities. It also means that we have to end the system where people can come to our communities and extract from them, taking our wealth, running down our housing and sitting on our land.

[Lisa Nandy]

Surely the most basic plank of all this is that people have the right to know who owns their town, village or city. However, the measures in the Bill that try to ensure that more information is collected about land ownership also allow the Secretary of State to withhold that information from communities. Why on earth would a Secretary of State want to deny people in our villages, towns and cities the right to know who owns the housing, land, shopping centres and town centres that make up those beautiful places that we call home? I remind him that it was that great Conservative—also a great radical—John Ruskin who said:

“Nothing can be beautiful which is not true.”

The commitment to beauty in this Bill is not true.

We need a serious plan to tilt the balance of power back in favour of the people who built this country and will do so again, who have stake in the outcome and skin in the game. We have debated the problems they face many times in this Chamber—

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) *rose*—

Lisa Nandy: If I am not mistaken, my hon. Friend is about to raise one of them, so I give way to him.

Matt Rodda: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She is absolutely right to highlight the very poorly designed planning system and the failure of the current proposals to change anything. In my area, there are enormous pressures on land and terrible pressures on green spaces, yet brownfield land in the south of England is not being redeveloped as it should be. When it is redeveloped, it is not done appropriately, and local needs and local authorities are not listened to as much as they should be. Does she agree that there needs to be a complete rethink of that imbalance?

Lisa Nandy: I agree with my hon. Friend, who reminds us that we have had 12 long years without real action to put power back in people's hands. He raises a really important point—I think all Members have raised it: that, as long as there are centralising tendencies in Government, and as long as they find their way into Bills such as this, we will continue to undermine the situation. If the Secretary of State does not want to listen to Opposition Members, I urge him to listen to Members on his own side; looking at their faces, I do not believe they will allow this to drop.

We have debated the problems that people face in this House many times. There are simple changes that the Secretary of State could make in order to stop people coming into our communities and extracting from them.

Richard Graham: I want to make a couple of very simple points. First, the constituents of the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) could have applied to a very good recent fund for brownfield sites; Gloucester was successful in its application.

Secondly, I find it curious that the hon. Lady keeps referring to the regional development agency, which was one of the most disastrous organisations ever created. It did nothing but harm in my city of Gloucester, and all the bad things that it did are gradually being sorted

out by this progressive Conservative Government. Could she talk about the Bill rather than Labour's failures of the past?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Lisa Nandy: Given all the chuntering and chuckling among the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, I did not catch the end of his intervention, but I can tell him that we have been calling for a long time for measures to make funds available to bring brownfield sites into use. I know that very well myself, as I represent a former mining community—[*Interruption.*] If he would just listen for a moment, he would hear that I am about to agree with him.

Representing a former mining community, I know how painful it is for people to see green spaces built on when brownfield sites cannot be used for lack of a small amount of investment to deal with contaminated land and other issues. I have no quibble with the hon. Gentleman about that, because those measures are welcome and important. But if he wants to challenge the last Labour Government about Gloucestershire, may I remind him that it has had £91.2 million taken out of its pocket by this Government? Perhaps he might have something to say to the Secretary of State about that.

We have debated the problems many times in this Chamber. The Secretary of State referred to the five Bills in the Queen's Speech for which his Department is responsible. Luckily for him, he will be seeing a lot of me and my colleagues over the next few months. We will remind him that there are simple changes that he could make, such as stopping sharks from coming into our communities and milking the housing benefit system; housing people in supported exempt accommodation; or allowing communities to go to rack and ruin. He knows that, because we have debated the issue many, many times and he has heard about it from colleagues on both sides of the House. Can he explain why, with five Bills in the Queen's Speech, the simple measure needed to tackle the problem has not found its way into a single one?

The Secretary of State proposes an infrastructure levy to replace section 106. I apologise if I have missed it, but there is no clarity in the Bill about whether that will raise more or less money than the current system. There is no clarity about whether it will boost affordable housing or whether affordable housing will continue to drop off a cliff. I will tell him why that matters: it potentially makes the difference to whether our kids can stay and raise families in the communities they were born into. We are entitled to know the answer, not after some horse-trading behind closed doors or on the back of an envelope once he has asked for our votes, but now, as we scrutinise the Bill.

Can the Secretary of State tell us what is in the Bill to stop his new system from allowing developers to create ghettos of poorer housing reserved for poorer people, while earmarking prime sites exclusively for wealthy buyers? What measures will he put in the Bill to prevent the new infrastructure levy from being used in that way? I can tell him that if he will not introduce those measures, we will.

Where are the Bill's impact assessments? Where is the regional impact assessment? Where is the local impact assessment? The Secretary of State knows how important

it is to close the gaps between and within regions: it is so important to him that he proposes to write such objectives into law, with some caveats. The clue is in the name: it is the Department for Levelling Up, but it has not even bothered to assess the impact of its own legislation on regions of this country beyond London and the south-east. I would be pretty ashamed of that.

What I would be most ashamed of, however—bar none—is a measure that has been tucked away at the end of the Bill and that reverses the commitment made by the Government and this House to junk a Victorian piece of legislation that has no place in modern Britain. It is simply unacceptable to seek to criminalise people who find themselves homeless. This Government have presided over soaring numbers of people in temporary accommodation and B&Bs. Those numbers are up 37% on the past year, and even now the Local Government Association is concerned that there are Ukrainian refugees sleeping on the streets because the Homes for Ukraine scheme has broken down. They deserve help, not antiquated measures, a lack of thought or imagination, and harshly punitive principles tucked away at the end of this Bill. It cannot be right that we are saddled with a Government who are reaching back for inspiration not only from the 1980s, but now from the 1880s as well.

The Secretary of State will face problems with the Bill as it goes through the House; he knows as well as anyone that he is in for a bumpy ride ahead. I welcome what he said when he was challenged by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) at the end of his speech, so I ask him to work with us to turn things around over the coming weeks and months. In every part of Britain, people are ambitious for themselves, their family, their communities and their country. They need a Government who match that ambition, so let us turn this Bill into a vehicle to match it.

We will fight tooth and nail for our communities at every stage of the Bill, to make good not just on the promises of the Secretary of State, but on the promise that they have and the promise of Britain. Our message to the Secretary of State is “You have acknowledged today that this is not good enough and that there is work to do, so join us and fight for our communities to make good on that promise.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to everyone in the Chamber that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, so we will begin with an immediate time limit of four minutes for Back-Bench speeches.

2.44 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye in this very important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am not so grateful to have to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). I cannot believe that in a speech that lasted more than half an hour, she could not find something to welcome in the Bill, which will help to level up some of our poorest communities in this country. I can only conclude that she and I have been reading different Bills.

I declare my registered interest as a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors; I have practised professionally in planning matters. I welcome the fact

that earlier zonal planning proposals were dropped, and I welcome the abolition of the five-year land supply. It is right to try to speed up the planning process by better using data and digitalisation. Where better to start than by streaming and accelerating the local planning process, and concurrently introducing neighbourhood development orders in clause 89 to make the neighbourhood plan process easier? That is important, because those plans are where most people become involved in the planning process. They are a truly democratic part of that process.

Unfortunately, the democratic theme applies with a vengeance to the national development management policies set out in clauses 83 and 84, which I referred to in an intervention on the Secretary of State. It is very important that we think carefully about them, because they set a dangerous precedent that begins to nationalise planning policy and upsets the delicate balance between national and local policy that has existed since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which largely decentralised planning.

Munira Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will not, because I have only four minutes.

Given the enabling power in the Bill to implement NDMPs, and the enormous centralising power, what will they contain and what will be the consultation process to create and amend them? That is a key question, and I hope that the Minister for Housing will provide some answers when he sums up.

I was heavily involved in the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into local government finance; indeed, I secured an Adjournment debate on the subject on 27 April—it is printed at column 845 of the *Official Report*—to urge the Government to stop local authorities such as Cotswold District Council, which wants to borrow £76.5 million on an annual core spending budget of just £11.2 million. The Liberal Democrats running that council are financially illiterate.

I welcome the implementation of the Letwin review to speed up development with the introduction of a development commencement notice that sets out the annual rate of housing delivery within large developments and the consequent completion notice. I also welcome the new infrastructure levy in clause 113, to be set in conjunction with the retained section 106 powers. In the Cotswolds, agricultural land is worth between £10,000 and £15,000 per acre; with planning permission, that could increase to half a million pounds or more. With good tax advice, only 10% is paid on the gain.

If the infrastructure levy is properly implemented, it could provide substantial infrastructure. It could end the endless argument about delays and viability, because the developer would know before purchasing the site what they would be expected to provide. The construct of charging on the gross development value—I urge the Minister to listen to this—is interesting, but will deter any aspect of environmental design improvement unless it is statutorily required. A better construct might be to capture the increase in land value, which I have demonstrated is there.

Finally, the increase in planning and enforcement fees is welcome. Most planning departments are poorly funded; they should be properly funded to determine

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

applications rapidly and should employ good and well-qualified planners. Thank you for allowing me to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesman, Patricia Gibson.

2.48 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I wish I could say that I was optimistic about the impact of the Bill, but the fact is that this flagship Government agenda will not deliver what it purportedly sets out to do; it is mere smoke and mirrors. We have moved on from the vague so-called missions in the White Paper to a Bill which is doomed to fail. Even the respected Institute of Economic Affairs has concluded that the plans, which are grandly referred to as missions, are “of dubious quality”. The new five-year plans and annual updates just will not be a fix for that dubious quality.

It is not just me, the SNP and, indeed, those in the Institute of Economic Affairs who are unconvinced by the Bill. The Institute for Government has concluded that it

“lacks the ambition needed to deliver”

the Government’s own levelling-up missions.

A real flaw in the Bill is the lack of accountability and ownership of each of the 12 levelling-up missions on the part of individual UK Government Departments. The Government could, of course, fix that if they chose to do so. Instead, they have given themselves the power to move the goalposts and change targets that look as if they will not be met. Rather than merely marking their own homework, the Government are ready to lower the pass mark of the test that they have set themselves if they fail. They tell us how important their levelling-up plans are; they tell us that the plans are a “flagship” commitment. If that is really true, why do they seem to have so little faith in their ability to deliver true levelling up?

The Institute for Public Policy Research has called for an independent body, established in law, to oversee and judge the UK’s progress on levelling up. What Government who had confidence in their ability to deliver true levelling up, as the Government say they do, would resist that kind of scrutiny and accountability? What have they to fear from transparent and objective allocation mechanisms for delivery? The only conclusion that can logically be drawn is that the Government know that there is more bluster here than actual substance. True levelling up requires investment, but the necessary financial backing is absent. Any investment must be delivered in a non-partisan and transparent way. And let us not forget that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that departmental budgets will actually be lower in 2025 than they were in 2010. How does that support levelling up?

People in Scotland know that this Government cannot be trusted with levelling up. There has been a 5.2% cut in Scotland’s resource budget, and a 9.7% cut in its capital budget. Levelling up, my eye! We only have to look at the Government’s record. Brexit—which it roundly rejected—has cost Scotland billions of pounds, causing exports to plunge, with increasing costs for families and businesses. The Office for Budget Responsibility has

predicted a chilling 4% contraction in the economy from Brexit alone. I know that it makes uncomfortable reading for Conservative Members, but Bloomberg’s research shows that under this Prime Minister, many areas that were lagging behind before his election are now further behind than before. In fact, 87% of constituencies are now stagnant or falling even further behind.

Only 38% of the 100 most deprived councils have received any levelling up money. According to the Institute for Government, central Government grants to councils were reduced by 37% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20—and at this point, only about two fifths of the Brexit damage has been inflicted. We see that all too clearly in Scotland, where exports fell by 25% in the latest year, to June 2021, compared with the equivalent period in the previous year.

How can we truly believe that levelling up really is a “mission” of this Government, when every indicator points to so many being left behind? Families are left to struggle on through a cost of living crisis, with insufficient support or even understanding from the Government. However, there is another aspect to all this. How can it be true levelling up if several Ministers whose seats are prosperous receive priority for levelling-up funding? The 49 councils in England that are considered to be the “most developed” are now priority places for so-called levelling up, and are represented by no fewer than 35 Tory MPs. What a coincidence! How can it be true levelling up if this funding has favoured wealthy Tory areas over deprived areas? Indeed, the constituency of Bromsgrove has done very well out of levelling-up funding, despite being one of the wealthiest areas in England. The Institute for Government has said that for true levelling up to take place, there must be an “incredibly serious, complete re-orientation”, but there is, as yet, no evidence of that.

Per person, per head, Wales and Scotland are getting less levelling up than England. Scotland is receiving a mere 3.5% of all funding, despite having 8.2% of the UK’s population. I know the Minister thinks that pesky Scots should just shut up and be grateful, but we in Scotland are not very fond of tugging our forelocks in gratitude for crumbs from the Westminster table. Moreover, we cannot simply forget that the Public Accounts Committee—with its majority of Tory MPs—concluded in November 2021 that the allocation of the much-trumpeted towns fund was “not impartial”. Yet we are supposed to believe that it will all be different now, with the levelling-up fund, even though we know that certain Tory MPs—I am choosing my words carefully—appeared to tweet about how they had expressed confidence in the Prime Minister, having been told that funding for their constituency would be “looked at again”. So much for levelling up! Many have perceived this to mean that it depends on patronage and favours, as opposed to doing what it says on the tin. No wonder this Government are running scared of setting up an independent body to oversee and judge the UK’s progress on levelling up.

How can the people of Scotland truly believe this rhetoric about levelling up when no one trusts a word that this Prime Minister says any more, and even fewer have confidence in him? It also must be said that levelling up, in all its ill-conceived guises, is a clumsy and pretty obvious attempt to claw back powers from the pesky devolved nations who will not take their medicine and

co-operate by voting Tory. Their democratic institutions must be undermined, so that they can be governed by Tories in devolved areas whether they like it or not. They will have to take that medicine.

This ought to come as no surprise to anyone. We know that the Secretary of State for Scotland is part of a group of senior Tories who are plotting to undermine devolution with the so-called “muscular Unionism” which has replaced the so-called “respect agenda”, health being the latest devolved competency in their sights. It has been well trailed, not least on the Conservative Home site, that the Secretary of State—not so much Scotland’s man in the Cabinet as the Cabinet’s man in Scotland—is

“dismissive of both the theory and practice of the Scottish Parliament”.

Not to worry; I hear that most of the democratically elected members of that institution feel the same way about him. But this Bill—following on the heels of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the repeated disregard for legislative consent motions, and the petty taking of the Scottish Parliament to court over the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill—shows the Government’s real agenda; and Scotland sees, and her people are not fooled by these attacks on our Parliament.

In this Bill, the Government say that the devolution of power is important to the levelling-up agenda, while at the same time they concentrate all the power for the delivery of funding in Whitehall, imposing a top-down approach on devolved Parliaments and riding roughshod over devolved powers. Levelling-up funding delivered across the UK has already robbed Scotland of £400 million in Barnett consequentials. We are now in a farcical and hugely disrespectful position, as the UK Government seek the Scottish Government’s help in implementing projects selected by the UK Government in devolved areas.

Part 1 of the Bill must be radically reformed so that devolved Governments take the lead in any levelling-up investment in devolved areas, which is what they were elected to do. Just as the Scottish Government took the lead with EU investment, they must also be allowed their legitimate democratic place with levelling-up funding. That will avoid duplication of spending and inefficiency, and will also focus levelling-up priorities and missions on devolved strategies and plans. Setting councils against each other and cutting out the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament will deliver no coherent strategic vision for Scotland and her priorities. The other areas of the Bill that impinge on devolved competences, in parts 3, 5 and 10, also require legislative consent motions from the Scottish Parliament. Consultation is not enough. The Scottish Parliament must have democratic responsibility for devolved matters, as it has been elected to do.

My SNP colleagues and I are not impressed by the Bill, which could be a metaphor for this whole Tory Government. It is mere smoke and mirrors; it will not do what it says on the tin; all attempts to hold it to independent scrutiny and accountability have been rejected; the goalposts can be moved and targets changed when they are missed, suggesting that failure is baked into its very core; and it is a blunt instrument to attack devolved powers. The Government can trumpet this Bill all they

like, but it is doomed to deliver nothing of any substance to the areas of Scotland and the rest of the UK that desperately need levelling up. Like this Tory Government, no one trusts it, no one is fooled by it, and it will undoubtedly let people down.

3 pm

Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): A friend of mine, while raising money for Shelter, the housing charity, ran the London marathon dressed as a house. In view of the quite serious injuries he sustained while doing that, it was perhaps not the wisest decision, but he was making a point. On the side of the house were painted the words “Home is everything”, and indeed it is, particularly for those who do not have one. Our country has a growing population, an ageing housing stock and a younger generation who have been almost entirely priced out of home ownership and for whom even renting a home costs far too high a proportion of their income. We need to build new homes.

The reason I am delighted to support the Second Reading of the Bill today, including its proposals for strengthening the planning system, is that it offers the best chance we have had for many years to improve what is an unacceptable and deeply flawed system. We currently have a serious problem. In 1995, two thirds of people between 18 and 34 were homeowners with a mortgage. The proportion is now just one in five. The Government observed in their February 2017 White Paper, “Fixing our broken housing market”, that the housing shortage was not a looming crisis, stating:

“We’re already living in it”

and noting that it was

“a problem that won’t solve itself”.

A gap has opened up between the places we want to see and those we actually create. Instead of beauty and a natural order in our new housing, we see a sterile sameness almost everywhere we look. The consequences are stark: most new housing is opposed most of the time, and in no other period in our history would housing be thought of as pollution. I understand why there is so much opposition. One witness in the housing review I did for the Prime Minister last year commented that

“the planning system rewards mediocrity”,

and people are entirely right to object to mediocrity.

We do not do enough to protect our beautiful countryside; nor do we insist on land reuse as a default starting point. Instead of the new housing that most people want, we have a soulless monoculture. The clunky and inconsistently applied methods for taxing land value uplift mean that we do not see the timely and right-sized improvements in physical and social infrastructure that we need, whether that is schools, doctors surgeries or strong sewerage systems. Most fundamentally of all, the wishes and interests of customers are barely considered. Indeed, for the very item on which customers spend the largest proportion of their incomes—their homes—they hold the least consumer power. That is intellectually indefensible.

There is a solution, and it involves creating the conditions in which customers are treated as if they matter the most, rather than for the most part scarcely mattering at all. More people want to build their own homes than to buy new ones. Research by the Home Builders Federation indicates that only 33% of people would consider buying

[Richard Bacon]

a new build home, while research by the Nationwide Building Society indicates that between 53% and 61% of people would like to commission their own home at some point in their lives. For the under-34 age group, the figure is 80%.

If we genuinely want to see a solution to England's housing problems, we must remove the risks around infrastructure—a proper public function—and create more certainty around planning so that the system is predictable, as should happen anyway in a rules-based system. We need permissioned and serviced plots to be readily available everywhere, and then allow consumers to make real choices. Moreover, there is clear evidence that consumers with free choices commission much greener houses with much lower running costs. Increasing consumer choice will therefore assist the Government in meeting their climate change commitments, which will not be met without significant changes in how we build houses. In conclusion, this Bill offers a real opportunity to deliver important changes and I am pleased to support it.

3.4 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The principle of levelling up is absolutely right, and it is one that is shared across the House. We have one of the most unequal countries by geography, and one of the most centralised. Both of those issues need addressing. However, the two fundamentals to addressing them are missing from the Bill. First, where is the money? Individual pots of money adding up to a few billion pounds are not going to do it. We need to see a commitment from the Government to actually change the way in which whole departmental budgets are spent. Why is it right that we spend 10 times as much per head on public transport in the south-east as we do in Yorkshire? That is a question the Government need to answer.

I asked the Secretary of State if he could point to any new powers in the Bill that would be available to councils and Mayors. It was clear from his answer that he could not do so, because there are none. He reverted back to saying that there would be discussions between Mayors, combined authorities and the Government as the initial devolution measures that the Government introduced under the coalition were brought in. Why are we back to individual negotiations? Why do we not have a right, through a devolution framework, to powers for all local authorities to access? That is something that we on the Select Committee have asked for, but it is not in the Bill.

Initially we were told that we were going to have a levelling up Bill with some planning powers incorporated into it. What we actually have is a planning Bill with a levelling up wraparound, because most of the serious measures in it are about planning. Some of them are probably welcome. The proposals to simplify local plans and make them accessible to local people, so that the argument can be about where we build homes at that stage rather than having rows about individual planning applications later, are welcome. Will the other measures in the Bill really do it? We are going to test that in the Select Committee. The Minister for Housing, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) is going to come to the Committee next week, and we are looking forward to seeing him. I hope he is looking forward to coming.

There are measures in the Bill that the Committee has asked for to simplify the powers available to local councils relating to compulsory purchase orders. Again, are they going to do it? Is there a real commitment to end the hope value system whereby landowners get money out of this process for doing nothing? We welcome the plans for improved environmental impact assessments, and we are going to test how they will work in practice. We welcome the increased powers of enforcement for local authorities, and I come back to a point I have mentioned before. When a developer refuses to implement the conditions given to an application that has been agreed, should that not be able to be taken into account by a local authority when the same developer puts in an application to build somewhere else? If that developer has failed at the first hurdle, why should it be given a second permission? Avant Homes, in Owlthorpe in my constituency, is an appalling developer, and there have been problems with it elsewhere as well.

The strengthening of powers over retrospective applications is also to be welcomed, but will there be an impact assessment to see whether it is really going to work? The Royal Oak, a centuries-old pub in Mosborough in my constituency, was demolished, and the developers came back months later to get permission to rebuild on the site. They are going to get a slap on the wrist, and that is not good enough. We need real powers to deter that. On the levy being implemented instead of section 106 agreements, can the Government absolutely assure us that this will not reduce the number of affordable homes being built? This will be tested at the Select Committee. We all share the ambition on levelling up, and there are some good specific measures in the Bill, including the ability for local authorities to set up local development corporations. That is another measure that is positive. However, I am really doubtful whether the specifics, particularly around planning in total, add up to a real agenda that will deliver the levelling up goal that we all want to see.

3.9 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I greatly welcome the change of tone from the Minister and Secretary of State in recent weeks; they have taken a step in the right direction, but I still want the Bill to address a number of points as it progresses.

I represent a constituency that is largely urbanised and the land that is not urbanised is green belt or parkland; it is simply not possible to meet the targets that were set out based on the 2014 census. So my first point to the Minister is that we must move away from that as being the basis for a calculation of housing numbers. We also need to move away from the inspectorate being able to simply impose national targets on a local authority; local authorities must have serious input into what the real housing needs are.

My second point is that in my area the housing needs assessments have been based on the salaries of people who work in the constituency, but in commuting areas such as mine a lot of those people do not live in the constituency; in fact many, many of my constituents work in central London and earn more. That is also a flaw in the methodology that needs to be changed.

I think there is general acceptance across these Benches that we need to set some pretty tight parameters for the inspectorate. There are too many cases of the inspectorate

doing its own thing; Ministers have been pretty clear in saying, “This is what our national policy is” on, for instance, the green belt, but all too often the inspectors simply do something different. They are there to implement policy, not to run the policy. I hope the Bill will include clear measures to make sure the inspectorate has strict parameters to work within in the future.

I would also like the Minister to take up two points in terms of the environmental sections of the Bill, one of which he is aware of. I think we have all experienced situations where somebody looking to apply for planning consent just clears a site—they rip the whole thing apart before applying for planning consent, with no thought for the ecology of the site or, frankly, the surrounding area. In doing so, they pay no attention to whether there are any vulnerable species on that site or implications for the local ecology. That must change, and I will be pushing as the Bill progresses for a provision that requires developers to do a holistic survey of the ecology and wildlife of a site and, if they identify vulnerable species, to have a plan to relocate those species. That must be an essential part of the planning application; developers simply must not be able to clear a site before going for planning consent, and they must have duties to look after the wildlife, plants and animals on that site if they are going to develop it. The Minister knows I will be pushing for that, and I hope he and the Government will take it up and introduce such a provision themselves.

We rightly focused a lot last year on better environmental practices generally and requiring each area to have nature recovery networks as we must reverse the decline of so many of our species in this country, but that must not happen in isolation from the local planning process; there must be a link between the two. Local authorities shaping a local plan must also be mindful of their plan for a nature recovery network—what needs to be done to restore the wildlife in that area and reverse the loss of species. I ask the Minister to look carefully as the Bill progresses through Committee and Report at how we can create that link in this legislation so the obligation is clear and it is put in the local plan. Local authorities are planning for housing need and there is indeed a housing need; my constituency and others around the country need more homes and all of us have a duty to work to try to ensure that those homes are delivered in the best way possible, but we must not do that at the expense of the natural world with no reference at all to what we have all been debating over the past couple of years, namely having better conservation in the UK. I ask the Minister to make that a part of the Bill as well.

3.13 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and I particularly agree with him on the need to strengthen the nature conservation provisions in the planning element of the Bill.

Levelling up has been the mantra of this Government for the last three years—it is a slogan that is emblazoned on everything they do—but many of my constituents feel left out of the levelling-up agenda, because their local public services have been decimated over the past 12 years, their health inequalities have risen, and their sense of civic pride has gone into decline as a consequence. It is jarring therefore to hear this talk of levelling-up from the same Government who have overseen the biggest decline in living standards since the 1950s.

I represent a constituency that straddles two local authorities, Tameside and Stockport, whose settlement funding has declined by 24% and 32% respectively since 2015. In 2020, some 12,900 people across these two boroughs were forced to access food banks, an increase of over 25% on the year before. That is yet another example of charity picking up the slack where Government have so catastrophically failed.

However, I want to give the Government the benefit of the doubt and believe that they do want constituencies such as mine to turn the corner. I want to genuinely support the Government in doing that. I do not want to play party politics. It does not serve my constituents well to be left in the gutter while everybody else is doing well. I want to ensure the people I am sent here to provide a voice for share in the wealth, prosperity and future of this country. But for that to happen, we need the Government to look a bit more closely at some of the measures in the Bill.

I shall give an example. A school in my constituency, Russell Scott Primary School in Denton—a school that I went to—had an extensive refurbishment. Sadly, that was botched by Carillion just six years ago. Today it is a crumbling building. The foundations are shot to pieces; the roof is not safe; the fire safety measures do not meet national planning regulations; and when we have freak weather events—which we often do in Manchester—the school floods and sewage backs up into the classrooms.

We have appealed to the Government to provide money for a rebuild, and that has fallen on deaf ears. If we cannot level up our children's future—and education is our children's future—we are letting those kids down. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council has put in a bid to the Government for emergency funding. I hope the Minister will pass my comments on to the Department for Education because true levelling up is education, it is skills, it is the kids and their future—the future of our country.

3.17 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Since 1996, 22,317 houses have been built in North Somerset compared with a target of 24,687, which shows that this is not a nimby district. However, as many colleagues will recognise, the overall figures hide enormous variability. During the years when the town of Portishead, a triumph of regeneration, was growing, we exceeded our targets by some way. Taking the period as a whole, targets were exceeded in seven years but missed in 18 years. That is a very good reason for housing planning to be considered over longer periods. Five-year housing land supply measures are nonsensical and should be dropped.

But these figures show the effect of two important factors which need to be tackled in this legislation. The first is the conflicting signals given by central Government to local authorities on planning priorities. While overall housing target numbers are given, there are simultaneous restrictions being put in place. In North Somerset, the land area is 40% green belt, 30% flood zone and 15% area of outstanding natural beauty. In my discussion with the Secretary of State, he made clear he hoped the Planning Inspectorate would take account of local authorities that had tried to balance these conflicting and sometimes contradictory factors when it comes to housing targets, but we have to go much further. We need to furnish local authorities with a clear mechanism

[Dr Liam Fox]

to net off the proportion of their land covered by things such as green belt, floodplain and AONB so that more realistic housing targets can be set, reflecting more accurately the availability of land in any one locality.

The second issue we need to tackle is land banking and build-out, which creates a Catch-22 for local authorities. Developers are given permission to build, but they do not do so. They then complain to the Planning Inspectorate that the local authority needs to give more land for housing, which creates a huge amount of uncertainty for local residents and even planning blight, but it helps to fill the developers' pockets.

Munira Wilson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Fox: I will not give way because so many colleagues want to take part.

The next issue is the green belt. The current framework has stood the test of time and represents a good balance between the values represented by green-belt policy and the need for some unavoidable development to meet local need. The village in which I live has seen two examples of redevelopment and infilling, which represents small and more acceptable development much better than the huge housing estates we have seen in other towns such as Backwell, Nailsea and Yatton in my constituency.

That brings me to my brief final point. We need to see more small developers coming into the housing market to provide much-needed competition and flexibility. I would like the Government to consider whether we can make it easier to have small developments of perhaps 30 to 40 houses, which would be much more attractive to small, new, innovative builders and much less attractive to the current dominant players in the housing market. As a matter of policy, we should introduce competition into the house building market. After all, if I remember correctly, we are a Conservative Government.

3.21 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I had looked forward to this Bill, so it is disappointing that the opportunity seems to have been missed. This feels like not a levelling-up Bill but an unambitious planning Bill. There are huge environmental, housing and planning control crises to be solved, but the Bill has not done so.

I will focus on some of the issues affecting rural communities such as mine in Cumbria and in Northumberland, Devon and Cornwall. These areas are under huge pressure. We have seen a housing crisis become a housing catastrophe over the last couple of years. I saw a story in last week's *Sunday Times* about Langdale in my constituency, where 90% of houses are second homes. Up to 80% of houses that changed hands during the pandemic went into the second home market. We have seen the collapse of the private rented sector into the holiday let sector and Airbnb. And we have seen individuals forced out of their community because there is nowhere else to go. People with jobs, and with places at the local school for their children, are having to uproot and go to places where they have none of those things because they have been kicked out.

This is having an impact across the country. Fifty per cent. fewer rentals are available across the country, but there is a 6% increase in demand. Average rents outside London are going up by more than 10%. In the last generation, buying a home was a pipe dream for most people in rural communities and elsewhere. It now appears that even renting a property is a pipe dream for many. Such properties are not available, and they are certainly not affordable. Meanwhile, planning permission is being given for buildings that do not meet net zero and without a compulsion for them to be sustainable and to meet the climate emergency.

What could and should this Bill do? It should give new powers to local authorities, national parks and local councils to prevent family homes from becoming second homes and holiday lets. We could create a separate category of planning use for second home ownership and holiday lets, as distinct from full-time, permanent dwellings. Local communities would then have the power to control what happens to their housing stock.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. At the very least, the Bill should match what the European structural funds were doing. Those funds dwarf the paltry levelling-up fund. Some people would call this Bill a subsidy from less well off areas to better off areas.

Tim Farron: I agree. Rural communities such as mine are being completely overlooked, in terms of both funding and the powers we are demanding to tackle these huge problems.

In planning, enforcing affordability in perpetuity is crucial. In this country, we seem to give planning permission and to build for demand, not need. In places such as the lakes, the dales, Cumbria, Cornwall and Devon, any house that is built will sell, but will it meet local need? No, it will not. This Bill does not give us the powers to enforce affordability in perpetuity. It does so little to build in nature recovery, which is vital to our communities and to any new developments.

The Bill also does nothing to give planning authorities, national parks and local authorities the power to enforce planning conditions. If a developer starts work on a field for which it has been given planning permission to build houses—they may have been told to build 25% or 30% affordable housing, which is not enough in the first place—and finds a few more rocks than it says it expected, it can use a viability assessment to go back to the drawing board. The developer can then say, "We don't need to provide you with any affordable homes at all, and the Government will back us up." That has happened in Allithwaite in my constituency and elsewhere. Let us give communities real power.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I will continue. I am aware of the time, and other people want to speak.

The enforcement of conditions is vital, and we need to stop developers getting away with using viability assessments to take the mickey out of local communities, which is totally and utterly unacceptable, as is the fact that planning departments are denuded of staff and resources. Even the conditions we have are therefore not enforceable.

The Bill also lacks any support for public transport in rural communities. Cumbria got nothing from Bus Back Better, despite making a perfectly good bid. Why? Apparently because there is an emphasis on bus lanes. The country roads of Cumbria have only one lane, so there is no room for a bus lane. That shows the bias against rural communities such as Cumbria, Northumberland, Devon and Cornwall in the distribution of funding. There is also a lack of investment in internet connectivity. In areas such as ours, small business is king, so we need to support internet connectivity.

Listening to the Secretary of State, the Bill sounded like Roosevelt's new deal. Instead, it is more like Major's cones hotline. It is a massive disappointment.

3.26 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There is much in the Bill that I welcome, such as digitising the planning system, tackling land banking and enforcing planning controls. I also welcome the important omission of the growth zone proposals that were in the "Planning for the Future" White Paper. These zones would have removed local input on what is built in areas designated for growth. I campaigned strongly against them, and I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for killing them off.

There are other measures that urgently need to be added to the Bill because, as it stands, it does not curb the powers of the Planning Inspectorate, it has no new protections for greenfield sites and it does not reduce or disapply housing targets. Excessive housing targets are creating ever greater pressure on elected local councillors to approve applications that amount to overdevelopment. Where committees turn down such proposals, they are at risk of being overturned on appeal.

Targets remain very high, even after the Government's climbdown on the so-called "mutant algorithm." The Bill's focus on better design does not resolve these issues. Loss of precious green space remains problematic even if what is built on it is well designed. A block of flats is still a block of flats no matter how tastefully it is presented.

In one respect, as we have heard already today, the Bill worsens the problems that Back-Bench colleagues and I have been highlighting about the erosion of local control over planning. Clauses 83 and 84 empower the Secretary of State to set development management policies at a national level, which will override local plans.

Munira Wilson *rose*—

Theresa Villiers: I am sorry, but I am unable to give way.

This radical change departs from a long-established planning principle that primacy should be given to elected councillors making decisions in accordance with their local plan. Management policies of this kind are at the heart of almost all planning decisions, covering matters as crucial as character, tall buildings, affordable housing and protection of open spaces. Removing from councils the power to set these management policies will severely weaken democratic control of the planning process. Development management policies form a bulwark of defence against inappropriate development. Centralised control would almost inevitably force councils to approve

many applications that they would previously have rejected. These clauses amount to an aggressive power grab by the centre, and I hope they will be dropped.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Would a community right of appeal not be a good addition to what my right hon. Friend is setting out in terms of other types of rights?

Theresa Villiers: Yes, I think we should seriously consider that.

The Secretary of State seems to accept the need for some rebalancing between councils and the Planning Inspectorate. The policy paper published with the Bill proposes to remove the requirement for authorities to have a rolling five-year land supply for housing, where their plan is up to date. That could be helpful, but it is impossible to say without more detail. The proposal is not in the Bill and even if implemented, it probably would not apply to areas already in the process of updating their new plan. So any impact probably would not be felt for several years, by which time many greenfield sites could have been lost.

I therefore appeal to Ministers to seize the opportunity presented in this Bill to restore the powers of locally elected councillors to determine what is built in their neighbourhood, by scrapping the mandatory housing targets which have been undermining those powers. We must stop these targets, and the five-year land supply obligations they impose, from being used as a weapon by predatory developers to inflict overdevelopment on unwilling communities. Once they go under the bulldozer, our green fields are lost forever. Once suburban areas such as Chipping Barnet are built over by high-rise blocks of flats, their character is profoundly changed forever. Please let this Government not be the ones who permanently blight our environment with overdevelopment. Please let us amend and strengthen the Bill so that we clip the wings of an overmighty Planning Inspectorate, restore the primacy of local decision making in planning and safeguard the places in which our constituents live.

3.31 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I think that what unites us across the House is an ambition to avoid the postcode where someone is born defining their possibilities in life. I think that that is something we share, but it is the reality for too many of the people we represent. We now live in a country where it takes five generations for the heirs of someone born in the lowest income group to rise up and even earn national average wages. That is a complete scandal. Social mobility has broken down in this country, and this Bill should have stepped up to address our ambition.

I wish to say two things by way of my contribution. First, as a former Chief Secretary who drove through the Total Place initiative and someone who has spent 20 years working on devolution—as the Minister knows, there are centralisers and localisers on both sides of this House, and I am resolutely a localiser—I am convinced that the inequalities in this country will be impossible to eradicate unless we create the freedom for local regions to begin developing their own institutions. They should be robust enough to mobilise and co-ordinate the demand and supply sides of ideas and innovation, capital and investment and land, and crucially, to intervene in the

[Liam Byrne]

labour market. We will continue to fail until local regions have the power to set up radical university enterprise zones, like the Fraunhofer, to translate innovation into the private sector; regional banks; regional land trusts; and local commissions on skills and enterprise. However, there are a few steps we could take now to drive this forward.

First, we have to take the 149 different local spending programmes which, together, have in them £65 billion, spread between eight different Departments, and put them into block grants for local areas. We have the most ridiculous centralisation at the moment as a result of having to bid against different criteria for 149 different programmes. We have to take a Total Place approach to pooling public spending—crucially, Department for Work and Pensions spending, as well as that of Department for Education and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We should go further and create full-time regional Ministers in government and full-time regional Select Committees in this House. Crucially, we have to fix the gross imbalances in public spending that mean that spending per capita in London is 70 points higher than it is in the west midlands.

Secondly, as chair of the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Taskforce, I can say that East Birmingham is a city the size of Derby, that it is the land between the two high-speed stations, but that it is also the capital of Britain's unemployment. The potential is enormous, because of the new jobs that will be created by High Speed 2, but we have to make sure that we are not the oasis of inequality in between that wealth. That is why Bridgid Jones, the Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council, has today written to Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, to ask that we make East Birmingham the key focus of the west midlands trailblazer devolution deal. We have a number of asks. We want to see: multi-year whole place public funding—pooling budgets between the Department for Work and Pensions and others; a levelling-up zone that would give us tax increment financing, potentially for a new urban development corporation; net zero powers; support for early intervention and preventive work, particularly in health; an enhanced transport package that would allow us to see our metro built through East Birmingham; a lot more funding for schools and for skills; tailored employment support; and greater housing powers.

We would love the Minister to meet a delegation from Birmingham along with the east Birmingham MPs in order to discuss this devolution deal in more detail. I am confident that we will also have the support of the Mayor of the West Midlands, too.

3.35 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy)—she is not in her place but will be coming back very shortly—but I have to say that her speech was pretty dire, her allegations silly, and her withdrawal pretty mealy-mouthed. For the record, for those on the Labour Front Bench, and for anyone else who wants to listen, I make no apology for persuading the Government to treat the Isle of Wight like every other island in the UK. The Island is the most under-represented place in this country. I have twice as many constituents. We are separated by

sea from the mainland, and I have to fight three times as hard to get any Government to listen to me. I make no apologies for speaking with passion and determination, and I make no apologies for fighting tooth and nail.

I shall tell those on the Labour Front Bench something else: we were not in the first round of levelling up, but by last December we were. We are now getting a new crane for Wight Shipyard, which means dozens of apprenticeships, and I am proud of that. If Labour Members want to insinuate anything about that, they are welcome to do so. I have one final piece of advice before I go on to the real issues here: the reason why there are so many of us here, not only in this debate, but in this House, is that, perhaps, we have a reputation for delivering for our folks. That is something that the Labour party may want to take into account. Anyway, that is almost a minute and a half of my life that I will not get back, so I shall now move on to the substance of the Bill.

The presentation of Tory MPs saying, “No, no, no!” to change is not true. We see the hundreds of thousands of unbuilt permissions and we worry. We know our youngsters cannot get on to the housing ladder and we worry. We see the loss of landscape in my patch celebrated by Tennyson, Turner, Keats and many others, and we worry. We see lazy developers relying on greenfield sites and we worry. We want the system to change. What we do not want is a system that keeps on giving to developers who give nothing back, who pocket development and then say, “More, please” like some inverted *Oliver Twist*. What we want is people who deliver for our communities and also for the nation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bob Seely: I would rather not give way as I have only one minute—

Munira Wilson *rose*—

Bob Seely: Okay, I give way.

Munira Wilson: I know the hon. Gentleman was desperate to get an extra minute. He is making a really impassioned speech and I agree with much of what he has said so far. He mentioned developers snapping up greenfield sites. In my constituency, the local community rose up to protect a site called Udney Park Playing Fields in Teddington, and thanks to a legal challenge it is now protected green space. The developer, however, will not now sell the site back to the community despite a good bid to turn it into playing fields, because they paid over the odds and they will wait years and years until planning policy changes. Meanwhile, the site is going to rack and ruin. Do we not need powers to tackle that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need short interventions, because there are many people who wish to speak.

Bob Seely: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. She will probably have to wait 10 to 15 years. There will be a form of planning blight on that land. We have the same with an awful development on my patch called Pennyfeathers, which I wish had never been built. I wish the Secretary of State or, indeed, the wonderful Minister

for Housing, had the powers to say no to it; we could go back to having a vineyard and green fields there, as there should be.

I am very supportive of my colleagues on the Conservative Benches who have made speeches this afternoon, but let me turn briefly to amendments. Targets are the bane of so many of my colleagues. They need to be advisory, not mandatory, and I remind the Government that neighbourhood plan areas tend to say yes to more developments because they get the chance to shape them. If we do not feel that developments are being shoved down our throats, and that we can shape them more, the Government will have greater success.

The Secretary of State has heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) and others about the pernicious loopholes, the vandalism of sites of special scientific interest and the way people corruptly game the system. Why is character not grounds for opposing development? Why can we not shut down those loopholes that do such damage to our countryside, national parks and AONBs?

I know this is not a tax Bill, but fundamentally we need to find an effective way of changing the economics from greenfield to brownfield sites, so that the half a million or a million properties on brownfield sites are developed. We also have a second homes problem, not only on the Island but in Cornwall, the lake district and other areas. We need to respect property rights, but communities in my patch such as Seaview, Bembridge and Yarmouth must not become Potemkin villages that are empty for much of the year. We must have a community that stays there.

There will be a series of amendments to the Bill, and I assure the Minister they will be as supportive as they can be, but I will finish with something close to my heart: compulsory purchase. I want the Government to give more powers to councils for compulsory purchase. In Sandown, a town in my patch, a Mr Steven Purvis owns the Ocean Hotel and is fighting forced redevelopment tooth and nail. Nick Spyker owns the Grand Hotel in Sandown. Those places sit empty year in, year out.

Sandown is crying out for investment. The Island cannot afford owners who, for whatever reason, keep those properties as empty eyesores, damaging our communities, our public health and our economy. We must ensure that our councils have the power to say to people such as Purvis and Spyker, “Invest, or jog on.” There will be a lot of amendments to this Bill, many of them supportive, but we need to get a grip and we need to drive development and levelling-up forward.

3.41 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The purpose of power is to bring transformation, with transformation of communities delivering transformation of life chances. When we get that moment to bring forward legislation to tackle the burning injustices perpetuated throughout our communities, where 14.5 million people live in poverty, one third of them children, we expect Government to make the bold interventions to ensure that everyone has a sustainable home to call their own; that public land is used for public good, delivering the homes people need and can afford to live in, rather than seeing investors further their wealth; and that we build houses and high streets together to ensure that the local community is served.

I welcome the opportunity to auction off empty units to ensure that our high streets become vibrant again, and I urge the Government to look further at ensuring that spaces above shops are utilised, not just for business, but for start-ups, creatives and social enterprises and as incubator and accelerator spaces, such as those the University of York is investing in. The Government have failed to level up power between communities and vested interests in this Bill, or to provide the framework to shift the entrenched planning injustices and tilt planning towards the needs of our communities. With this Bill, we still have landowners marking time against profits and developers continuing to extract wealth from investments while denying house seekers the right to a home.

That brings me to the challenge before us. We need to get the pecking order right with housing, putting social housing at the heart of what needs to be developed, and then bringing on affordable housing so that house seekers can have the home they long for. That is what Nye Bevan did when he developed his “homes fit for heroes”, putting the power in the hands of municipal authorities and giving them the permissions and powers to build. We must learn from that in order to build to need again. I think everyone in this debate ultimately wants to ensure that we get the right tenure, in the right places, at the right price for our communities. This Bill simply does not tick that box, so we know there is more to come in terms of amendments to the Bill to make sure that that happens.

Without having value defined in the infrastructure levy, it is hard to assess the benefit it will bring. I trust that the Minister will say more about that. Take York-based Persimmon: last year it generated £3.61 billion in revenue and made just shy of £1 billion in pre-tax profits. A robust levy must demand more from those large developers, so that those who make the greatest profits contribute the most, whereas small developers have greater opportunities to grow their businesses. We need to capacity-build as well as to see a strong social return. The problem is that when addressing housing need, the Government start with numbers, not numbers combined with tenure. Their starting point is therefore market value housing, which house seekers simply cannot afford. In my city of York, we are seeing those homes turning into second homes and Airbnbs, stripping out the opportunity for people to have a home they can call their own. We need to ensure that this Bill also addresses the scourge of Airbnbs, which are shooting up everywhere.

If the starting point is first to build social housing to meet needs and ensure that house seekers get the homes that they need, this Bill will do its job. At the moment, it needs further revision, and I trust the Minister will listen to that.

3.45 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Minister knows through our many conversations about planning that there is, in my view, much to welcome in this Bill, but also much to improve. The general feeling in my constituency is that the planning system is not currently working for anybody.

Given the limited time, I will choose four quick points. I passionately believe that we have to scrap housing targets and make them advisory, and to look at ensuring that the infrastructure plans are upfront. In Stroud, we are in the invidious situation where local

[Siobhan Baillie]

people are desperately worried about the emerging local plan coming from Stroud District Council, and they feel ignored. Sharpness, Whaddon, Cam, Wisloe and Whitminster, among others, are facing thousands of new homes going into their areas, but they have no confidence that the infrastructure will be in place to assist the people who are going to live in those homes or the people already there, and so avoid chaos.

There is no confidence, unfortunately, that the council is paying attention to the consultation, and in some cases consultation responses have been lost. Any challenges to the council about bona fides issues are often met with blame for the Government targets, even when the Government say that the council has control, and the Planning Inspectorate is in the mix with all that as well. I ask that we make the housing targets advisory so that there is no confusion over who is responsible and we can do what is needed for our local areas, and that we make the infrastructure plans and infrastructure levy upfront so that we can plan properly. I hope that work is being done to look at what can be done with the Planning Inspectorate now.

On dilapidated buildings, I really welcome the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) in seeing legislation come through to deal with empty buildings that are an eyesore. We need to auction properties, as the Secretary of State said, and strengthening rules on compulsory purchase is very important. We are blessed with beautiful old mills that represent our industrial history, but also blighted with some really ugly buildings—including Tricorn House, which has dogged our area for decades. Very sadly, a young boy lost his life at the property last year, so we feel very passionately that we want to see change there.

It is obvious to me that the fastest route to change is a private sale or a private demolition; I would be very happy to press the button, if I am allowed. People locally know that I am working as hard as I possibly can to move this forward. The owner says that he is committed to selling but nothing actually happens, so it is useful for me to be able to say now that winter is coming, or at least legislation is coming.

On existing planning permissions, I was hoping for, and actually expecting, more in the Bill to deal with developments in terms of land banking and permissions that have already been given. These should be homes by now, in many cases. Communities have already gone through the pain and stress of the planning arguments, so not to see the homes go up ends up being an additional slap in the face.

On environmental matters, housing developments like the one in Great Oldbury are fabulous, wonderful homes, but even a gentleman I spoke to who is living there and loves his home agreed that new homes are being built now without solar, electric charging points or insulation, and with gas boilers, so they are likely to need to be retrofitted. Where is the mandating of developers, because I think they have probably had their chance? Let us future-proof the housing stock and stimulate the market.

Finally, I ask my right hon. Friend to look at my proposal through the all-party parliamentary group on wetlands that we implement schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. That will help with surface run-off, flooding and sewerage issues, and we can get this done without too much sweat from his Department.

3.49 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I am going to ask the question, “What does levelling up actually mean?” My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) asked the same question, and people in our communities have not got a clue what this means.

In my view, levelling up should be about people. It should be about individuals and families. We should be addressing issues in the left-behind communities, which were once proud and thriving but which have been left behind for an awful long time. It is fair to say that people believe that levelling up is purely political rhetoric—a political narrative and a political slogan—that does not mention them. Levelling up should be about tackling child poverty, pensioner poverty, fuel poverty and food bank reliance. It should be about employment opportunities, educational opportunities, health outcomes and life expectancy. It should not just be about shiny new one-off projects in towns that need a bit of a polish.

I take this opportunity to invite the Secretary of State to visit me in my constituency and witness for himself the desperate need for some sort of levelling up finance. I want him to come to Northumberland and visit Ashington and Bedlington to see the holes in the centre of those wonderful towns, which are desperate for investment but have not had any for many years. I want him to walk through the streets of Bedlington and listen to the constituents who have been pleading for leisure facilities for many, many years but have not been given any. I want to take him to the Hirst area of Ashington to see the conditions that some of its residents live in, which many people would not tolerate. They do not even have a suitable refuse collection, so there are bin liners on the streets, seagulls the size of jumbo jets, and rats right across where they live. We need investment and support for these held back communities.

I want to take the Secretary of State to Newbiggin, Morpeth, Choppington and Sleekburn, but we would need to make sure that the buses were on time, because we have not got a suitable bus service. In many of the places I have mentioned, people have to get the bus at 10 o'clock in the morning and return to the community by 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon, because otherwise the bus service is not there to assist.

I want the Secretary of State—I will call him my right hon. Friend—to come and see how people live in my constituency, because this is an extremely serious issue. It is time we used the leaps forward in modern technology and connectivity to radically rethink Whitehall. We need to make it a priority to create jobs in the places I have mentioned—real, good, solid employment opportunities with decent wages and terms and conditions, and trade union recognition. We need to stop the rhetoric and focus on reality. I say to the Secretary of State, “Come along and join me. I am sure you will enjoy it.”

3.53 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In Wokingham, there are thousands of permissions outstanding to build new homes, and thousands of new homes have been built in recent years. We do not need or want Government inspectors determining in favour of yet more homes on greenfield sites that are outside our local plan area.

I am pleased with the anger among Conservative Members about the disgrace that is the abuse of the planning system by some large development companies and rich landowners, who manage to game the system to

get extra permissions and make money out of the granting of the permission while houses go unbuilt under the legitimate permissions that have been granted. I understand that the Government agree with us, so where is the new direction to the planning inspectors to say that the Government will no longer put up with that? If a statutory instrument is needed to make that clear in law, where is the statutory instrument? As the Government have now brought forward a Bill about planning law in general, can we have a clause in the Bill that nails the issue? I do not know anyone who defends the gaming of the system in that way by rich development companies—I do not think the Labour party defends it. The Government should nail it, so please let us see the draft clause.

The Secretary of State did not answer my polite inquiry—perhaps it was too polite—about what will be done to ensure that local communities have more say and influence over how we define and calculate housing need and over the housing numbers that we think are appropriate and feasible for our area. Surely they have a right to a say in that and may have something useful to contribute to the discussion.

Infrastructure is crucial in this argument. In places such as Wokingham and West Berkshire, where I have the privilege to represent many of the people, we have seen a huge increase in development—some granted on appeal against our wishes—but no proper extra provision for infrastructure. Planners must understand that we cannot suddenly conjure up new broadband, sufficient water supply, enough cable to take the extra electricity that is required, the extra road space needed for all the extra cars, or the extra primary schools and surgeries that will be needed to cater for people.

In an area that has been subject to very fast development, as mine has, there is no excess capacity in the private sector services or the public services that are crucial to a good quality of life. It is embarrassing if planning inspectors grant permissions to build more homes and there then has to be a scramble to put in a cable big enough to take the extra power and to find private companies to organise some broadband, and of course there are the usual family arguments in the NHS and the education system to get the quite lumpy investments that are needed. All those things need to happen before the houses are opened up for people; we should not invite people into new homes that they have bought in good faith only for them to discover those pitfalls and difficulties in the provision of services.

My final point about the Bill is that I am proud to belong to a party that opposed unelected and elected regional government, and we won the argument about elected regional government in England. I would like Ministers to talk more about England, because a number of Cabinet Ministers and senior Ministers are basically England-only Ministers in practically all they do. I trust them to make some of the big calls, as long as they listen to me and my local community. We do not need regional government interjected between us and the Ministers who actually have the power and the money. Let them talk England and forget regional.

3.57 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am glad to speak as a Welsh MP after that. This Bill should be read in the light of the Public Accounts Committee report on “Local economic growth”, published today. On the levelling up fund, it states:

“principles for awarding funding were only finalised by Ministers after they knew who...would win and who would not as a result of those principles.”

That is, the decisions were taken and then the principles were established as to who would win. It also states:

“The Department also needs to demonstrate how the priorities of the devolved administrations will be addressed in the context of administering these local growth funds on a UK-wide basis.”

That is, the Government in Wales decide their own priorities, but somehow the administration of local growth funds is decided on a UK-wide basis. Many people in Wales feel that this Government have been steadily undermining devolution, and that is another example.

The Bill intrudes on devolved areas such as health, education and housing, bypassing our Senedd, which raises concerns regarding Wales. For instance, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Welsh Government regarding the levelling-up metrics? How will they be monitored to account for distinct Welsh economic and development structures? What methodology will the Government use to measure the success or failure of the metrics in Wales?

Wales has the highest levels of child poverty in the UK and high levels of disability, and we should not be disadvantaged by ill-thought-out evaluation procedures. The Westminster Government should take immediate action to address the structural causes of poverty in Wales, and I shall list just three. Research and development funding should be devolved. Per head, research and development expenditure in the east of England was £1,106 in 2019; in Wales, it was £252, which is a great difficulty for our local economy. We should be getting the £5 billion Barnett consequential owed from HS2 spending, which is provided for Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Welsh Government require greater borrowing powers to pursue proper economic development.

This Bill is just one part of the levelling-up agenda, and it cannot be divorced from the replacement of EU funding. Wales has done very poorly out of that. Not only is the funding far below what was promised, but there is no coherent strategy as to how it will be spent. We know that the funding formula for other funds, such as the shared prosperity fund, does not reflect the needs of Welsh communities. Indeed, Wales Fiscal Analysis has shown that funding for the SPF will shift money away from the west of Wales, which is poor, to the east of Wales, and will fail to address rural poverty. There is also a huge democratic deficit involved in the levelling-up approach.

The UK Government’s application of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to devolved areas has excluded the Welsh Government from decision making, which again is a very severe blow to the Government of Wales. Indeed, we all hold, as I have said, that the UK Government are busily undermining Welsh democracy, and I am afraid this Bill will continue that process.

4.1 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will answer the many questions people raise about what levelling up means. It will lead to a greater understanding that levelling up is not an action or even a series of measures, but a philosophy—a philosophy that will determine the direction of Government policy making in years to come.

[Jo Gideon]

Stoke-on-Trent Central features regularly in the national media because we have branded ourselves as the litmus test for the levelling-up agenda. Shoppers in Hanley are asked what levelling up means to them and if it has happened in the city. It is unsurprising that many focus on their immediate surroundings, and reflect on the closed shops in the high street as a sign of continued decline. So I welcome the new powers for local leaders to run high street rental auctions, in which they can auction off tenancies in shops that have been vacant for over a year. This and the use of compulsory purchase orders will help to end the plague of empty shops that blight so many high streets. I also welcome the announcement that the al fresco dining revolution will be made permanent. In the Piccadilly area of Hanley, businesses use the pavements to full advantage, creating a local hospitality hotspot through café culture.

It is time there was better understanding about the missions behind the Government's levelling-up agenda. The challenge of addressing decades of decline in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent is vast, so how do we do it and how will we know when it is done? It is rather like the old adage, "How do you eat an elephant?" We know the answer—"One bite at a time"—yet we are all hungry for change. We are impatient with the speed of reform and, as we come out of two years of firefighting a global pandemic, the hunger for transformative politics is greater than ever.

Working together with Stoke-on-Trent City Council, the Stoke-on-Trent MP trio have succeeded in making the case for massive investment to improve the city's public transport offer, as well as for the £56 million levelling-up funding, which will unlock key regeneration sites within the city. It is understandable but frustrating that major regeneration projects take time, and that people walking around the city centre will currently only see rubble and fences marking the start of the Etruscan Square project. When finished, it will provide urban living space for young professionals with hybrid working lifestyles, and an e-sports arena to build on our Silicon Stoke ambitions. Fences also mark the goods yard project, which will provide a quality living, retail and hospitality offer canal-side and near the mainline station. However, those ambitious projects cannot be delivered overnight, and the original plans will need adjusting because of a number of factors outside the council's control such as the rate of inflation and the co-operation of key partners such as Network Rail and First Buses.

In fact, it cannot be right that in the same month that Stoke-on-Trent has secured £31 million for a bus improvement plan, the local bus company has decided to cut back bus provision in Abbey Hulton in my constituency, where many residents are dependent on the service to access work. In Stoke-on-Trent, one in three households is without a car, so bus provision is a vital lifeline. Public transport is a public service that must address residents' needs, and Government support must require that commitment from private sector partners.

Given the time limit, it is not possible to cover the entirety of the Bill, so I close by reaffirming my commitment to support the Government in their plans to tackle health and education inequalities so that my residents in Stoke-on-Trent Central have the same opportunities

as people in more affluent parts of the country. Levelling-up means creating the right conditions for everyone to live a long, healthy, productive life—in short, to thrive.

4.5 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In my constituency, levelling-up is more than just a buzzword. Communities like mine have borne the full brunt of 12 years of the Conservative Government's austerity agenda and a chronic lack of investment. Forgive me if I do not trust the very same party when it claims that it is the one to fix the mess that it has made.

Let us look at what the Government have done to council funding. Local authorities are the backbone of our society, delivering the services that people rely on every single day. Levelling up will be achieved only if our local authorities are empowered with the investment they need to deliver for their communities, but their funding has been cut to the bone by the Conservatives. Sheffield City Council has seen its central Government grant cut by more than £3 billion in real terms since 2010. That inevitably means that budgets are being stretched thinner and thinner, and my constituents are left to deal with the consequences. Speaking of budgets being stretched, the cost of living crisis means that families are having to cut back even further to make ends meet, but the Government have turned their back on them. In my constituency, the claimant count is almost double the national average. It was therefore a hammer blow when, last year, the Government callously slashed universal credit by £20 a week. Not only that but they scrapped the triple lock on pensions, leaving households with impossible choices to make.

Government Members may be quick to point out subsequent rises in universal credit and the state pension this year, but they are a drop in the ocean compared to the high levels of inflation, which are putting more and more pressure on household budgets. We cannot level up when people are still being pushed into a never-ending cycle of poverty. Decisions were made in a very different economic climate, and inflation has now sky-rocketed to a 40-year high. If the Government are serious about levelling up, they must revisit their cuts, which have taken money out of people's pockets at a time when the cost of everyday essentials is spiralling out of control.

When these issues have been put to Ministers, they have constantly stuck to the line that high-paid jobs are the solution, but, under the Government's watch, work is no longer a reliable route out of poverty. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that the proportion of families in poverty where at least one adult is working is at an all-time high. Those figures are the culmination of the Government standing back for more than a decade while low pay and insecure work became more and more prevalent in our economy.

The truth is that we have a Government too distracted by scandals of their own making to focus on delivering the changes that the country needs. The never-ending soap opera of the Prime Minister means that, for communities like mine, levelling-up is seen as merely an afterthought.

My constituents have concluded that the Government simply do not care about them and their everyday struggles. In 2019, the Prime Minister visited Sheffield and delivered a promise to level up every corner of

the UK, but let us look at what has happened since. Independent analysis shows that, by the Government's own 12 levelling-up metrics, my constituency has fallen even further behind. The South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority has big ambitions for the area, but they are being held back by the Government. The Mayor made a detailed £474 million bid for a bus service improvement plan that truly would have helped to level up the region, but it was rejected by the Government. That is perhaps not a surprise when we consider the fact that the funding available under that specific scheme came to just over £1 billion, despite £3 billion being initially promised.

The Government are going nowhere near far enough to truly level up constituencies like mine. What we need is bold action, but the Bill, in its current form, is simply more empty rhetoric.

4.10 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I very much welcome the aims and missions of the Bill on education, skills, health and wellbeing, transport connectivity and closing gaps in opportunity. Levelling up is a key priority for the Government and a key priority for me representing a rural constituency. I am passionate that rural areas are looked after by the levelling-up agenda and recently held an Adjournment debate on that very issue.

Transport access is pivotal in levelling up. Unfortunately, in 2014, Cumbria County Council took the decision to stop using central Government moneys to subsidise commercial bus services. That led to a reduction in services. Last year, Cumbria received £1.5 million from the rural mobility fund, but this year it did not receive anything. I am concerned that the funding system needs to be looked at. Central Government and local government need to work together to produce better services. We have fantastic volunteer services in Cumbria—the Fellrunner, the Border Rambler—but we need people to work together.

I have been working closely with Alston Moor Federation of schools to see what can be done to improve transport access. Pupils and teachers tell me that, basically, students are being disincentivised to go to the next stage of their education because of the lack of transport facilities. That is not levelling up; that is really unfair. There are similar themes in other schools in my constituency, including in William Howard School, Ullswater Community College and Nelson Thomlinson School to name just a few. Students are having to drive themselves on challenging rural roads or rely on families, and are sometimes taking the life-changing decision not to go to the next stage of their education. The Government have, quite rightly, said that people need to be in education up until the age of 18, but the discretion is with the local authorities as to what level of transport is available for post-16. I really urge the Government to put a duty on local authorities to look after people post-16, so they can get to the next stage of their lives. I have raised the issue with various Government Departments, but we really need to get central Government working with local government to improve the life chances of our young people.

Digital connectivity is absolutely paramount in the levelling-up agenda. I have been calling for better broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural Cumbria, as have

colleagues across the House for their parts of the country. I firmly believe that part of levelling up has to mean physical and virtual connectivity, so again I urge people to work together.

Along those lines, local government restructuring has presented some challenges for rural Cumbria. I am concerned that there is inertia—lack of grant applications, lack of decision making—as we have new authorities coming in. I urge people to work together to ensure that public services can still be delivered. I again ask the Department to allow parish councils to be able to meet in virtual or hybrid formats, so that local decision making can be made in isolated communities, too.

We have heard about housing from many colleagues. In my part of the world, the second home issue is at crisis point. People are being priced out of their local communities and are unable to live in their own communities. I am pleased that the Government have moved on that issue, closing some of the council tax loopholes, and that the Bill looks at increasing costs on second homes, but we really do need more affordable housing for our local area, so that people can get on to the next stage of their lives.

Furthermore, in terms of levelling up our communities, we need equality of access to all our healthcare services. I feel passionately that we need equality on rural mental health for people to be able to access services and that is part of the levelling-up agenda, too.

4.13 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): There can be no levelling up in the UK until there is a restoration of funding for the public services on which we all rely. Conservative Governments since 2010 have decimated funding to local authorities. Central Government funding for Wirral Council dropped 85% between 2010 and 2020. The impact on our communities is devastating. As a result, in Wirral West the future of libraries in Hoylake, Irby, Pensby and Woodchurch is uncertain, as is the future of Woodchurch leisure centre and swimming pool. Far from levelling up, the loss of those facilities means the running down and impoverishment of the lives of everyone who relies on the services. How short-sighted of the Government to ignore the importance of libraries, pools and leisure centres.

There can be no levelling up until the Government provide building blocks for educational progression for adults in all communities. The Learning and Work Institute highlighted that more than 9 million adults have low literacy or numeracy skills, 13 million have low digital skills and more than 850,000 people say that they cannot speak English well or at all, yet the number of adults taking classes to improve their skills has fallen significantly in recent years. Those numbers are stark, yet the Government have failed to understand how important such provision is for levelling up opportunity across the country.

There can be no levelling up when around 4 million children are living in poverty and the cost of living crisis is threatening to push many more into poverty. Why does the Bill not address food insecurity? Between April 2021 and March 2022, 2.1 million emergency food parcels were given to people in crisis by food banks in the Trussell Trust network.

[Margaret Greenwood]

There can be no levelling up for all generations if the Government repeatedly fail to act on the climate crisis. They should ban fracking and underground coal gasification once and for all. Instead, they have commissioned the British Geological Survey to advise on the latest scientific evidence around shale gas extraction. We do not need a review to know that fracking is not the answer to our energy needs. Exploring the extraction of fossil fuels is an absurd and irresponsible response to the climate crisis. As Greenpeace UK said, the Government should stop

“pandering to fracking obsessives who aren’t up to speed with the realities of 21st century energy”.

The Better Planning Coalition, a group of 27 organisations across the housing, planning, environmental, transport and heritage sectors, said that

“the current proposals for new Environmental Outcome Reports give far too much leeway to Ministers to amend and replace vital aspects of environmental law.”

The coalition is concerned that those

“powers could be used to weaken essential safeguards for nature”.

It believes:

“Any new environmental assessment system should be set out in primary legislation, not in secondary...and clearly deliver for nature, climate, cultural heritage and landscape.”

The recent announcement by Leverhulme Estate that it has submitted planning applications to build 788 homes on the green belt in Wirral is a matter of real concern, as local residents and campaigners have made clear to me. The Government must introduce much stronger protection for the green belt. It is incredibly important for the health and wellbeing of people who live nearby and has an important part to play in our response to the climate and ecological emergency, supporting habitats for wildlife and allowing nature to flourish.

In conclusion, the Government are failing to provide our communities with the public services and facilities that they need; failing to tackle the crisis in adult literacy that is leaving many unable to realise their potential; failing to tackle poverty; and letting down both this and future generations on the environment. Put simply, the Government’s levelling-up Bill fails to deliver.

4.17 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Bill focuses on three things that are close to my heart and the hearts of many Members: levelling up, democracy and devolution. If anybody wants a symbol of what can be achieved through the levelling-up fund, they should look no further than at what is happening in Kings Square in the heart of Gloucester. In what was the Debenhams department store will arise, by September next year, a new teaching campus for the University of Gloucestershire, bringing 5,000 students, 300 staff and the revitalisation of retail. That enterprise will be able to train people in health and teaching skills, thereby bringing huge help to our hospital and schools. So yes, the Bill is hugely important.

A big part of the Bill documentation is about planning. One thing that I would like to highlight there is the ability of councils to be creative in compulsory purchase orders. There are two examples on the streets of Gloucester: the ex-Colwell College on Derby Road and the Pall Mall Investments building on London Road, both of

which are giant eyesores plagued with litter and antisocial behaviour. They are a symbol not of levelling up, but of what cannot be done because of not having the powers to enforce that these buildings should be brought back to productive use. I am all in favour of the clauses in the Bill that allow for better compulsory purchase.

There is one aspect of the Bill that needs to be highlighted. Unfortunately, the new class of combined county authority in the Bill, as it is currently worded, takes away from a consent section in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. That section only allowed district council functions to be transferred with consent, whereas clause 16 of the Bill does not require the consent of district councils—second-tier councils; borough, city or district—that cannot be constituent parts of the CCA. Ministers tell me that it is not their intention for districts to be stripped of powers, but I believe that the Bill can do that, and so does the District Councils’ Network. I hope that the Minister will give a reassurance in his summing up that the Bill Committee will look very closely at the issue and ensure that a new combined county council cannot take away powers from a district council without its consent. We should be devolving down, not up. We should be creating new authorities with consent, not fiat. We should be reinforcing democracy, not taking it away from two-tier councils through unintended stealth clauses.

This is particularly relevant to small cities, because if cities such as Gloucester lose powers to combined county authorities, they would be the losers. We would have less say about our future and fewer representatives to work with community groups, and the outcomes in terms of local pride would invariably be exactly the opposite of those intended by the levelling-up Bill.

By contrast, a well-focused city council, with responsibility for its own future, is delivering, through the levelling-up fund, the brownfield site fund and the shared prosperity fund, and has further ambitions for another key part of our city centre. We will be doing our bit to achieve the goals that the Secretary of State and his Ministers share. But that is not all, because there are changes happening through multi-academy trusts, the use of diocese land, and the achievements of our university and college in the skills agenda. Be in no doubt that levelling up is happening, but let it not be at the expense of second-tier councils, and let us ensure that the Bill allows us all, however small our authority, to achieve what we want.

4.21 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The Government’s levelling-up White Paper states:

“While talent is spread equally across our country, opportunity is not. Levelling up is a mission to challenge, and change, that unfairness.”

I want to talk about an unfairness that is at the heart of inequality in the UK, and why I think the Bill lacks the ambition to address it.

There is a housing crisis in Britain, and my city is at the sharp end of it. In 2021, there were 21,615 households on Sheffield’s housing waiting list. Between 2020 and 2021, nearly 3,000 Sheffield households were made homeless or threatened with homelessness. Sheffield has also experienced one of the largest increases in annual rental demands in the country. From 2020 to 2021,

there was a 46% increase in the number of private renters claiming housing benefit to help pay the rent. A 2019 Sheffield and Rotherham housing market assessment found that, in 13 of the 19 areas in our region, one third of all households were priced out of private renting altogether. After 12 years of stagnating wages and savage cuts to our local services, and now soaring inflation, the situation is getting far worse, not better.

Without action to tackle the housing crisis, the words “levelling up” will ring hollow to many of my constituents and the 17.5 million people across the UK who are also affected. The failure to invest in good-quality, genuinely affordable social homes lies at the root of their problems and at the root of the housing emergency, so surely that is where the Government should start.

But that is not what the Bill proposes. Rather than mandate for a boom in affordable and social rents, the proposal for an infrastructure levy only guarantees that affordable housing will be built at the same rate as it is now. But the status quo clearly is not working. Between 2015 and 2020, there was a net loss of more than 1,500 social homes in Sheffield. Only 229 new homes could be built by the local authority, and 1,800 were lost through right to buy. Our city council is ambitious and has embarked on a programme to build more than 3,000 new council homes by 2029 but, without proper support, that will not be enough to tackle Sheffield’s housing emergency.

The conditions in the Government’s affordable homes programme have made building good-quality social housing in Sheffield almost impossible. Until 2021, geographical restrictions stopped us from receiving funding altogether, despite the great waiting lists that we have. Even though Sheffield is now eligible, the way in which money is allocated is still producing problems. To ration a small national pot of money, the Government have mandated that schemes with the cheapest cost per home be prioritised. Delivering good-quality, environmentally friendly, disability-accessible social homes is often not possible because they cost more to build than other types of affordable housing. Social housing should and could be a source of quality, innovation and even excitement for our communities, but the programme bakes in a lack of ambition for the delivery of our housing stock. We should be providing families with a home, the asylum for so many people. People cannot get on in life if they do not have access to good-quality housing. That is a fact that we need to acknowledge and take seriously, but the Bill does nothing to address it or to address the rapid decline in affordable housing. What Sheffield needs to level up is a plan to build good-quality affordable social homes, but, as ever with this Government, what we have is a wasted opportunity and more of the same.

I did not expect to come here today and hear light entertainment from Government Members, but I have to say that I am pleased that the Secretary of State seems to have given up on his ambitions to audition for—[HON. MEMBERS: “Time!”] My apologies. I will stop.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Would the hon. Lady like to finish?

Olivia Blake: It is fine—don’t worry. They don’t want to hear it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Angela Richardson.

4.26 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will be delighted to know that I will stick to my time.

I welcome this much-awaited Bill. Levelling up opportunity everywhere is recognised by everyone I speak to in my Guildford constituency as a worthwhile and honourable mission of this Government. Although Surrey County Council was not included in the pilot county deals that have been announced, we need to see Surrey in phase 2 to tackle deprivation in Surrey and accelerate our own levelling-up programme.

Of the four areas in Surrey that fall within the bottom 20% of the national index of multiple deprivation, two—the wards of Westborough and Stoke—are in my constituency. Some of the adjacent wards have a life expectancy differential of up to 10 years, and there is a 14-year gap between wards in highest and lowest life expectancy for women. In the areas worst affected, more than 40% of children are impacted by income deprivation; the associated features include malnourishment, housing instability, low educational attainment and mental health disorders. We are levelling up healthcare with the new GP provision that my local clinical commissioning group plans in deprived wards, but I am concerned that we are losing local access nearby. Levelling up should not take away.

While we wait for more powers to be devolved to Surrey, my local enterprise partnership—the M3 LEP, which will see its long-term future integrated into local democracy under the Bill—needs an interim plan. It continues to provide vital support to business and our local economy to stimulate growth through innovation and enterprise. Guildford and Surrey more widely continue to be a net contributor to the Exchequer, but growth is slowing. We want to do our bit to help to level up the rest of the country, but we need continued investment, both private and public, to do so.

I welcome some of the Bill’s planning measures, including digitisation of the process, powers to deal with vacant properties on our high street, and a real focus on delivering infrastructure. Infrastructure is a genuine frustration for my residents, who have seen local plans that will deliver a high number of homes through massive strategic sites on green belt and an additional town centre masterplan with densification. Local residents worry about the Wokingisation of Guildford, which does not suit its topography, let alone its historical beauty.

I have concerns about the Bill, but they have already been addressed by many right hon. and hon. Members; I encourage my constituents to go back through *Hansard* and read those concerns. I am particularly concerned that there are no additional measures to protect greenfield in the Waverley part of my constituency. That greenfield is often more pristine, beautiful and remote from existing infrastructure than green-belt provision that we are trying to protect.

Finally on infrastructure, in order to level up in Guildford, we need to tunnel down. The A3 through Guildford is the most polluted road on the strategic road network in England. Air pollution is lowering the life chances of my constituents. I thank the many

[Angela Richardson]

constituents who responded to the road traffic infrastructure survey that I put out, including by signing up to my petition to get the A3 tunnelled under Guildford.

Levelling up and investment are needed everywhere across this country. I welcome the Bill.

4.29 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): When the Prime Minister staggered out of Monday's no-confidence vote, he and his remaining allies were quick to take to the airwaves to insist that this lame-duck Administration intended to move on and focus on delivering bold solutions to our country's biggest problems; but, as we meet here today to scrutinise a "flagship" piece of legislation, it is as clear as day just how bereft of ideas this Government are.

The Bill is desperately lacking in ambition, and nowhere is that clearer than in the parts that deal with the critical issue of housing. Our country is in the midst of an acute housing shortage, with more than 1 million people nationwide languishing on the waiting lists for social housing and millions more trapped in unaffordable and inadequate accommodation in the private rented sector, but the Bill will do little to deliver the new social housing that the country so desperately needs, which the housing charity Shelter recently estimated to be 90,000 new social homes each year.

I believe that if we are serious about getting to grips with the scale of this country's housing crisis and delivering on the promise of affordable and quality homes for all, we must at long last have the political courage to do away with what has become an unquestioned, and indeed unquestionable, pillar of housing policy. I am speaking, of course, of the right-to-buy policy, which, since its inception more than four decades ago, has led to the decimation of social housing stock, and which today remains one of the greatest obstacles to local authorities' building the social homes that my constituents—and the constituents of every Member—so rightly deserve.

When I raised this issue in the House last month, the Minister for Housing said that he could not understand why I had a problem with a policy that had helped so many people on to the housing ladder. Let me be clear: I empathise enormously with anyone who wants a home that they can call their own, but as I walk to work each morning, I am greeted by homeless people lining the streets in one of the richest boroughs in one of the richest countries in the world, and when I return to my constituency at the end of each week, I am greeted by an inbox filled with the desperate pleas of constituents who are trapped in damp and draughty housing in the private rented sector, and who have been left with no choice but to hand over small fortunes each month to unscrupulous landlords who care nothing for their health and wellbeing.

The time has come for us to accept that realising the dream of home ownership cannot come at the expense of the precious social housing of which our country is in such desperate need. It was for that reason that my colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government—whose foresight and breadth of ambition are unmatched anywhere on this Government's Benches—decided to scrap the right to buy once and for all in 2019, and the time has surely come for England to follow suit.

We must also take steps to reduce the amount that it costs local authorities to build new social homes, and that means delivering urgently on the promise of land value reform. Land value today accounts for up to 70% of the cost of building new homes, and has been responsible for a staggering 74% increase in house prices in my lifetime. Today, too many local councils cannot commit themselves to building new social homes, because they have no choice but to pay the so-called "hope value" of the land on which those homes would be built.

It is time, Madam Deputy Speaker, to put the needs of local communities before those of the property developers who are so well represented on the Conservative Benches opposite.

4.33 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): This morning I learned the very sad news that a 51-year-old constituent, a father of four children, had received a diagnosis of terminal cancer, which was spotted far too late. His GP surgery is in the town of Leighton Buzzard, the third largest town in Bedfordshire and the biggest in my constituency, which has grown massively in size and where all the GP surgeries are somewhat swamped, to put it mildly, by the residents who have recently come into the town. The new Clipstone Brook surgery is not coming to pass, and we have no indication yet of whether there will be a health and wellbeing hub in the town.

I use that tragic story—and all our hearts and sympathies, I know, go out to my constituent's wife and four children—to illustrate the point that when we build tens of thousands of new homes, we need to be every bit as rigorous in making sure that the increased general practice capacity is put in at the same time as those houses go up as we are when it comes to the provision of school places.

On Tuesday, I celebrated being an MP in this House for 21 years. In that time, I have rarely found a child without a school place to go to. We generally do public administration quite well in this country. Sometimes we run ourselves down—I think that is a fact—but we can do well for school places. We plan well, and when we build new houses, we make sure that, in the main, there are primary schools for those children to move into. Why is it, then, that we have such difficulty with making sure that the increased general practice capacity is in place? We can do better, and for the sake of my 51-year-old constituent, we have to do better.

What people generally do not understand is that NHS England provides hardly any additional funding for health infrastructure to cater for the impact of new housing. There is £105 million in total for the whole of England, £90 million of which is ringfenced for technology for GPs, leaving just £15 million. That is around £2,600 per GP practice. What are they going to do with that? We really have to do better. Local authorities have no statutory requirement to provide health services—quite understandably, I think most of us would say. If we look at page 294 of the Bill, in schedule 11, we see that medical facilities are just one of 10 types of infrastructure that the infrastructure levy is supposed to provide. All the other nine are extremely worthy, and I do not want to argue against a single one of them in favour of medical facilities, but I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I know is taking this issue seriously, that we have to get it right.

This is what my constituents care about more than anything else: the ability to see a doctor when they need to do so. When we build thousands and thousands of new homes, we really have to do better. The advice I have had from some very experienced health planning lawyers and from the Rebuild General Practice campaign is that there are fears that the Bill might make the situation worse, and that it will certainly not really fix the problem, so I say to the Minister, whom I have met privately on this issue: please, please take this away and, for the sake of all our constituents, get this right.

4.37 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Despite the talk of investing in and empowering local communities through the process, this Bill, like the White Paper, fails to deliver. Major decisions will continue to be made in Whitehall, with communities made to compete for small, paltry pots of money handed out by Tory Ministers. I want to take the short time I have to speak to focus on levelling up in Wales. I am astounded that I am one of only two speakers, along with the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), to make reference to Wales, because the levelling up White Paper and the Bill have significant and very concerning implications for my country of Wales.

Wales needs, deserves and is entitled to investment. The levelling up White Paper identified a number of income and employment metrics that showed that Wales needs levelling up. The reality that we are facing, with the worst cost of living crisis in living memory, is extremely worrying, and I hold this UK Government accountable for the situation, which is indeed dire for my constituents. I have just conducted a survey in my constituency to find out how the crisis is affecting local people, and the response has been staggering. More than 600 local people have responded, making it clear that the crisis is making life a misery and painting a bleak picture of poverty, anxiety and despair.

What does the Bill actually do for Wales? How have the Welsh Government been involved in the development of the Bill and consulted on the measures that are included? The UK Minister spoke today about a revolution of democracy and increasing devolution, and in the intergovernmental relations report that the Secretary of State presented to the Welsh Affairs Committee recently, he talked of the

“extensive engagement between UK Government”—

and the—

“Welsh Government”.

The truth is very different. The Welsh Senedd Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee noted on Monday of this week that

“due to very limited prior consultation by the UK Government and the complexity of the Bill”

it has not yet

“been possible to fully consider the devolution consequences of what is being proposed”,

and the Welsh Government intend to lay a legislative consent memorandum before the Senedd when they have a better picture of the Bill’s implications for Wales.

So there we have it: a levelling-up Bill for further devolution and regional investment with no consultation or involvement of the devolved Government of Wales. This is another centralising Bill, handing powers to the Westminster Secretary of State, and it certainly is not resulting in more funding for Wales. The Welsh Government have stated that the Welsh budget will be nearly £1 billion

worse off by 2024 as a result of the UK Government’s so-called levelling-up programme—that is appalling—and it will allow the UK Government to sideline the Welsh Government by making spending decisions in areas under the Welsh Government’s control, such as transport and the environment.

This is yet another example of Ministers at Westminster, with no understanding of the measure of need in different communities in Wales, bypassing the democratically elected devolved Government of Wales, resulting in more prosperous areas benefiting while more severely deprived communities such as mine are excluded. It flies in the face of any democratic measures or recognition of the reality of devolution.

The UK Government’s promise to Wales of, “Not a penny less, not a power lost” rings hollow. This is not levelling up; it is levelling down.

4.41 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I want to start by addressing the many positives in this Bill that will make a significant difference going forward. I particularly welcome the ending of the zoning proposals in the original planning reforms put forward in 2020 to support the presumption for brownfield development and to support the improved enforcement of planning controls and the attempts to tackle land-banking. I also congratulate the Government on making a centrepiece of this legislation democratic engagement and involving local communities. However, it is also my argument today—and I will certainly be pursuing this with other Members who have spoken in the debate as the Bill progresses through Committee and Report—that we must further strengthen the community involvement in and democratic underpinning of our planning system. On that point, there have been swathes of development across my constituency over many years, placing a great burden on parish and town councils, whose representatives do the job for the love of their communities and neighbourhoods without remuneration; the Government must therefore acknowledge the strain that mega-development—huge planning proposals coming through—places on councils.

In the brief time that I have for my speech, I want to highlight a couple of areas of concern that must be acknowledged and polished in this Bill. The first of them is understanding the geography of an area. Much of the south of Buckinghamshire is designated as an AONB, so when targets are put on the whole county there is only place the build-out can happen, which is largely across my constituency and that of my constituency neighbour my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler). The Bill must tackle that issue, although I should also say that I support those Members who have said in the debate that targets should be advisory, not mandatory; if we are to have true local control and democratic consent to development, local communities must decide what is right for them.

Secondly, we must focus more on the loss of agricultural land. The Environment Act 2021 put a duty on the Government to consider environmental concerns in every part of policy making. We should have a similar provision to protect agricultural land for food security. Too much agricultural land in my constituency is being lost—not just to houses and the great destroyer that is HS2, which of course I oppose, but to solar farms and so much more. That will have an impact on our food security.

[Greg Smith]

I also ask my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing to give us greater clarity on where the Government currently stand on the Oxford to Cambridge arc. We have seen great words written in the press about the Secretary of State's flushing gesture when asked about the Oxford to Cambridge arc, but it would be good to have certainty that the once-held ambition for 1 million homes across the arc, many of which would have landed in my constituency, has indeed been dropped.

I share the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) about clauses 83 and 84, which need to go. We must also fundamentally challenge the way in which developers are allowed to fund the very reports that inspectors and planning officers work on.

4.45 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): With average wages, education levels and some health outcomes lower than elsewhere in the south-east, and with life expectancy differing in my hometown by seven years from one area to the next, levelling up and regeneration are mission critical. Since 2010, Conservative-led Governments have not only recognised that but rowed in and invested in the potential they see in my hometown. That has most recently been manifested in the £20 million levelling-up bid that is set to place us as a premier visitor destination; in the hundreds of millions of pounds for a new hospital; and, not least, in the investment in East Sussex College to promote skills, including skills across the construction industry. I welcome this Bill, which seeks to close the gap in productivity and opportunity.

I will focus my remarks on improving the planning system, because having a place to call home sits at the heart of all our ambitions and underpins every measure of wellbeing and success. For context, 1,337 households were on the council's housing register as of April 2022. Building the right homes in the right places and with the right community infrastructure is as vital as it is challenging.

It has got more challenging in the last year. My beautiful seaside constituency has seen a surge of new homeowners from the nearby cities of Brighton and London, and the change in commuting patterns is set to consolidate that dynamic. As the eastern gateway town to the South Downs national park, and sitting on the iconic Seven Sisters coastline, it is perhaps unsurprising that we welcome newcomers into our midst when awareness of the value of green space has never been so keenly felt, but the same essential environmental qualities make new development, at any scale, utterly constrained. The 600 to 700 new homes to be delivered per annum is a little beyond the rainbow. My local council has seemingly never been able to adequately challenge or counter this number in its local plan, which I hasten to add it is now at some pains to bring up to date.

How can new legislation provide the homes we need? In Eastbourne, the use and optimisation of existing properties and the built environment means stronger action on empty homes and commercial buildings. Although it is beyond the remit of this Bill and the presenting Department, I make a pitch for levelling up the VAT regime. With new builds at 0% and refurbishment, restoration and repurposing at 20%, we are seeing heritage buildings left mothballed and not attracting the development

needed for them to be brought back to market. That is particularly key at the Debenhams site, and it is a concern ahead of the Brighton University campus removal.

I would also like to see more in the Bill on brownfield sites, including the funding for them, and more challenge on the undersupply that sees up to 1 million permissions across the UK not completed, including 1,000 in Eastbourne. As the Bill develops, I will apply the morning smell test. There is a very live, fiercely disputed local planning application for a vast housing estate on our now precious open space. As the Bill progresses, I welcome every opportunity to improve it.

4.50 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I welcome many things in this Bill, from the setting up of levelling-up missions through to the powers to regenerate, but I will focus on housing and planning because I get more correspondence about that than anything else.

I believe strongly that Governments should be helping as many people as possible to own their own home. More importantly, the vast majority of my constituents believe that as well. Those who already own their own home remember the pride they felt in getting on the ladder for the first time, and they are often helping their children and grandchildren to try to do the same. Those who do not own their own home have never complained to me about too many houses being built—they only say that they are not affordable.

The problems in my constituency, which are dismissed as “nimbysism”, actually stem from the fact that the two district councils I cover are in the top 10 for house building in the country relative to their zone but the bottom third for infrastructure. That has meant we get many homes that are too often low quality and unaffordable, and put an unnecessary strain on the environment, local infrastructure and people's quality of life.

So I entirely support the Government's focus on BIDEN—beauty, infrastructure, democracy, environment and neighbourhoods. I am grateful that they have listened to a lot of the complaints people had about the planning system. Such complaints related to issues from stressing the importance of local plans, which I believe will have greater weight in the Bill, through to the issues of five-year land supply; we had the bizarre situation where land is allocated by councils for development and if it is not developed, it is not classed towards this—it is not the council's fault that that is the case. I am pleased we are going to challenge some of the anti-competitive practices that we have seen in this industry for a long time. Like a number of colleagues who have spoken, I also support moving away from the zonal system, because that was one thing that most concerned constituents; someone would be able to build whatever they wanted in certain areas.

There are lots of things we might still do to help enhance this Bill as it moves through—many of them have been touched on, but I shall address them briefly. First, I support the digitisation of the planning process. I would like to think we might bring back hybrid meetings for people when it comes to these planning situations, as that is a logical approach. We must make sure that the digitally excluded still have ways of taking part.

I welcome the environmental outcome reports. However, as the Minister knows, I feel strongly that this is not just about what something does to the surrounding environment;

it is about the way in which the houses are constructed. He knows that I would like to see houses built to the latest environmental standard once a certain period has elapsed, rather than to the one at the time permission was obtained, which is often five or six years previously. We know that we will have to retrofit those homes.

I agree with what a lot of colleagues have said about targets. I understand why they are needed. My two district councils have usually exceeded their targets, but the way in which they are used is unhelpful. We have a problem with Oxford City Council always demanding the highest possible number of houses but not building any of them; in my area, we build 1,500 when it builds 88, yet it still says it always wants the highest target it could have.

Finally, on infrastructure, I completely endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has said. We have to get infrastructure in first, particularly GP surgeries. Constituents do not believe it is coming any more. They, like most of the rest of the country, believe in home ownership, but the way we have built homes has too often made them feel a curse on the area people used to love. I hope this Bill can fix that.

4.54 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I support the Government's commitment to levelling up, to boosting jobs, to boosting our high streets, to boosting economic opportunity, and to enhancing our standard of living. Those priorities are all shared by the people in Gosport, but, as the Minister knows, I am not convinced that this levelling up Bill goes far enough. I would like to explain why.

I wish to raise three issues in particular that affect my Gosport constituency. It is a peninsula of about 25 sq km. It is not very big, but it is more than 80% built on. The rest that is not built on is largely Ministry of Defence land, at flood risk, or part of a conservation area. There is simply nowhere to build the wildly unrealistic 2014 housing target numbers without concreting over the last remaining green space, ruining air quality, which is already one of the lowest in the country, and decimating the vital strategic gap. To add insult to injury, more recent housing numbers, which the Government have chosen to ignore, significantly reduce the projected requirement, so we are being asked to build more houses than we actually need.

In my constituency, we need levelling up to prioritise job growth and productivity. We have one of the lowest job densities in the country and pockets of significant deprivation, so I urge the Minister to look at how targets can be made much more locally and applied much more sympathetically in this Bill.

A related issue, which the Minister knows about, is that of nitrates. Across the Solent region, it has caused numerous developments on brownfield sites to be delayed and housing targets to be missed. I understand that a nitrates trading platform, funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is being piloted in some of our local authorities in the Solent region, with a potential to be rolled out across the UK. This is a massive issue. It puts swathes of farmland out of use today, at a time when our food security is of vital importance, in order to address the impact of chemicals that were put on our farmland more than 30 years ago.

It is a major obstacle to planning. I ask the Minister to work with colleagues in DEFRA to address this and move forward to find a less ridiculous solution.

Finally, regenerating our high streets is key to levelling up. They need to be reimagined—not just places where we shop, but places where we live, eat, socialise and work. A local company, Pro Pods, has been instrumental in reimagining the high street. In Gosport High Street, unused shops and the buildings above them are being brought back into use. The shops come back into use as independent traders, and the upper levels as high standard homes of multiple occupancy—executive HMOs if you like.

However, there are worries about the Valuation Office Agency's interpretation of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, which means that these executive HMOs up and down the country will now be considered as separate dwellings despite the fact that they share all the common facilities. This is causing significant hardship to tenants who are seeing increases to bills of around £500 a month because they are then liable for the council tax rather than the landlord. In some instances, tenants have been given backdated bills of around £3,000.

Furthermore, if these facilities are considered as separate properties after four years they can be lawfully be used as separate dwellings in planning laws, creating a surge of micro flats that do not meet current housing standards. Please can the Minister look at what can be done in this Bill to ensure that HMOs are classed as one property? We want to level up how council tax is charged, not stifle the ideas that are about reinvigorating our high streets and ensure future housing standards.

4.58 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): There is much in this Bill that I welcome, and a just a few caveats. Let me start with the caveats. When I was a local government Minister, I was very proud to be part of the team that delivered the Localism Act 2011 and the first iteration of the national planning policy framework. The whole point of that was handing power over to local communities so that they could shape their own built and physical environments.

As we drive forward, quite rightly, towards a greater emphasis on regeneration and levelling up, we must be careful that we do not lose that localist aspect to what we are doing. That applies in a couple of areas. The first is, as has already been mentioned, the way in which targets operate. I do not rule out targets as a spur, but when they are imposed in a mandatory and rather arbitrary fashion, they are a particular problem in areas such as suburban London where they are magnified by the predatory attitude of the Labour Mayor of London towards suburban boroughs. We see unrealistic targets put on boroughs such as Bromley, much of which is green belt, which therefore puts pressure on to London suburbs at the same time as much brownfield land in London, much of it publicly owned, remains unused for many years. We really need a brownfield first policy in our urban areas—that is an area that the Government should put a spur behind.

My second point is on local plans. I particularly welcome the removal of the requirement for a five-year rolling land supply when there is an up-to-date plan. That will avoid the abuse we have had in areas such as Bromley town centre, with speculative developments

[Sir Robert Neill]

being allowed on appeal, but equally we must ensure that things such as the national planning development model do not erode the ability to create truly local plans in that area.

On London—here I declare my interest as chair of the APPG for London—while I understand that levelling up is important, it should not be at the expense of London. First, London is the economic powerhouse of the whole country, and if we harm London, we damage everybody in the long run. Secondly, London also has high levels of poverty. It is worth remembering that post pandemic, 27% of households in London were living below the poverty line once housing was taken into account. Even in comparatively affluent suburbs such as mine, London has pockets of real poverty. We need levelling up within London as well as across the rest of the country.

My third point is that levelling up and regeneration must come with proper devolution. I welcome the mayoral model and the approach we are now taking with combined authorities. Those are sensible, but we ought to couple them with financial devolution. As I said in my intervention, the approach really only makes sense if communities have the ability to raise more of their revenue locally.

We have one of the most centralised local government finance systems in the western world, and that does not make for long-term, healthy democracy. We must do more work on that. The current Prime Minister, when he was Mayor of London, set up the London Finance Commission, which came up with many useful devolutionist but entirely pro-Conservative recommendations, and I hope he will take those on board again as a basis for the future.

Finally, I ask the Minister not to forget the contribution that the arts can make to levelling up—both cultural arts and the performing arts. As chair of the APPG on opera, I draw his attention to the excellent work being done by English National Opera. For example, it is rolling out programmes in school halls and canteens across areas outside London; some 30,000 children are getting access to performing arts through ENO's Engage programme. It is also doing work with long covid sufferers through the ENO Breathe programme.

Those programmes work outside London. Proposals to take ENO to Liverpool had to be put on hold during the pandemic, but I hope the Government will support their revival, so that those and other companies in the performing arts sector play the role that they are willing and ready to do in building up a truly holistic approach to levelling up in our country.

5.2 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): For too long, communities in Rushcliffe have felt that the planning system is not on their side. For too long, councils such as Rushcliffe Borough Council have not been able to get the backing they need to prevent overdevelopment and inappropriate development. For too long, developers have used the planning system to their advantage, not listening to local people and only building out developments when it suits them. This Bill offers a huge correction.

The Bill resolves many of the concerns that my constituents have most often raised with me, including the fact that too many homes are built in the countryside,

rather than on brownfield sites. It strikes the balance between building the homes we need and ensuring that they are built in the right places: strengthening local plans and providing greater protections for the environment.

Local communities do not get enough say about development in their area and cannot prevent ugly development. The Bill will give more weight to local and neighbourhood plans and make them simpler to produce. It introduces mandatory local design codes, so that developers have to respect styles drawn up locally, from the layout and materials used to the provision of green spaces.

There is a perception that developers buy land and then do not build on it. This Bill strengthens the requirement for commencement and completion notices, addressing land banking and slow build out by larger developers, and the worry that we do not have the roads, GP provision or school places that we need for new development, and that developers do not pay their fair share. This Bill reforms developer payments through a locally set, non-negotiable infrastructure levy that means that developers would always have to pay their share. As other hon. Members have said, this must come with development, not after it.

Rushcliffe Borough Council's biggest concern is the abuse of the duty to co-operate, which has enabled Labour-run Nottingham City Council to shirk its responsibility to build houses and regenerate the city centre of Nottingham. It has used this national policy to push nearly 5,000 houses away from brownfield city sites into the countryside of Rushcliffe, and that is on top of Rushcliffe's own housing target. So I am delighted, I am relieved, I am jubilant that the pernicious blunt instrument that is the duty to co-operate is being abolished in this Bill, especially as right now in Nottinghamshire, Nottingham City Council is gearing up to try it all over again this autumn. Authorities should of course co-operate with each other, but not in a way that can be abused. True co-operation means a system that works for all parties, and we must make sure that the replacement for the duty guards against this abuse in the future.

This Bill represents the turn of the tide—an important and transformational step forward for the hard-pressed communities who have seen unwelcome development and who feel powerless in the face of large developers. I thank Ministers for listening to our concerns along the way. I know they will continue to do so on many of the issues raised today, such as a more flexible approach to housing numbers and national development management policies.

5.6 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I welcome parts of this Bill, which has the great potential to improve the planning system, but I do have some concerns that I hope the Secretary of State and Ministers will address either today or during its passage.

First, I will quickly rattle through the positives of the Bill: increased powers for councils to bring vacant units back into use and greater powers to encourage positive regeneration across the country; streamlining and extending the temporary regime for outdoor seating to promote the café culture that has been beneficial to local businesses and communities across Bexley and the country; extending enforcement powers and doubling fees for retrospective planning so that local councils can crack down on

dodgy developers and better protect their neighbours; reform of the infrastructure levy so that developers pay more of their profits to support community infrastructure required to support new homes and to allow councils to differ the rates of the levy for different areas that do not want more development; and the strengthening of local plans so that local residents have a greater say in the future of their areas and development can be targeted to use old brownfield sites, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), and to protect the environment.

The latter is one of the major issues that councils in Greater London have faced with the Mayor of London's London plan, alongside the dramatic increase in housing targets and policies that are simply not appropriate for Greater London areas such as Bexley. Residents across Old Bexley and Sidcup regularly tell me that they do not want any more flats, and I hope that the Bill will help local people to have a greater say over their future. I would therefore appreciate it if the Secretary of State clarified how he sees the relationship between the London plan and future local plans changing, given the existing hierarchy of planning policy. In places such as Bexley and Bromley, we currently have a democratic deficit whereby local people did not vote for a Labour Mayor of London but are still stuck with his policies. Levelling up the country must not forget areas in the south-east such as Bexley, which does not have the infrastructure of inner London but is seeing its population dramatically increase and never gets its fair share of funding, whether grant funding or health spending per head. The Government would be well advised to carefully review how taxpayers' money from central Government is allocated in London—how much of it is wasted and swallowed up by City Hall—when that money could be sent directly to local councils that can target its use better, as we have seen with business grants during the pandemic.

Here lies one of my main concerns: I hope that Ministers will put appropriate protections in place to stop London's problems being replicated across the country. For every Ben Houchen and Andy Street, there is a Sadiq Khan—a Sadiq Khan who has destroyed borough-based policing and overseen record levels of crime; a Sadiq Khan who has nearly bankrupted TfL and overseen a record number of strikes; and a Sadiq Khan who has increased his share of council tax by 8.8% this year and plans to introduce a stealth tax of around £4,500 a year on drivers in Greater London during a cost of living crisis. Not even the champagne socialists can afford this Bill. Although levelling up this country is an admirable and key Government policy, I implore the Secretary of State and Ministers to use their power to ensure that devolution does not equal more civil servants, more local taxes, more nanny state and more Sadiq Khans.

5.10 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I start by putting on record my thanks to the brilliant London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, who has been delivering for Londoners across the city. We have all seen it, and we can all witness and attest to it.

Today's Second Reading debate leaves me concerned about whether the Bill will seriously tackle structural wrongs—the Government do not have a good track record of fighting inequalities—and whether the Government

can be trusted to deliver. I will focus my comments on levelling up and the proud city of London, and on affordable housing and good infrastructure. The Government claim that they want to reverse geographical inequalities by spreading opportunity more equally through economic, social and environmental measures, but levelling up is as important in London as it is to other regions, because data and evidence show that the economic fortunes of London and other regions are strongly correlated. We all know that when London thrives, the country thrives.

In my constituency of Battersea, we have great affluence and wealth alongside pockets of deprivation. That is reflected in the fact that London is one of the most unequal regions. The cost of living disproportionately impacts people living in London, with inflation and unemployment higher than the national average. That is why I am very proud of the new Labour administration in Wandsworth for declaring that it will pay all council workers the London living wage.

Given all the issues in London, I am concerned about the impact on the city of the provisions in the Bill, such as the national development management policies, which could scale back devolved powers in London. That will hinder all the positive actions and the progress that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has made through building more genuinely affordable homes and good quality infrastructure.

That brings me on to housing and infrastructure, and I worry about the ambiguity and lack of detail in the Bill in relation to housing, given the Conservatives' unhealthy reliance on donations from developers. We know that in 2020, the Tories received £11 million in donations. As one of my colleagues has said, the Tories' relationship with developers is an example of the political elite working at the behest of private interests.

I know about the negative consequences of such close relationships, because the former Conservative-led Wandsworth Borough Council allowed developers to reduce their affordable housing rate in Nine Elms to just 9%, when it really should have been around 33% to 44%. We all know that that affordable housing requirement is a scandal, and we know about the problematic changes in the definition of affordable. It was the former Mayor of London, the now Prime Minister, who changed the definition in 2011 to 80% of market rates, when it had been set at 50%. It is a shame that the Bill does not seek to address that.

Beth Winter: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill is seriously lacking on the question of affordability, and that when we look at the levels of homelessness in our country, including on our streets in London, we can see that serious amendments to the Bill are needed to address the urgent housing crisis?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If we are not committed to building genuinely affordable homes, how are we going to house people? That is why I am really proud that the Wandsworth Labour administration has committed to building 1,000 affordable and social homes. That is what progress looks like.

It is crucial that the Bill does not prioritise developments or developers over people. The proposed infrastructure levy will be successful only if it delivers genuinely affordable

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

homes. The Bill does not really address the issues around what the Government proposed on the right to acquire for affordable housing. When will the Government bring forward legislation to address the issue around the right to acquire? The infrastructure levy will be paid not up front, but on completion, so how will that alleviate any of the pressures on local authorities to build more homes? That will need addressing.

The Bill is thin on detail and I worry that it will leave us with some of the same problems. It is essential that the Government take all the necessary steps to ensure that the Bill challenges and alleviates the pressures around affordable housing and the infrastructure levy, and that it addresses some of the challenges that developers are imposing on our communities.

5.15 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Bill is clearly a significant piece of legislation and the centrepiece of the Government's policy for the next couple of years. I fully support it and, in many respects, actively encourage the Government to be even more ambitious.

In my view, levelling up is two things: first, it is about simply improving people's lives; and secondly, it is about closing the gap between the more and less prosperous areas of our country in an upwards direction. I accept that it is easy to talk about but far more challenging to achieve. There are five key ingredients: education and skills at all levels; infrastructure; the environment, particularly housing and planning; leadership and devolution at a local level; and of course, most importantly, private sector investment. Ultimately, it is those in the private sector—the wealth creators—who will really make a difference. It is vital that we encourage their investment, because they are the real game changers. We need to incentivise business to invest in less prosperous regions, which could also help to alleviate the housing problem in areas that are overpopulated.

The Bill is a serious bit of legislation with 325 pages, 193 clauses and 17 schedules—and we all get four minutes to talk about it. I could probably talk for many hours about different aspects of the Bill, but I will concentrate on two. First, development corporations are a welcome opportunity for local government to be innovative and ambitious for its area. They are a chance to help to redevelop an area and seek investment to revitalise it. They are a welcome development that I hope will be used extensively.

Secondly, on the most important aspect of the Bill, leadership and devolution, we have talked about taking back control from Brussels and we now need to take back control from Westminster. If we get that right, we can transform many different parts of our country. I suggest that moving towards unitaries is absolutely right. Devolving real powers is vital if devolution is truly to work, but responsibility is also vital so that we can encourage fresh and new leadership. Mayors, governors or whatever we want to call them will bring personality to the job and encourage new talent; Andy Street is an obvious example. They are key figures who represent different parts of the country.

I encourage the Government to be as ambitious as possible. We are a highly centralised country where 95% of all taxes go to the centre and most big decisions are

made in Whitehall, not town hall. Carlisle is a good example. We recently had a significant amount of investment, but the final decision was always made in Whitehall or Westminster, rather than in Carlisle. If levelling up is to succeed, real power must be moved away from the centre, including fiscal powers and responsibilities. Local leadership can transform our provincial towns and cities, as well as larger urban areas, but it must be given the tools to succeed.

I support the Bill, but I encourage the Government to consider taking reserve powers so that, if there is unnecessary opposition from a particular area to combined authorities or Mayors, they have the opportunity to impose them if, when they have analysed that locality, there is broad support for them. I believe that is the only way that we will truly transform our regions.

5.19 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Levelling up is a great ambition—definitely the right thing to be doing—and I applaud the Government for that ambition, but I do not for one minute underestimate how challenging that is. The one thing I might suggest is that there be a focus on the differing needs and the differing solutions. The solution for a rural community and the solution for an urban community are very different. I think the detail, when it is further worked out, needs to be properly rural-proofed, and probably urban-proofed, if there is such a concept.

Devolution is the way to go, and I thank the Government for positively considering the Devon, Torbay and Plymouth devolution deal. We have a way to go. I think my ask would be that it is a devolution of real power with the money to go with it. My frustration—and that, I know, of my councils—has often been with the strangling bureaucracy and red tape that mean the real power to change is taken away. I would love to see the end of what I see as pointless bidding processes. It is taking up so much council time, often with zero results. If we could reduce the bureaucracy and reduce all that—in some cases, unnecessary—compliance to free up officer time to do things that drive productivity, that would be a real win.

Planning reform has been long overdue, and I am very pleased to see the Government's proposals in the Bill today. Most of them I support wholeheartedly. Of course, we want beautiful communities. Of course, we want to deal with the overdevelopment. Of course, we want to deal with the planning permissions that are not executed. I am pleased to see the push for local plans to be faster and, frankly, to have greater power and community involvement, but I share the concern that has been raised by colleagues about the national development management policies. Those should not override these plans.

The infrastructure levy should work and should be an improvement, but I share some of the concerns about that being paid at the end, not at the beginning. Is there not a compromise of potentially staged payments, so that local authorities can begin to put in place some of the infrastructure that we desperately need? I absolutely agree that those targets do more harm than good. They are too top-down and do not represent the local need. I also agree with comments about the five-year land supply concept. It simply does not work.

Housing reform is clearly not the prime focus of this legislation, but it clearly is the flipside. This is, it seems to me, a bit of a missed opportunity, and I hope that the Government and the Department will start looking at that. The issue of affordable housing is not going away. The issue I have is that, in the south-west, salaries are so low and house prices so high that a 20% discount simply does not work. We have no proper provision yet for social and community housing. It seems to me that, if we are going to look at the opportunity for tenants to buy, there has to be a mechanism to replace that sort of housing. On second homes, this is a good start, but I share some of the thoughts about needing to regulate Airbnb properly.

If I was to leave a final thought with the Minister, it would be, “Think longer term.” What do we do when we can no longer build on all the brownfield, all the land bank and all the empty properties? Where is the vision? There was a vision for sustainable villages. That needs to be dusted down. Poundbury needs to be the sort of the thing we see every day. We need properly to defend green belt, look at reviewing it, extending it and protecting, if I can put it this way, greenfield land, particularly that which is prime agricultural land, and give it some particular status so that it cannot be built on. I commend the Bill.

5.24 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): If anywhere reflects the Government’s focus on levelling up, it is Stoke-on-Trent. After decades of neglect and decline under Labour, finally things are changing. It is a city on the up, with Conservative leadership delivering renewed ambition and focus for Stoke-on-Trent. £56 million from the levelling-up fund—more than anywhere else in the country—is regenerating key brownfield sites across the city, such as the Tams Crown works in Longton, which have lain derelict for more than a decade; and more than £70 million in transport improvements through both the transforming cities fund and the bus back better fund is helping to deliver better local bus and rail services. In a city where a third of households have no access to a private car, the lack of effective public transport is a major barrier to employment and skills. That is especially the case in areas such as Meir, where the figure is over 40%. It is vital that the Government announce that our proposals to reopen Meir station will be progressing.

Supporting people to access better-skilled and better-paid employment is more important now than ever, given the cost of living challenges. Stoke-on-Trent is already a city delivering on levelling up, with predictions that our city will have the third fastest jobs growth nationally. That was also reflected in the recent hugely successful jobs and skills fair organised by the three Stoke-on-Trent MPs.

Jo Gideon: Does my hon. Friend share my view that it is really annoying that the shadow Cabinet keeps popping into Stoke-on-Trent and reporting that our young people are dissatisfied? We talk to our young people daily and there are so many opportunities. That is really negative publicity that our young people can do without.

Jack Brereton: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital that we talk up our city and all the fantastic training and job opportunities. The jobs and skills fair that we organised had 450 people attending to see the

huge, fantastic range of opportunities available in Stoke-on-Trent. We are working on helping people to access those employment and skills opportunities. Through things such as the kickstart scheme and the lifetime skills guarantee, we are helping them to get into better-skilled, better-paid employment.

The Bill supports our high streets as well. It will enable new uses to fill some of those empty spaces in our town centres. I particularly welcome the new powers on compulsory purchase orders and auctions for properties that have been empty for more than 12 months. We must tackle the issues with absent landowners, especially when it comes to many of the important heritage assets in our town centres, of which there are many across the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent.

It is vital that we support the regeneration of our high streets and town centres. In Longton, despite having a nearly £1 million partnership scheme funded by the city council and Historic England, some owners, unfortunately, do not want to work with us. That includes owners who are overseas, properties tied up in complex legal agreements and even owners who are in prison. How can we work with people like that? We need to see both a carrot and a stick approach. We must support local authorities to have the resources to carry out more enforcement and greater transparency of high street ownership. I very much welcome the further measures to tackle those who allow damage to our heritage buildings and work against the levelling up of our city. Those sites are part of us—they are very much our character and identity. Our industrial heritage in the Potteries cannot be lost because, once it is, we cannot easily replace it.

In Stoke-on-Trent, we have also been working hard to improve digital connectivity with the roll-out of gigabit fibre, which is faster than in any other city in the country. We have so many fantastic and exciting opportunities to further develop the digital industry, gaming and creative industries, all of which will create the high-skilled, high-paid employment opportunities that we want to see based in Stoke-on-Trent. Ideally, they could fill some of those vacant spaces on the high street, providing well-paid, high-skilled employment opportunities in some of the fastest growing sectors.

If we can get the regeneration of our city right and secure improvements to our town centre built environments, we can deliver a step change in opportunities for our area. On the back of the huge Government investment and the fantastic Government support that we have received, we must now catalyse the wider private investment that we need to transform our city and level up opportunities for everyone in Stoke-on-Trent.

5.29 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I very much welcome the Bill and its Second Reading today. It is great to see the Minister in his place, who I know will engage with colleagues throughout the process.

Hyndburn and Haslingden was one of the forgotten areas of the north for too long, but I vowed to change that. I recently listed in this place some of the investment we have already had and what we want to see in the future, so I want to focus, in the short time I have, on why the Bill will make a fundamental positive change to our home. Levelling up is not option; it is a necessity for us to remain an economic powerhouse in the decades ahead.

[Sara Britcliffe]

I will focus mostly on the necessary planning reforms and start with the infrastructure levy on developers, which is vital. We all want beautiful homes across Hyndburn and Haslingden, but we need the GP and school places to match them. We need investment in our local broader infrastructure to meet that request. This is one of the key issues we have across Hyndburn and Haslingden.

On new powers to address empty units and properties, we have a problem with such properties across my patch. From Accrington and Haslingden town centre to Great Harwood and Clayton, we see empty units across our high streets. It does not attract footfall into our towns. The auction system for the empty units that sadly dominate the high streets will not only put the necessary pressure on the owners, but give opportunities to new businesses when those owners refuse to do something with their properties.

Retrospective planning is a huge community concern due to recent local developments. We have to get this bit right. It is completely wrong that developers can move away completely from their original plan and get away with it, and we all know that that happens on a regular basis. Measures for the protection of greenbelt are also key and I have had discussions with Ministers on some of the problems I have had in my own patch.

We are doing so much to create the jobs and skills that are needed, but if we want people to stay in their communities and provide those jobs, then we need to create a place for them to be proud to call home. Also on planning, many listed buildings are not beautiful heritage sites that people once knew; they have become hazardous local eyesores. I have looked at the measures set out in the Bill, and welcome the extra powers to protect listed buildings and recover the costs from landowners. I am running out of time, so I will just say that I also agree with the measures on CPOs.

The measures mentioned above give us the powers to truly transform our home into what we want it to be, and can restore the civic pride mentioned in this Chamber and create the future we all want for Hyndburn and Haslingden.

Finally, I will quickly give a shout out for our levelling-up fund bid in Hyndburn and across Lancashire, which will create the change we want and desperately need, creating something for people to come and see in our town centres.

5.32 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I welcome so much of this levelling up Bill. I will address my comments to the housing issues in my beautiful constituency, which I know are reflected across rural and coastal constituencies around the country. I would also like to take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to the Minister for letting me repeat myself time and time again, and for his constant engagement on this matter. I very much hope that, as the Bill makes its passage through the House, I might be able to persuade him to consider what, to my mind, is currently missing from it.

The peninsular of Devon and Cornwall has seen an explosion in short-term holiday lets and second home ownership, particularly since the start of the pandemic. We recognise the importance of our tourism economy,

but our housing market is now simply out of balance. We just do not have homes for people to live in if they work locally. The affordability issues already spoken about by other colleagues from Devon are replicated even more so in North Devon, where we have the second fastest growing house prices in the country, with a rise of over 22% this year alone. Put simply, wages are not keeping up. Since 2016, Devon has seen 4,000 homes come out of private rent and 11,000 join the short-term holiday listings. As of today in Ilfracombe, a rural and coastal town with a population of 12,000, there is one long-term rental available on Rightmove, but if people would like to come on holiday there this June, there are 560 available options. That imbalance is simply unsustainable for us.

The demand for social housing in rural communities is growing six times faster than the rate of supply. At current rates, the backlog of low-income families needing accommodation will take 121 years to clear. We need to find other ways to enable people to build houses and for local people to move into them.

I am pleased that my Lib Dem council has finally started taking some action today, as it does have tools in its toolbox. I first wrote to it more than a year ago, so it is a delight that it is starting to tackle the issue of the derelict properties that are scattered across my constituency. However, so much more still needs to be done.

There is far too much leeway for homes to be built without meeting affordability needs, and in order to address the problem of vacant and second homes, additional planning measures are needed. Although the council tax changes are welcome, they will not be sufficient and are already incurring unintended consequences. I very much hope that a new clause can be added to the Bill to require planning permission to change homes from other tenures into short-term tenancies and holiday accommodation.

The Secretary of State spoke about creating neighbourhoods, not dormitories. We need to create communities in which people who work locally can also afford to live. At present, we are at risk of becoming just a winter ghost town.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind everybody that if they have participated in the debate, they should be here for the wind-ups.

5.36 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Doncaster needs levelling up. We have had a superb start with levelling up round one, and city status is great news for Doncaster: it puts the spotlight on Doncaster and firmly puts it on the map. A light is shining on Doncaster that has never shone before. City status gives it a destination status, and with the Yorkshire Wildlife Park, its racecourse and its castles, hon. Members can see why many people already come and enjoy my city. Although the new-found spotlight is wonderful, it may highlight some things that people do not want to see. The way to deal with that, however, is not to turn our heads away, but to deal with those issues head-on and to use that light to see where we have gone wrong and where we can put things right.

Since being elected, I have tried to use my position to level up my constituency by talking up Doncaster at every opportunity. Through my role models project,

I have been educating our children about the opportunities that my city offers in order to level up their aspiration. I believe I am making progress, but as much as I can try to do it on my own, I know that I cannot.

The village of Edlington in my constituency made the national papers recently for all the wrong reasons. We have organised crime gangs, antisocial behaviour, absent landlords and a community who are beginning to lose hope. However, I ask the people in specific hotspots of Don Valley not to lose hope. Let me tell them why: I am working hard on levelling up. I have people onside who want to help, such as Damian Allen, the chief executive of Doncaster Council, and Ian Proffit, chief superintendent of Doncaster police. They care, and with the Government's levelling-up agenda, additional police and its now being an education investment area, we stand a chance. We have a reason to hope.

Levelling up cannot just be a catchphrase; it must have real substance. Indeed, we must achieve. We must have a plan and now we do—we have the Bill, and I have personally written a plan, which I will share with all stakeholders over the coming weeks. It goes something like this: to level up a place such as Edlington, we need, first, to remove the criminals. There are not many, but they need removing, and we will do so. We then need to engage with the community, young and old. We need to encourage our youth to aim high. We must engage with homeowners and landlords to encourage them to respect their homes and investments and reward tenants who do the same. Through the levelling-up fund's directed and targeted regeneration and by properly exercising devolved powers, we can take the necessary steps that will sustain each town's future through the pride that every citizen takes. No matter how bad some places can appear, no matter how many negative stories one hears, when I knock on doors, I find good people who want the best for their town and their children. Some seem to have just lost a little hope, but with this Government and a community who can believe in their MP, we can and truly will level up Doncaster.

I will not say that I cannot wait to get started, because we already have and we are doing great. This Bill sets a legal basis for reporting against levelling-up missions, and I like that very much. I like goal setting and measuring where I am on my path. It will take time, so I ask for a little patience. Decades of neglect will take some turning around, but my ask of this Government is to back me with each round of levelling up so that Doncaster has the funding and the resources it needs. I am asking the people of Doncaster to keep their faith in their MP as I am keeping faith in my Government. I welcome this Bill and I am sure that the good people of Doncaster will do so, too.

5.40 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to speak to this Bill and also to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon and I have worked extremely hard and we understand the challenges in our constituencies extremely well.

I am going to talk about housing and Cornwall. We have already heard from MPs who do not represent my area about the challenges that Cornwall faces. I am looking to the Bill to provide accessible housing, affordable housing and healthy housing. On accessible housing, we

have heard a few ideas this afternoon about how to make sure that the houses that are built are made available to local people. Whether through this levelling up Bill or a county deal, we in Cornwall need our local authorities to be given the power to place a restriction on new homes so that they go to permanent residents. That would give local communities the confidence that any housing they are asked to accept will meet local need. It is a lot easier to win the argument in a community if it knows, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon said, that the houses built will help to secure the community and work for everybody.

Issues in Cornwall include nurses, doctors, police, planning officers, engineers, marine engineers—all sorts of people—being unable to get the homes they need, or even to get close to where the jobs that they can take on are located. There is a critical problem on the Isles of Scilly, because the people who need to work there to ensure the provision of basic services cannot get housing. It is important that new housing is prioritised and meets local needs and pressures.

On affordable housing, I was glad to hear the Secretary of State refer to mortgages, which have not been mentioned by others. The Bill does not necessarily have to mention them, but it would be helpful if it could reform our approach to affordable housing. At the moment, mortgage providers will often turn down affordable housing applications from people who have been paying a lot of rent for a long time. If someone has been paying high rents for five or six years, that should be taken into account by the mortgage sector when considering affordability. Many people pay more in rent than they would pay having purchased a property.

On healthy homes, if the Minister wants to make his life a little easier, he could look at the forthcoming Healthy Homes Bill in the other place, a private Member's Bill that includes a lot of good principles. If homes are not healthy, they curtail education and cause problems for older people. We have heard examples of poor housing this afternoon. The healthy homes principles include houses having the necessary space and access to natural light, and that they should be located near good transport and walking links. It is vital that we build housing in areas where people can get to their jobs.

I commend the levelling up Bill and the Minister for engaging extremely well.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman makes some good points on housing, but I have just been given some figures by Calum Iain MacIver of the Western Isles Council. My part of Scotland in the Hebrides used to get £3 million a year from European structural funds. We will now be getting only £2.35 million from the levelling-up fund, and that is over three years, so it is about a quarter of what we used to get. Is Cornwall suffering similarly, and is it not more of a levelling-down fund than a levelling-up fund for people like us?

Derek Thomas: I am glad to answer that question, but just to finish what I was going to say earlier, I commend the Minister for the way in which he has engaged with all of us in trying to get this right.

Cornwall has received enormous sums through European funding, but not all the systems are very easy to navigate; I have had personal experience of trying to navigate them just to claw down funds already committed. What

[Derek Thomas]

we see in the levelling-up fund, the shared prosperity fund, the high street fund—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member is disagreeing with me, but the rough calculation in the Library's figures is that we will receive £80 million a year, compared with the £50 million a year that we received in European funding, which will carry on until next year.

In Cornwall, we want to make sure that every penny that we receive genuinely leads to the transformation of every life and every opportunity for the people who live there.

5.45 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Levelling up is the core mission of this Government. It was certainly a mission that resonated with voters in my constituency of Penistone and Stocksbridge in 2019. For far too long, communities such as those in Barnsley and Sheffield have been left behind—there really is a north-south divide—and some have been completely forgotten.

What do we need to do to level up? We need to improve our social fabric, improve opportunities, improve education, provide more skilled jobs and improve our infrastructure. This Conservative Government are tackling all those issues. We are preparing people for well-paid jobs through the Skills and Post-16 Education Act. We are improving public transport through measures such as the levelling-up fund, my bid to improve the Penistone line, the Restoring Your Railways project and my bid to restore the Stocksbridge line. Through the towns fund and the community ownership fund, we are making places that we can be proud of.

We also need good-quality affordable housing, because good housing is the foundation of wellbeing and prosperity and bad housing is the cause of poor health and poverty. So many families in our country and in my constituency cannot afford to buy a decent home to raise their children. The impacts are wide-ranging, including poverty, overcrowding, parents being forced to work longer hours than they want, and young couples delaying having children or not having them at all. Despite its considerable mass, the Bill will not, in itself, solve the problem overnight, but it does lay the foundations for repairing our broken housing system.

One of the biggest barriers that we face to building new houses is the number of objections that appear to planning applications, both from local residents and from local authorities, often because the housing is inappropriate or the infrastructure has not been properly thought through. For example, the Wellhouse Lane development in my constituency, which I know the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) is aware of, is an interesting housing development, but there is not enough infrastructure at the right time. Greenfield sites such as Hollin Busk near Stocksbridge are being picked off by developers when brownfield sites are available. The Bill will enable local plans and local people to take precedence, so it should lead to more of the right type of housing being built with fewer objections and more developments making it to the point of delivery.

Neighbourhood planning absolutely needs to be simplified. I tried it as a parish councillor, but we got stuck; it is too bureaucratic and too difficult when there is not enough volunteer time, which is a particular

problem in areas that need levelling up. Many areas in my constituency have been successful in doing that—Oxspring, Penistone and Silkstone are in development—but for many areas it is just too complicated. The reforms to make it simpler, with just a statement of priorities and wishes, are a really good development.

The infrastructure levy is a fantastic way to ensure that development gives back to communities and that infrastructure is built in a timely way, but I ask the Minister to look into how schools receive the funding. It often does not work, because many more children come in than will actually be affected, and because the formulae used to calculate the number of children do not make sense in areas that are attractive for families to move to.

I welcome the Bill, which will improve the landscape and lay the foundations for fixing our housing problems, but we need to go further. We need to build more social housing, stop developers hanging on to land for their own benefit and look at the causes of housing demand, particularly family breakdown. Over the past two decades, the number of people who live alone in the UK has risen by 20%. The number of 45 to 64-year-olds living alone has increased by 53%: they are often middle-aged men who are moving out of the family home and then require another family home for their children to stay in. All sorts of problems associated with family breakdown are also causing housing demand. I welcome the Bill and it lays some great foundations, but we need to look at the causes of demand for home ownership, including family breakdown.

5.49 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): In my 16 years as a councillor and as a Member of Parliament, I have never met a nimby in my constituency. I have, however, met people who are passionate about their neighbourhoods, who want to retain a sense of community cohesion, and who want to ensure that their communities can thrive and continue to evolve. In fact, I have learnt that people tend to know what works in their neighbourhoods much better than any Parliament or, particularly, any developer, and in any planning reform it is vital to respect that.

For me, this debate is about the detail of the Bill and how it will work in practice. After all, it is a key piece of legislation, affecting real people, real homes and real lives. In this context, completion notes are, I believe, essential to any planning reform, and I welcome their inclusion in the Bill. In my personal experience, there is no point in reforming planning if it is just going to add to the backlog. We cannot, and should not, have more than 1 million homes that have been granted planning permission but still have not been built. I appreciate that there is no “silver bullet” to deal with a lack of housing stock, but I think that clause 100 will go a long way to help.

By the same token, I welcome the renewed emphasis on local plans and appropriate design codes. I am a great believer in local plans, to the extent that I am surprised that many local authorities still do not have them. However, I believe that one of the key aspects of a local plan is that it appreciates the nuances of individual communities, and with that in mind I have some concerns about the reference in clause 184 to

“provision to make the regime for pavement licences...permanent”.

This goes back to what I said earlier about different areas having different requirements. It should not be a case of “one pavement licence scheme fits all”. For instance, neighbourhoods such as Pimlico, in my constituency, welcome *al fresco* dining and it works there, whereas in Soho we are at saturation point. The streets are far too narrow for it to be practical, and an extended pavement licensing scheme would cause serious problems for residents. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that we make a concerted effort to give local authorities the freedoms and flexibilities that they need, and to ensure in the guidance accompanying the Bill that we respond to local variations without unnecessary centralisation.

Let me make one more point about centralisation. Like others, I have some reservations about the proposed measures that may be contained in secondary legislation, particularly the regulations mentioned in clause 96, on street votes. I realise that the proposal is subject to the affirmative procedure, but I ask the Minister to give planning authorities a meaningful period in which to respond to consultations on changes to planning rules.

I was surprised by the inclusion of clause 187, entitled “Vagrancy and begging”. As Members know, I have been working hard to secure the repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824, and I hope that the Minister will explain what the clause actually entails. I think we all need that explanation. We would not want it to override our provision to repeal the Act in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Section 4 refers to “rogues and vagabonds”. We live in the 21st century, and I have not seen a rogue or a vagabond on the streets of Westminster for some time.

Apart from that, however, I think that the Bill delivers for levelling up across the country, and I welcome it—with those caveats about the Vagrancy Act.

5.53 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on a Bill that is at the heart of the Conservative party's commitment to delivering for each and every constituency in the country. Levelling up and regeneration have the power to drive progress and prosperity in areas that have long been neglected. The place where we live should not determine our opportunity or our life chances, our health or our life expectancy. In that context, there is a great deal to commend in this comprehensive Bill.

I am grateful to Ministers for heeding the widespread concern about the designation of growth zones, which would undoubtedly have put pressure on our precious green spaces. Many of my constituents contacted me to say how worried they were that growth zones would be imposed on them, irrespective for local circumstances and bereft of local democratic accountability, and I am glad that those zones are no more.

I am especially pleased to see the introduction of a new infrastructure levy. Aylesbury is no stranger to development; the town has grown massively since I was born there some 50-odd years ago. What is rather less familiar to the people of Aylesbury is a sufficient level of funding for the infrastructure to support the new houses and the people coming to live in them. Development has to work for all—for old and new residents—and that means that GP surgeries, schools and roads must be completed at the same time as the houses, not after

they are occupied. With further huge housing growth on the cards for Aylesbury in the next 20 years, our already stretched public services will simply not be able to cope without radical improvements to our local infrastructure, so I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State say this afternoon that the new infrastructure levy would be “inescapable”.

Aylesbury is a great place to live, work, visit and invest, but it is no exaggeration to say that it is a town of two halves. People in Bedgrove and Fairford Leys live longer, healthier and wealthier lives than those in Quarrendon, Southcourt and Gatehouse. We have entrenched pockets of deprivation where outcomes in education, health and income are far below those in other parts of the town and in other parts of the country, including much further north.

For example, only 49.7% of children in Aylesbury north-west achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2. The Government's ambition is 90% nationally by 2030, so there is clearly an enormous gap to bridge. For that reason, I firmly believe that levelling up must apply to the whole country, wherever it is needed—whether that is in the north, the midlands or the south. For Aylesbury to flourish, we need to be able to compete on a fairer footing with towns in other parts of the country when it comes to funding from central Government. If I can put it this way, we need a level playing field to level up.

We do not expect the Government to do all the work, let alone provide all the money—far from it. Buckinghamshire Council has strong and exciting plans for the regeneration of Aylesbury town centre. We have seen what can be done with the excellent Exchange quarter. We have a dynamic, able and willing private sector and local entrepreneurs with imagination who are investing in local businesses. Our garden town master plan will open up the town centre and make it more accessible, with cycleways, walkways, greenways and blueways truly bringing natural beauty into the heart of Aylesbury.

In fact, this is all going to prove so popular and irresistible to visitors that we are going to need to find more ways to get them there, so if I could encourage my right hon. Friend the Minister to give his friends in the Department for Transport a little nudge on the Aylesbury link of East West Rail, that would be very welcome. There are some railways in my constituency and my county that we would really like to see.

In conclusion, creating the opportunity for people to succeed in the life they choose is core to the reason why I am a Conservative. This Bill is a step in the right direction and I will enthusiastically vote for it.

5.57 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am grateful to be given the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I want to focus particularly on planning and local government. There is much in the Bill to welcome, around enforcement, around the strengthening of local plans and particularly around getting rid of the pernicious duty to co-operate, which is what completely scuppered our local plan in Sevenoaks, for reasons that were completely inexplicable.

The local authority took a local plan to the planning inspector that would have tripled our housing targets, yet despite being surrounded by local authorities that

[*Laura Trott*]

have similar green belt constrictions to our own, it was chucked out by the planning inspector. There was no ability for the Secretary of State to do anything about it at the time, so the changes in the Bill are really positive and will make a big difference to local authorities.

I echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and others about planning inspectors. These people are unelected and unaccountable and we need to do something about them. At the moment, the powers do not rest with local authorities as they should do; they rest with the planning inspectors. I think all of us here will have examples of planning inspectors going against the national planning policy framework, with no ability for recourse whatsoever. That has to change. In many ways, the new power of the Secretary of State to intervene will restore democratic accountability that is not there at the moment.

I want to make three points to Ministers about the Bill. First, I back up what my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) said: it is not right to force district councils into combined county authorities. The Secretary of State was spot on when he said that one size does not fit all in local government. I have an unbelievably good local district council and I want it to remain; I would be very grateful if the Minister summing up confirmed that no powers will be taken away from my district council without its consent.

Secondly, the Secretary of State talked in his opening remarks about not having dormitory towns, but I have the opposite problem from that faced by many of my colleagues in that we have a thriving local high street yet shops are too often being turned into houses because of huge local demand. Recently, Courtyard Antiques, a much-loved shop that has been trading for a number of years, has been taken over and turned into houses because of the demand. We must look at this; it is too easy for change of use to be put in place and it is depriving our towns of thriving local high streets.

I cannot finish without talking about housing numbers and calculations. That is not part of the Bill, but obviously changes to the NPPF will be needed as a result of it. Many Members have said that we need greater protections for our green belt. It is absurd that in Sevenoaks, which is 93% green belt, the current proposal is to build 12,000 houses on 10 square miles. That is insanity. We must have changes that give some control back to local authorities on establishing need and that take into account green belt where it exists. That will make a significant change to our local communities. We need to set one simple test for ourselves: if it is green belt, it will be protected, and if a planning application is put on the green belt the answer will be “No.”

6.1 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Needless to say I support the Bill, and in the brief time available to me I shall focus on some small elements of it.

We have heard a lot about planning, which speaks to the fear I raised with the Minister for Housing just a week or so ago when I heard that planning had been put in with the levelling-up Bill. I understand all the many reasons, expressed very eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) a few minutes ago, about why housing is so

important to the levelling-up agenda and improving lives and communities, but it is a complex and often controversial conversation to have, as evidenced by the fact that it has dominated today's debate. My ask of the Front Bench, and the Secretary of State in particular, is to not allow the often-difficult debate around planning to delay the broadly supported and fairly straightforward other part of the Bill around empowering local leadership, devolution and bringing forward the vehicles we need to promote investment. I am fearful about that as the Bill progresses, and timing is of the essence in delivering on our promises in this area.

The Bill's progress needs to be swift, not least because devolution is the best way to deliver many of the planning reform outcomes we want. It is evident from the debate that these policies need to be locally led; there is not one size that fits all across the country. Devolving areas such as brownfield funding and having spatial planning done on a wider scale led by combined authorities is a route towards being able to deliver many of the outcomes we would like in the planning element of the Bill. So I urge that we be allowed to crack on with our devolution plans and for them not to be held up by other issues.

We have the most centralised economy in the developed world, and the east midlands is often the place that misses out most as we are the only region with no devolved powers at all. That is incredibly frustrating and we often look with envious eyes across the border to the west midlands or up into South Yorkshire at the additional powers and funding they receive, but we have a plan and we are working through it in tandem with local leaders around the region.

I declare an interest: I am one of those local leaders who is actively bringing forward a devolution plan to Government, and we want to be able to get on with it. By the end of this year, we will have a structure and set of powers negotiated with the Department and the Government, and the only thing we will be waiting for is this legislation. The timing of it is very important. The difference between this Bill becoming an Act in February of next year as opposed to May is not two months but a year in terms of the implementation of our plan, because we have to hold an election for a regional mayor and if we cannot get it done in time for May '23 it may well be May '24. That will delay the outcomes we want to see through all of this and end any chance of delivering those outcomes prior to the next general election, which we should all want to see happen in a timely fashion. Timing is hugely important, as is backing from the Treasury, because the east midlands deal and other deals in the coming years cannot be second rate compared with the ones that have gone before. They must have equivalent powers and the same backing and financial support from the Treasury as the west midlands and Greater Manchester had.

We need a framework that is suitably accountable to the Government and suitably practical for us on a local level. It should be something we can build on, as the west midlands and Greater Manchester built on theirs, to give us additional powers. When we build that relationship and trust with the Government, and when we show we can deliver on those key priorities, we will be trusted with more at a regional level. As this debate has shown, much of the levelling-up agenda needs to address local priorities led by empowered local communities, which is hugely important.

There is a huge opportunity for us to crack on and deliver this. We are only waiting for the Bill to pass, so I urge the Government to make sure we get the simple bits done quickly and allow us, at a local level, to deliver the outcomes we would all like to see.

6.5 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): At the heart of this Bill, which I welcome on behalf of Southend West, is reversing geographical disparity and spreading opportunity. Coastal communities such as the new city of Southend are the unrecognised potential powerhouses of the UK economy.

I make no apologies for reminding the Minister that Southend alone welcomes more than 7 million visitors every year and contributes £3 billion to the Exchequer, yet coastal communities face their own unique challenges—housing being one that was powerfully addressed by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). I therefore hope the Minister can confirm that coastal communities will be given the very highest priority in the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I represent an entirely coastal constituency. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is an absolute travesty that, now we have left the EU, we will be given just a quarter of the sum from the levelling-up fund that we would have had from the European structural fund? And does she agree that the UK Government should make good the damage that Brexit is doing? I hope Southend does just as well. Money for Southend and money for Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

Anna Firth: No, I do not accept that at all. My understanding is that regions have had just as much money as they would have had. I particularly welcome the £27 million of levelling-up funding that Southend has already received, and the £20 million that has been given to the old port of Leigh to enable our famous cockle industry to provide employment well into the future.

Now Southend is a city, we need to go further and faster. A key part of this Bill is recognising that levelling up means restoring civic pride and spreading opportunity through investment in culture. For Southend that means becoming an international centre for culture and, of course, following Bradford as the UK's next city of culture.

Levelling up must mean delivering a long overdue shot in the arm for a once ignored community. Southend has an international award-winning music and performance charity for people with learning disabilities. It is the first of its kind in the world, and I am grateful to Ministers for engaging with me on this project.

The Music Man Project was founded by the remarkable David Stanley BEM, and it oversees a global network of special needs music educators from Southend to South Africa. Students develop confidence and a clear sense of identity by giving hundreds of largescale public performances, including at the London Palladium and the Royal Albert Hall. Through the power of music, students with learning disabilities in Southend gain high-quality skills, becoming far better equipped for the workplace. Despite being an international beacon of disability potential, the Music Man Project does not yet have a specialist permanent facility of its own. It needs

premises that would enable disabled people to access specialist music education in an equivalent way to someone who is not disabled. It needs premises that would enable us to host concerts to showcase disability talent, record disability music making and enable collaborations between non-disabled and disabled creative artists. There can be no more deserving project for levelling-up funding than to take this once ignored community from isolation to opportunity. I hope that the Minister will confirm in his winding-up speech that projects such as this will be prioritised for levelling-up funding.

6.10 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I warmly welcome this Bill, particularly the 12 missions that are being put on a statutory footing. I say that because my mission in this place is to make Burnley, Padiham and all of our villages the best places to live, work, study, relax and raise a family, and that is what those missions talk to for me, be it on income, employment and closing that gap with the rest of the country, or improving our public transport. Someone who lives in a village such as Worsthorne in my constituency has one bus an hour into Burnley town centre; that is the one public transport link they have into our economic centre, which then pushes them out to those employment zones. That is the kind of thing we need to fix.

We want to see our education and skills provision improved. We have brilliant provision in Burnley, with Burnley College, an expanding UCLan—University of Central Lancashire—campus, and the secondary schools and primary schools that I visit every week that are doing amazing things. That is what our levelling-up fund bid was all about; that is the thing that is allowing UCLan to expand and go from a couple of hundred students to a couple of thousand students, giving that opportunity to so many more people. We want those missions—those transport missions, health missions and employment missions—at the centre of every conversation we have, whether it is with Government, civil servants in Whitehall, Lancashire County Council, the NHS or anyone else.

I also wish to pay tribute to Lancashire County Council, which this week is debating its own levelling-up fund bid to the Department. That will see more money come in to Burnley and Padiham. It includes active travel zones, living neighbourhoods and getting money into places that need it more than anywhere else. I am talking about places such as Queensgate, Daneshouse, Padiham, Hapton and Worsthorne. That is exactly what we want to see.

I also want to comment on the planning aspects of the Bill, because they are really important. In Burnley, our local plan, adopted by the Labour-run council, is causing huge issues for local residents. It sees a huge amount of our green belt built over, despite opposition from local residents. So I am delighted that the Bill increases the status of neighbourhood plans, so that parish councils in places such as Worsthorne and Hapton get an equal weighting. I would be delighted if the Minister offered assurances to residents in those parishes that, through this legislation, their views will have far more weight than they have done so far. The street votes idea—the idea that residents can take things into their own hands and decide on the kind of houses they want to see—is really important.

[Antony Higginbotham]

In the 50 seconds I have left, I wish to comment on two other things. The first is compulsory purchase orders and the other is houses in multiple occupation. I hope we can get both of those things right. I know that HMOs are a difficult subject and are not covered in this Bill at the minute, but the issue vexes my constituents, causes immense anger and frustration and raises questions. They want the same level of say over the occupation of those houses as they have over the housing itself. We want a thriving university centre in Burnley with flats and student accommodation, and that includes HMOs, but in some of our villages that is not the right thing. I ask the Minister to work with me during the passage of this Bill to look at whether HMOs and CPOs are areas we can improve.

6.14 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a pleasure and a privilege to speak on Second Reading of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and to follow the passionate speeches from Members on both sides of the House.

The Bill is incredibly important to communities such as those in my constituency of Ynys Môn—communities that have lost industry and been left behind by decades of neglect and underfunding. One of the 12 levelling-up missions that form the cornerstone of the Bill is pride of place. The Government want to improve people's pride in their town centre and engagement in local culture and community. That pride of place mission is particularly important to Holyhead in my Ynys Môn constituency.

Holyhead was once described as the “pride of the principality” and

“one of the most splendid refuge harbours and packet stations in the universe”.

In recent years, this once prosperous port town has lost its glow. It now has the dubious honour of hosting one of the most deprived areas in Wales.

We have incredible scenery, incredible people and incredible heritage, but the piecemeal application of EU funding by the Welsh Government has left the town centre looking and feeling rundown and neglected. We need to restore a sense of pride. The Bill provides the critical legislative tools to make that more feasible, while funding through the levelling up, community ownership, community renewal and shared prosperity funds provides the capital and revenue finance to make it a reality.

What needs to happen now is for the community of Holyhead to come together and make this happen, and I am delighted to say that that is already happening. Last year, the Isle of Anglesey County Council was successful in its bid to the UK Government's community renewal fund, with £2.7 million awarded to six different projects. Môn CF, based in Holyhead, is using some of that funding to support the development of local micro-businesses. A total of £250,000 is being used by Menter Iaith Môn to promote and support the Welsh language across the island. And now stakeholders in Holyhead, including the town council, St Cybi's Church, the Maritime Museum and the Ucheldre Centre, have pulled together with Anglesey Council to make a bid for the levelling-up fund. That bid will provide up to £20 million to celebrate our fabulous port heritage and be the starting point to turn the town centre into a go-to hub for locals and visitors.

Before the pandemic, more than 40 cruise ships berthed in Holyhead each year with over 20,000 passengers. Most stayed on board or bypassed the town for a coach trip to Snowdonia. Just two miles down the road from Holyhead, the seaside village of Trearddur Bay welcomes thousands of families for beach and sailing holidays every year, but most find no attraction to draw them into Holyhead. For a community so reliant on tourism, this is a travesty. Holyhead has the potential to offer so much for visitors and locals alike.

I am heartened by the approach of local councillors such as Trefor Lloyd Hughes, who said of Holyhead:

“In common with other towns in the UK, out of town shopping has had a major detrimental effect on the high street and many believe it is now impossible to bring them back to their glory days...We need to look ahead to the next 10, 15, 20, 30 years. I believe we all need to work together to make Holyhead a place that our young people and future generations are proud to call home.”

The Bill has the power to do just that by giving our community leaders the tools to regenerate communities. I am delighted to speak on Second Reading and to play a part in the start of an exciting period of transformation for places such as Holyhead. This is an opportunity to bring the community together—regardless of political persuasion—to create true pride of place, and to transition to a better and more prosperous Holyhead town.

6.18 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to close this debate on behalf of the Opposition. When it comes to levelling up, we have had a few rounds of departmental questions, the White Paper, the Bill and, today, nearly six hours of very good debate. There is only one question left in front of us: when it comes to levelling up and the Government's approach to levelling up, is this it? With our huge regional inequalities, is what is in the first third of this Bill really it? When it comes to the wasted potential of the nations and regions in our country, is this it? When it comes to the over-centralisation of this country, is this really it? The Minister for Housing seems to think that maybe it is, but I say gently to him: if this really was a comprehensive Bill aimed at tackling the regional inequalities that are holding us back, it would not have been necessary to bulk it out with a planning Bill as well. That is the reality: the first third of the Bill is levelling up, and two thirds are about planning. The reality, too, is that there are no answers in here either to the immediate cost of living challenges we face, or to the long-term structural questions that we as a country must address—more evidence that this Government are out of touch and out of ideas.

Hon. Members should not take my word for it: the Office for National Statistics report clearly shows that, far from levelling up, things are getting worse, and the excoriating report from the Public Accounts Committee shows that the approach so far has been a very poor one indeed. Is this really it?

This debate has been a good one. I know the Minister is a listener and will reflect on the contributions that have been made, but he will certainly have heard a lot that would improve the Bill. The Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), should have been drafted in to help to write it because his speech was about two

fundamental things: first, more money, ending the beauty parades of small pots of funding, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said, and properly funding our communities so they can build their futures; and secondly, new powers for existing Mayors and access to those powers for communities that do not currently have them. That was a really good starter for where we could go with the Bill.

Some reality was injected into the debate by my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who talked movingly about just how hard things are for people right now and the struggle people are facing just to make the bills work, finding that there is too much week or too much month left at the end for their paycheques to cover. There is not enough in the Bill to address that. Again we see the promise of jam tomorrow, but there is no value in jam tomorrow when there is not bread today.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) also injected some reality around cuts to local authorities. We talk about this on the Labour Benches a lot, but we used to see Government Back Benchers standing up to say how much they had been winning out of levelling up so far. The reality, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) said in her opening speech, is that even those winners, through the levelling up fund, the towns fund or the future high streets fund, are losers because of the cuts to their local authorities. She made those points very well.

My hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) also made moving points about decent housing. I hope that we can feature that in Committee, because it is impossible for people to build a life and to build communities, to have that solid foundation to reach their potential and to help their family to reach theirs, if they are worried about their housing, or if their housing is of poor quality or a detriment to their health. We must aspire to much better for our fellow citizens.

Finally on the Labour Benches, I must refer to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), and the points she made about London. Hon. Members on the Government Benches also said this, but it is important to understand that across every community there are pockets of deprivation. Levelling up fails if it becomes a conversation of north versus south or the rest of the country versus London. That does not serve anybody, and my commitment to her is that she will never see us do that.

There were an awful lot of very good contributions from those on the Government Benches, particularly those that majored on planning—I counted 27, and I think I got them all—but there were also good contributions in interventions on the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State. For the moment, I think there was contentment that, broadly, the Secretary of State largely seemed to think that he could accommodate all those significant and strongly felt views about local decision making. We want to see that too. I think it will get harder. I say to the Minister, and I know this is his instinct, that he will have to bring people with him on this. There is inevitably a trade-off at some point between reaching the volumes we need to address our housing

crisis and having respect for communities and local decision making. Nobody thinks that is easy, and that ought to be dealt with. We will have plenty of time in Committee to do that. If we are not going to do levelling up, we might as well do that in its stead.

To make a few points of my own, four months ago, the Secretary of State presented the levelling up White Paper to this House. After all the big promises and slogans, before elections and after, it offered little other than the usual: governing by press release, with the reality never quite matching up. The one thing in there was that levelling up, which, as the Prime Minister has reiterated, was defined as the core mission of this Government, would have 12 missions. The hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) made an excellent case for them, although I would gently say to him that they also served to highlight the failings of this Government over the past 12 years on education, housing and crime—12 admissions of failure to cover 12 years of wasted time in Government.

Antony Higginbotham: One of those missions relates to healthcare. It was the Labour Government before 2010 who closed Burnley's A&E. It was the same Labour Government who forced our schools to have new PFI buildings, which has seen money taken away from educating children and instead paying for expensive contracts. So the hon. Gentleman might just want to think about whether a Labour Government have all the answers.

Alex Norris: I will always think carefully about the contributions the hon. Gentleman makes, but I am afraid that he will struggle to win an argument with Labour on NHS investment. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members are all back then—nice to see you. I will take you all on if you want. *[Interruption.]* Even the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien)—but I shall save him for Committee.

On the 12 new levelling-up missions, which are the centrepiece of the White Paper, and so important to the Government that they want to place a statutory duty on Ministers to report on their progress—what a big and bold claim that is—we now see that they come with a rather crucial addendum, which is that, if the Government decide that they do not like them any more, or perhaps think that they will not meet them, they can just do away with them altogether: when they fail, they can move the goalposts. Measured by actions, I am afraid that that is how important those missions actually are to the Government, who cannot even commit themselves to them. In that sense, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan said, they are not worth the paper they are written on.

We are told today that those missions are a core part of, and a key moment in, levelling up this country. I find that hard to believe, for the reasons that I have stated. But if they are going to be so impactful that they will create the change on which there is, I think, a universally held view across those on all Benches, why is there no impact assessment? Why is there no impact assessment on regions either? I hope that the Minister will give a commitment that before we enter Committee we will have the chance to see that so that we can debate the facts of the matter.

Levelling up was supposed to be about getting all parts of the country firing on all cylinders, but yet again we do not see that. Another key example: where is the

[Alex Norris]

community power in this? If the levelling-up portion of the Bill is really about saying to people, “We want you to have greater control over the state of your community and its future”, why does that stop at a sub-regional level? That is still a very long distance away from communities. We will certainly seek to add to that in Committee, and I hope Ministers will be in listening mode on it, because there is a great deal of expectation beyond this place that we are going to see more devolution to communities. We want to see powers and funds devolved from Whitehall to town hall, and beyond, so that communities are empowered to make these decisions for themselves.

One of the things in the levelling-up section of the Bill that we are pleased to see is further devolution of power and all communities having the chance to access those highest levels of power. However, I cannot quite understand why that comes with the caveat that they must accept the Government’s preferred model, which is a Mayor. The message from the Government seems to be that they are willing to devolve power but only on their own terms. That does not feel like proper devolution. The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and I frequently talk about devolution of power to Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. I agreed with much of what he said but, in our access to tier 3 powers, which we both want and is wanted universally across Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, I do not see why we should have to take a Mayor as well. I do not see how those two propositions are linked, and I have not heard anything in the debate that has moved me further on that.

The Minister will also, whether in closing or in Committee, need to address the important points made by the hon. Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) about provisions in the Bill that allow powers currently held by district councils to be drawn up from them to combined authority level without their consent. That is a really challenging provision that will not hold for much longer.

As I say, this Bill is not enough, but it is what is now in front of us, and we will seek in Committee to make it better. We will also, I warn the Minister in advance, help the Government by adding back into the Bill some previous Government commitments that are missing from it. I hope greatly that they will want to take them on.

Let me turn to the planning side of the Bill. We welcome planning reform. We want to see the building of genuinely affordable housing. We want communities with good services and thriving town centres. We are glad to see the back of some of the worst excesses of previous policy. This is a much better version than what was publicly announced a year-plus ago. But the reforms could go further to change the system to provide greater support for planning authorities, and to deliver more say and power back to communities. Again, we will seek to do that in Committee. I hope that in his closing remarks, the Minister for Housing might do slightly better than the Secretary of State did on the infrastructure levy. It is an area of significant interest that has come up in a number of colleagues’ contributions, and when the Secretary of State was pressed on it, he was unable to say at what level he thought the levy would be set. That will not do. I understand that that is a complex calculation, but the Opposition ought at least to have heard an

assurance that it would not be less than current section 106 moneys, because I do not think that anyone has argued for less money for infrastructure. This “We will tell you later” approach does not work. We do not want to have to get through the whole Bill process only to be told that the level will be set in regulation later.

Mr Betts: I want to raise with my hon. Friend an issue about local democracy and local plans, which the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) mentioned. A local plan must be consistent with national planning policies, and correctly so. However, if there is a conflict between a local plan and national development management policy, national policy holds sway and is given priority in any determination. How can it be that a local plan can be drawn up in full consultation with the local community, but if the Secretary of State later decides to change the national policy, it will override the consulted-upon local plan?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. There are 200 clauses in this Bill, so if there are 20 words in each, that is 4,000 words, give or take. On the planning side, however, only three words really matter: “to any extent”. They mean that the national plan overrides the local plan under any circumstances if that is what the Secretary of State wishes. I hope the Minister will say in summing up that he does not think that that is the right thing to do, that it is not the Government’s intention and that it will be changed in the Bill. I do not think that that can hold.

We will not seek to stand in the way of the Bill at this stage, but significant changes and additions will be necessary if it is to deliver the change that communities up and down the country are waiting for. After the long wait, it is no great surprise that the Bill is so symptomatic of the Government’s whole approach to levelling up—high on rhetoric, low on delivery. The Government just cannot seem to follow through and deliver properly on levelling up. Perhaps that is because deep down, they are not sure whether everyone on their side really believes in it. They are hamstrung by the Treasury—that is a matter of record—riven by division and drifting towards no defined point. But the Opposition feel this in our bones. It is why we are here, and we will fight tooth and nail to make sure that the Government do not waste this opportunity to deliver power back to the people and communities that we all represent.

6.32 pm

The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew): It is my pleasure to deliver the closing speech on Second Reading of the Government’s Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. I begin by thanking hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the House for their thoughtful contributions to this afternoon’s debate. Before I address some of the points that have been raised, I should say that accompanying each of the 12 missions in our levelling up White Paper, enshrined in law by this Bill, is a clear commitment from this Government to work with all political parties, across all four nations and all tiers of government, to build a stronger, fairer and more united country after covid.

Despite the negativity we have heard from the Opposition Front Benchers, I am pleased to report that when I go around the country, I find that Mayors and leaders of

all political persuasions are keen to work with us to deliver this mission. I believe that the Bill will help us to make this shared vision a reality by supporting local leaders to take back control of regeneration, end the blight of empty shops and deliver the quality homes that communities need. It is about giving them the tools that they need to deliver, along with the other major pieces of work that Government are doing in this area. I am grateful to hon. Members who continue to engage constructively with us on the provisions of this Bill so that it delivers the transformative change that we all want.

Liam Byrne: Could the Minister say a word about how he will use the missions to drive the reduction of inequalities in our country? One approach that the Labour Government tried was the use of floor targets in neighbourhood renewal funds. He may have a different approach, but that detail is terribly important.

Stuart Andrew: The right hon. Gentleman will have seen that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) just reminded me, we have a whole annexe with the measures on that and we will be held to account by Parliament. That is the right thing to do. I cannot recall there ever being missions like this before Parliament so that every single Member of the House can challenge the Government on whether they have reached those objectives; it is a real opportunity for Parliament to hold the Government to account on those missions.

I echo the sentiment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he said in his opening remarks that we will continue to work closely with right hon. and hon. Members to further hone and refine the legislation before it is put on the statute book. We want to build on our £4.8 billion levelling-up fund which, as hon. Members know well, is supercharging connectivity by building the next generation of roads, bridges, cycle networks and digital infrastructure. Through the UK shared prosperity fund, more than £2.6 billion is being spent to help people in the most deprived parts of the country to access more opportunities and pursue better careers. With more than £2 billion pledged by my Department over the next three years, we are helping local authorities to redouble their efforts to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, building on the incredible achievements in the pandemic.

I will turn to some of the issues that were raised today. One issue that hon. Members on both sides of the House spoke about, including my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton)—I understand that they are calling themselves “levelling-up central”—and the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and my hon. Friends the Members for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), is the importance of breathing new life into our high streets, towns and city centres, all of which were especially hard hit by the covid pandemic and now require investment and support to adapt and thrive.

Many hon. Members spoke about the importance of entrusting councils, which know their areas best, to get on with the job and to green light regeneration schemes in their areas. We agree, which is why the Bill liberates

councils to more easily redesign and regenerate their communities. The Bill allows local authorities to hold high street rental auctions so that landlords are encouraged to put empty buildings to good use. It makes the temporary freedoms around *al fresco* dining permanent, so that we can create more buzzing vibrant high streets. I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and I will take her thoughts further—well, I would not be allowed not to do so.

Most importantly, the Bill makes it much easier for councils to issue compulsory purchase orders so that they can repurpose boarded-up shops and derelict sites. All those changes are accompanied by a series of common-sense reforms that will mean that no council has to pay over the odds in hope value to landowners when it issues compulsory purchase orders—a small change that will deliver big savings for the public purse. We will publish further details on how we intend to use those powers in the Bill. It should hopefully go without saying that we are more than willing to engage with hon. Members in the process.

One issue that is guaranteed to provoke lively debate in this place is planning reform, as we have seen today. I was going to list all the hon. Members who have raised planning concerns with me, but I suspect that I would run out of time. I am extremely grateful to all hon. Members who have engaged with the Government and with me on that issue over many months. We have listened intently to their feedback, and that is reflected in the fresh reforms that we have set out in the Bill.

Some may defend the status quo and question whether there is still a case for planning reform amid everything else that is going on, but let us look again at the facts. It currently takes on average seven years for councils to prepare a local plan, and, in some cases, five years before a spade even hits the ground. Response rates to a typical pre-planning consultation are around 3%, and that drops to less than 1% in local plan consultations. I say to hon. Members that we cannot deliver the homes that this country needs without planning reform, and we cannot level up communities without the improvements set out in the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) rightly pointed out, we need these homes. I commend him for his excellent report and the proposals he has made to help people to build their own homes.

This Bill will simplify the content of local plans and standardise the process in a much shorter time, with improved local engagement. With more local plans in place, there will be far less speculative development, giving communities transparency and a real voice to influence what is built in their area. Our digital reforms will also move us beyond the days of laminated notices on lamp posts to fully accessible planning applications that people can view on their iPads and smartphones at home.

I am, of course, still continuing to listen to hon. Members. On the issue of local housing need and the targets, I should make it clear that they are not targets. They are there to inform the development of a plan, but in reality we know from listening to colleagues that they have been treated rather stringently. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his opening comments, we need a more sensible approach and we are looking at that at pace.

Ben Bradley: My right hon. Friend rightly points out that planning often leads to a heated debate in this Chamber and can be quite a complicated issue. He also knows that the other elements of the Bill such as devolution, locally-led development corporations and all the other factors can have a huge beneficial impact on our areas. Can he assure me that the complicated planning debates and discussions among colleagues will not be allowed to delay the outcome on those other much more straightforward and well-supported parts of the Bill?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is challenging me to expose my parliamentary expertise, but this is really in the hands of the Committee, so I would ask him to kindly lobby members of the Committee to help me get the Bill through, and I can help him with his aim.

Let me mention a key element that people have been raising, which is the issue of the five-year land supply. If an area has an up-to-date local plan, it will no longer need to demonstrate such a land supply, and that is so that we can stop speculative development.

Chris Grayling: Part of the problem we face—for example, in an area where there are small local district councils in charge of planning—is that, however much Ministers may say that targets are not targets, the local officers see them as such and see their task as being to implement a number that has landed on their desk. It is really important during this process that we break free of that. One of the reasons that councils are taking so long to form their plans is, frankly, that it takes so long for them to work out what on earth to do with the targets. Can my right hon. Friend please bear in mind, as he takes the Bill through, how we send clear messages to councils about what they are and what they are not expected to do?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. He knows—we have had a number of conversations on this very issue—that these are the things we are looking at. I look forward to bringing them forward as part of the Bill.

I want to touch on the issue of build out. I have heard loud and clear from colleagues, and so has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, about the issue of developers seeming to take a long time from approval to build houses. These commencement orders and an agreed rate of delivery will, we hope, help us to get such permissions built out much more quickly.

A number of Members—my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) and others—have raised their concerns about the national development management policies. One of the key aims of the Bill is to reduce the administrative burden on local councils so that they can concentrate on delivering high-quality, locally-led plans. That is why, through this Bill, we hope to shift the onus of delivering on national priorities to central Government through introducing a set of national development management policies. These policies will cover the most important national planning issues facing the sector, including net zero, tackling climate change and making sure that we are also dealing with heritage issues and protections of green belt.

To those who are concerned that these provisions will somehow override local plans, I would say that that is not the intention. The intention is to produce swifter,

slimmer plans to remove the need for generic issues that apply universally, which will help us to reduce time-consuming duplication, and to ensure that local plans are more locally focused and relevant to the local communities. I hope that, during the passage of this Bill, we will be able to give more assurance on that.

Andrew Gwynne: The Minister will know that Stockport, which is one of the two councils that covers my constituency, pulled out of the Greater Manchester spatial framework, largely because even though Manchester and Salford were taking a large chunk of its housing allocation, its councillors were against green belt development.

Stockport is a very tightly constrained borough surrounded by green belt. It is now in the process of developing a local plan, but it will have to meet even higher housing targets. Will the Minister guarantee that if Stockport develops a local plan that meets the needs of Stockport but saves and protects the green belt around Stockport, he will support it?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Member knows that I cannot comment on individual plans. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) would be the first to apply for an urgent question asking me to explain why I prejudged a local plan. What I would say, in general terms, is that it is clear that local authorities can argue the constraints that they may have, and his local authority may be planning to do that; I do not know.

Let me move on, because I am conscious of time. I turn to second homes, because, if I did not, my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) and others, would be rather angry with me. We have put provisions in the Bill to try to help on that, and I know that she wants us to go further. I have made a commitment to come down to the south-west to hold a series of roundtables and see the issues for myself. We will see what else can be done as we go through the Bill's passage.

Rachael Maskell: In addition to second homes, we have the challenge of Airbnbs, which of course the Bill does not mention, and yet they are blighting our communities as they take out existing stock and dominate new stock that is being built. Will the Minister look again—it is urgent—to put an amendment into the Bill to address that serious issue?

Stuart Andrew: In fact, I had a meeting just this morning to talk about that very issue. I will report back in due course, if that is okay.

Tim Farron: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I concur with the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), but will he also carefully consider introducing an amendment in Committee that would make second home ownership a separate category of plan and use? That is obviously the clearest way in which we could control second home ownership in communities such as mine and in other parts of the country. Will he at least consider that in the coming weeks?

Stuart Andrew: I am keen to ensure that we get it right. Of course I will consider it, because I want to ensure that we consider all aspects. There could, however,

be unintended consequences in other parts of the country. We will want to ensure that we get it right, but I will look at all options. I have made that commitment to numerous colleagues who have raised the issue with me.

I turn to infrastructure. I want to mention in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who seems to secure a Westminster Hall debate on this issue every other week. I congratulate him on that. Many have asked what the Bill means for our infrastructure: our roads, bridges, schools, GP surgeries and so on. This is where I believe communities stand to really benefit from our reforms. All of us know that, without new infrastructure, when people see new homes going up in their community, too often they fear the worst. They fear that it will result in more congested roads, busier trains and fewer services to go around.

I hope that the proposals that we have set out in the Bill will go a long way towards allaying those fears for good. I am determined to continue working with hon. Members on both sides of the House to do so. That starts with sweeping away the old, opaque section 106 agreements and replacing them with one simple infrastructure levy that is set and raised by local authorities. The new levy will be fairer, simpler and more transparent, and it will be imposed on the final value of a development. It is important to stress that, with the housing market as buoyant as it is, the levy will easily be able to respond to market conditions. Put simply, when prices go up, so will the levy.

Crucially, our Bill also requires councils to prepare an infrastructure delivery strategy, setting out how and when the levy receipts will be used. That means new development will always bring with it the new schools, nurseries and GP surgeries that communities want and need. I have listened, in particular to the debates secured by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire. He knows that I will be meeting my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care next week to see what more we can do to ensure that local health services are more involved with the planning process.

We will run a test and learn approach. We are holding a series of roundtables with stakeholders because we want to get it right. It is important to remember that councils can borrow against the levy, so they can bring the infrastructure in as soon as the development is happening.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will have heard what I said in my speech about the gross added value method of charging for the infrastructure levy, which will act as a disincentive to developers to put added value on environmental and design matters. Will he please discuss that matter with me to see whether we can use a better method by capturing the increase in land value?

Stuart Andrew: I certainly make that commitment. My hon. Friend raised that point with me earlier this afternoon. There are some points there that I want to further explore, so I will ensure I meet him in the next week or so.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister say something in his summing up on the points that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) raised, and

which we discussed earlier with his colleague the Secretary of State, to reassure us that there is no intention to devolve upwards and that the powers of district councils will remain as they are without being poached by some CCA?

Stuart Andrew: I hope my hon. Friend saw the enthusiastic nodding on the Front Bench, which will give him the reassurance he seeks.

The Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill represents a major milestone in our journey towards building a stronger, fairer and more united country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) said, it is for all parts of the country. It confers on local leaders a suite of powers to regenerate our high streets, towns and cities, and gives them unprecedented freedoms to build the homes and infrastructure that communities want and need, following all the BIDEN principles—that is, the Secretary of State's, not the President of the United States. I also take on board the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) about the environmental standards of homes. I hope to do some more work on that in the coming weeks.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has not responded to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) about publishing an impact assessment. Will he confirm that one will be published, and will he let us know when?

Stuart Andrew: Yes, there will be, and it will come at the second stage of Committee.

Munira Wilson: The Minister talked about building the homes that communities want and need, and he made a commitment to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) about not devolving powers upwards. Last year, central Government pushed through permitted development rights, which enable developers to put whole storeys on top of existing buildings, causing misery for leaseholders even when residents and local planning authorities have opposed them. Will he look at rescinding those powers in the Bill?

Stuart Andrew: No, I will not.

As I said, these new freedoms will help communities to repurpose and redesign old unused sites, and turn them into new vibrant communities. The Bill allows us to become a regeneration nation. It will support the housing and construction sector to play its part in growing our economy, creating well-paid jobs and levelling up. At the same time, the Bill brings our ageing analogue planning system into the digital age, with residents able to share their views at the touch of a smartphone. It places local people at the heart of a smoother, simpler more streamlined planning system using street votes, new design codes and community-led plans.

Most importantly, by enshrining the 12 missions of our levelling-up White Paper into law and offering every part of England a devolution deal by 2030, the Bill fulfils our promise to the British people—a fundamental promise upon which the Government were elected—to take power away from Whitehall and place it directly in the hands of communities, so that they can determine

[Stuart Andrew]

their future and realise their full potential. That is the pledge we made and that is what the Bill delivers. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 20 September 2022.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 51(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown or another public authority; and

(2) the payment out of the National Loans Fund, the Consolidated Fund or money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of the National Loans Fund, the Consolidated Fund or money so provided.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees or other charges;

(2) the imposition of an Infrastructure Levy; and

(3) the payment of sums into the National Loans Fund or the Consolidated Fund.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Import of Animals and Animal Products and Approved Countries (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 30 March in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (9 JUNE)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Thursday 9 June the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on-

(1) the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Social Housing and Building Safety not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and

(2) the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that business, or 5pm, whichever is the later, and proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Parks and Green Spaces: Manchester, Gorton

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

6.56 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the importance of parks and green spaces in my constituency, which I am immensely proud of, and to make a case for urban parks and green spaces to be a national priority. My constituency celebrates its diversity and our parks are often where different cultures meet—in exercise, play and enjoyment.

During the covid-19 pandemic, all of us gained a new appreciation for the outdoors. In Manchester, Gorton, terraces and flats are the most common form of housing. Research shows that many of my constituents have just 1 square metre of garden space. For many during the pandemic, our parks were the only options for outdoor space, and Manchester's parks saw a 30% increase in visitor numbers during that period.

I believe that my constituency is served by some of the best urban parks in the north of England, and they are a part of our British history. For example, Alexandra Park was one of Britain's first municipal parks. That beautiful space has been at the heart of Manchester's history, with public meetings addressed by Keir Hardie and James Larkin, among others. Alex Park played a unique role in the fight for women's suffrage; in 1908, Emmeline Pankhurst addressed a crowd of thousands there.

In 1978, the Rock Against Racism northern carnival attracted 40,000 people—people say that this was “the day it became cool to be anti-racist”. It is also home to the Manchester Caribbean carnival, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Over the past few years, the park has been restored, thanks to the support of Manchester City Council. Volunteers work not only through an active and passionate friends group, but through a heritage group dedicated to promoting Alex Park's radical history.

In Fallowfield, we are lucky to have Platt Fields Park, another beautiful historic park that is home to the friends of Platt Fields, which was Britain's first park friends group. Platt Fields is important for Manchester's Asian community. It is home to the Mega Mela and hosts Holi celebrations, as well as Britain's largest “Eid in the Park”, which was attended by more than 20,000 people this year. Manchester Urban Diggers has repurposed former bowling greens and turned them into a community market garden, helping local people to grow their own food in the heart of the city.

Similarly, in Levenshulme, the Friends of Chapel Street Park have created a community garden on their disused bowling green. In just 18 months, thanks to local community volunteers, an overgrown and inaccessible space has become a bustling resource for the Chapel Street area.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Afzal Khan: In Gorton, the innovative Friends of Debdale Park have placed their green space at the centre of their community, running projects such as the Debdale Nature Centre, the Men's Shed and the Debdale ramblers, to name just a few.

The users of Birchfields Park value biodiversity. Last year, I was lucky enough to be asked to plant a sapling in Birchfield. That tree is the first of 470 across the Rusholme area, helping to repair Manchester's green lungs after centuries of industry. Highfield Country Park and Nutsford Vale are doing the same. These former industrial sites have been transformed over the past few decades into green open spaces. A special mention must go to the enthusiastic Friends of Crowcroft Park in Longsight, who have recently relaunched their group. We can already see the benefits they are bringing to the park.

There are so many other green spaces, large and small, across Manchester, Gorton, including George V Fields, Taylor Street, Godfrey Ermin, Gorton Park, Sunny Brow, Greenbank, Cringle, Manley and West Point Gardens, as well as sports fields and allotments, all serving the community in ways that are too many to mention. I put on the record my thanks to Manchester's team of dedicated park rangers, who make everything that happens in Manchester's parks possible. I also thank all the community groups and volunteers for giving up their time and for their hard work. I am told that there have been more than 11,240 volunteer hours across Manchester in the past year, but I suspect that that is an underestimate. I hope that the Minister will join me in thanking them for their hard work.

Friends of the Earth states that Manchester is seventh in the list of areas in England that are most in need of investment in green spaces. We cannot ignore how access to green space intersects with race, class and health inequality. Individuals who visit outdoor spaces regularly are more likely to live healthier, active lifestyles, which is something that any Government should encourage.

People residing in cities are disproportionately impacted by polluted environments and have restricted access to green spaces. In my constituency I see at first hand the impact of that inequality. We cannot talk about green spaces without considering climate change and the environment. Not only do urban parks and green spaces have a positive impact on the local environment; they also help in small ways to combat global climate change. Biodiversity in urban areas is vital, specifically in supporting the pollinators and bees that are crucial for 70% of the world's crops.

We also know that in urban areas rain is not absorbed into the ground due to the materials used for roads and pavements. Without surfaces to absorb the water, the risk of floods increases. We have seen severe flooding across Manchester in recent years, and the result is devastating to families. That is why Manchester is developing sponge parks, which suck in water from surrounding hard landscaping, using it onsite.

Poor air quality is a serious threat to human health. In Manchester, hospital admission rates for children with asthma are double the national average. Trees, shrubs and grasses can improve air quality and keep harmful, traffic-related pollution away from where children play and congregate.

There is an elephant in the room that we cannot ignore, and that is the impact of austerity on our parks. Since 2010, cuts to local government funding have

[Afzal Khan]

meant that Manchester has been forced to make more than £420 million of savings and has had its spending power cut by 15%. Having been a councillor until 2015, I know that local authorities face heartbreaking decisions when managing budgets. Despite that, Manchester has set out an ambitious plan for our parks. Since 2019, the city council has invested more than £1 million in the parks in Manchester, Gorton. I am pleased that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, announced just today his green spaces fund, which will allow communities across Greater Manchester to apply for grants to improve or create local green spaces.

That dedication locally needs to be matched by commitment nationally. Our parks and green spaces need additional funding from the Government for green infrastructure, for accessibility and, crucially, for maintenance. There is no doubt that capital investment is desperately needed, but that is no use when it comes to maintaining the basics. We know that £190 million has been lost from parks budgets nationally in five years, and that those cuts have not been equitable: the north-west is one of the areas most affected.

In 2017, the Communities and Local Government Committee wrote of parks that

“failure to match their value and the contribution they make with the resources they need to be sustained could have severe consequences.”

That was five years ago. Why has it taken until 2022 for the £9 million parks fund to be announced? That £9 million is a far cry from the £190 million lost from parks budgets. This is hardly levelling up.

I am sure the Minister agrees that parks and green spaces are incredibly important. Long-term investment allows parks to be maintained and to become hubs of community engagement, areas where nature and biodiversity are protected, and a place for working families to relax after a day at work. I am keen to hear from him the Government's plans to support parks and green spaces.

7.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing this Adjournment debate on a subject that matters a lot to all MPs in this House. He is a committed champion and advocate for green spaces in his constituency; we heard about the breadth of that advocacy in his very good speech. Who can blame him, when his constituency is among the greenest in the country? Not a lot of people would immediately guess that 89% of neighbourhoods in Manchester, Gorton have a high level of accessible green space within 15 minutes' walk.

The hon. Member touched on some of the fantastic things that are happening in his constituency. He mentioned places such as Gore Brook valley, which offers locals access to a butterfly garden, historic pubs, a grade II listed church, a water sports centre, 200-year-old cottages and handsome Victorian terraces. There are also outstanding family parks such as Alexandra Park and Platts Field Park, which had the first ever “Friends of” group, as he mentioned.

Members of this House do not always share the same politics, but I think we all have the same enthusiasm for our parks. During the covid pandemic, as the hon.

Member says, we appreciated them like never before; they were incredibly useful in keeping our sanity and our health during that difficult period. With the worst of covid now behind us, it is right that we reflect on what keeps parks going and on how we keep them looking brilliant and being useful.

The hon. Member rightly drew attention to the many roles that parks have, from sucking up water—that vivid image that he conjured up—to being a place where communities interact with one another. They also host important events for particular communities; it sounds as if similar things happen in his constituency as in mine on the edge of Leicester.

The hon. Member asked me to draw attention to and praise the work of the community groups that have put in 11,000-plus hours of community work in Greater Manchester. It is a pleasure to do so; some fantastic things are being done. I draw particular attention to the Litter Wombles—I do not know whether they operate in his constituency, but they are a wonderful social movement with huge numbers of people making our country tidier and nicer. I pay great tribute to all those groups.

The hon. Member touched on several subjects to which I will try to do justice, including planning. The Government are committed to retaining the beauty and the majesty of places, so our national planning policy requires that planning processes seek to deliver

“high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places”.

That includes encouraging the creation of appropriate green and public space within new developments. The national planning policy framework makes explicit just how important beauty and design are to development across the country, and to

“creating better places in which to live and work”.

The hon. Member will have heard during the earlier debate on the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill about the BIDEN principles that the Secretary of State is championing, access to nature being a crucial element of that agenda.

The hon. Member mentioned funding. That did not, of course, start in 2019. Between 2017 and 2019 alone, we made £16.3 million available to support parks and green spaces, including those in urban environments. We provided the £9.7 million local authority parks improvement fund, the £5.1 million pocket parks and pocket parks plus programmes, and the £1.4 million investment to test new models and new ways of doing things through the future parks accelerator programme. As the hon. Member said, we are keeping that investment going well into the future with the £9 million fund for levelling up parks, which was announced in the spending review. The aim of the fund is to create 100 green spaces on unused, undeveloped or derelict land. Although we are still to announce further details, I can assure the hon. Member that it will be focused on increasing access to quality green space in deprived urban areas in the UK. Such access is important, for exactly the reasons that he gave.

The hon. Member touched on the role of the mayoral combined authority. I was pleased to be able to play a part in helping to set up the authority, which will enable communities to regenerate themselves and find more ambitious ways of creating green spaces in urban environments through, for instance, the multi-year investment funds that we have given it.

We will, of course, go further. The Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill contains a range of provisions for the creation of attractive green spaces, such as our planned reforms of compulsory purchase orders and our proposal to create liveable spaces by extending the temporary flexibilities on pavement dining. This is all about creating nicer places to be in, and about bigger area regeneration. The Bill also contains new legal powers, which we are backing up with funding streams such as the levelling-up fund, which can be used to create attractive new cultural and green spaces, and the highly flexible shared prosperity fund, which can be used to create new parks, among other civic amenities. There is also the programme that we have with Homes England to create 20 instances of transformative Kings Cross-style regeneration, using funding streams such as the £1.5 billion brownfield fund, and also the powers and expertise of Homes England to drive transformative urban regeneration. I am keen for that to include attractive new green spaces, because they are so important.

In the past, the link between public health and wellbeing and access to green spaces has not always been as well articulated as it could have been, but over time, evidence has built up. The hon. Member talked about some of it. Studies have found that contact with nature can reduce anxiety and stress, raise self-esteem, and improve psychological health. One 2009 study even concluded that people find it easier to resolve minor life problems when spending time in natural settings. It is difficult to think of any other resource that caters for so many different needs, from health to wellbeing to community integration.

I am delighted to have had the chance to talk about some of the things that the Government are doing, and about why and how we intend to continue to back our parks and make these wonderful and treasured community facilities even better in the future, and something of which we can all be proud.

Question put and agreed to.

7.13 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 June 2022

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Government Action on Suicide Prevention

9.30 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government action on suicide prevention.

As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone.

Three weeks ago today, I hosted an event on mental health and suicide prevention in Speaker's House. We heard from two members of the band Joy Division/New Order because the event took place on the 42nd anniversary of the death by suicide of the singer, Ian Curtis. I want to take this opportunity to thank Stephen and Bernard from the band for coming along, because if it had been just me speaking about this subject, not as many people would have listened, although I am sure a mass audience is hanging on to my every word today.

At the event, we also heard from Simon Gunning, chief executive officer of Campaign Against Living Miserably, or CALM, whom I thank for meeting me yesterday in advance of the debate. I also thank Mr Speaker, who spoke movingly about his daughter's suicide and the recent loss of his brother-in-law. We also heard from the leader of the Labour party and the Minister. I thank the Minister for speaking at the event, but I hope she will forgive me for seizing the opportunity of securing today's debate to press her further on some of the issues we discussed then. It is good to talk, but it is even better to see action.

I am sure the Minister will remind us that the Government are consulting on their 10-year mental health plan, which will also be used to inform a refreshed national suicide prevention plan—the previous one is 10 years old. I am a little concerned that the issue is being bundled up within the one consultation and that there are only passing references to suicide in the consultation overview, which is what most people will read. In fact, suicide is not mentioned at all in the chapter on crisis, which is where I would most expect to find it, and people have to go to the mental health and wellbeing plan discussion paper to find any detail. I hope that that does not mean that suicide is being treated as an afterthought.

We are told that the details of the suicide prevention plan will be set out in due course, but given that suicidality is recognised by the Government as needing its own separate strategy, I do not understand why it does not warrant its own consultation. The latest coroners' statistics show that deaths by suicide are at a record high, and it is obvious that the Government have not met their target of reducing suicide by 10%. Clearly, a better strategy is needed.

I accept that setting any kind of target is complex. We saw a spike in suicides after the 2008 financial crash; we are now emerging from a pandemic that has taken a terrible toll on people's mental health and the cost of living crisis is starting to bite. A lot of factors are not in

the Minister's control, but as is often said, what is measured is what gets done, so there has to be something to aim for. To help us to get there, several organisations have raised with me the need for real-time data. The Government are developing a national real-time suicide surveillance system, so perhaps the Minister will update us on progress with that.

As the British Psychological Society has explained, suicidal behaviour cannot be understood from any one perspective alone. Suicidality is best explained as a complex interplay between risk factors across domains. Not everyone who experiences bereavement or relationship breakdown, or who is under massive pressure at work or is struggling financially, will feel suicidal. There is often an accumulation of pressures and events, sometimes stretching back to adverse childhood experiences and exacerbated by adult trauma, although sometimes it is just that something bad has happened.

It is difficult to unpick all that, but Professor Louis Appleby has suggested some priority areas for the suicide prevention plan: where rates are high, such as among middle-aged men; where rates are rising, even if they are quite low, which relates to children and young people; where there is proximity to prevention, such as among current mental health patients; and where there is public concern, such as for university students. Professor Appleby also suggests, for political reasons, that the north should be a priority. That might also be because he is based at Manchester University and he is perhaps pushing his home turf, but as part of levelling up. Economic aspects such as poverty and unemployment can be big factors.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In 2017, my constituent Jack Ritchie took his life at the age of 24 as a result of gambling addiction. I am pleased that his mother and father are in the Gallery with us today. It is estimated that there are more than 400 gambling-related suicides each year. The national suicide prevention strategy recognises high-risk groups, and my hon. Friend has highlighted the comments from Professor Appleby. Does she agree that as gambling-related suicides account for almost 8% of all suicides that group should be recognised in future strategies as high risk?

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know there was a very good debate in this Chamber yesterday morning, which unfortunately I could not attend, where such issues were raised. There are some discrete areas where a specific intervention suggests itself, such as gambling addiction, alcohol abuse, post-natal depression, or veterans' mental health. I certainly feel that such risk factors ought to be reflected in the suicide prevention plan.

A quick win would be to obstruct people from accessing the means to die by suicide, with obstacles placed in their way. A lot of suicides are opportunistic. For example, the British Transport Police is very good in terms of how it polices stations and watches out for signs that somebody might be thinking of jumping in front of a train, and helplines can be flagged up at places such as the Humber bridge and the Clifton suspension bridge, but there are also physical measures that would make suicide more difficult. People might say, "Well, perhaps people will just go somewhere else," but it does not always happen like that. If the moment is lost, there is a good chance a life will be saved.

[Kerry McCarthy]

Will the Minister tell us a little bit about the plans for the revised suicide prevention plan? Will it have clear priorities, with an evidence-based, tailored plan in each case for how we will bring rates down, and then targets set on that basis? One organisation described the current approach as very much a “throw everything at the wall and hope something sticks” approach. We need a far more tailored approach.

Will the Minister also tell us where the boundary falls between what is in the remit of the Department of Health and Social Care and work that requires action by other Departments? We have already talked about gambling, and the debate yesterday was answered by the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston). The Online Safety Bill is another example of where another Department is taking the lead, and I am worried that the Government will not fully seize that opportunity to crack down on sites promoting suicide and self-harm. I gather there is a bit of a difference of opinion between the two Departments, which is particularly disappointing given that the current Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), was the first Minister for Suicide Prevention. Does the Minister agree that we need to strengthen the Bill's provisions on this issue, or has she lost the battle with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care? I hope not, and I hope that, if the Bill is not strengthened in Committee, we can improve it on Report.

The review of special educational needs and disability is another potential missed opportunity. It is meant to be a joint effort by the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care—there is a joint foreword—but there is very little in it on child and adolescent mental health services. Given the overlap between children struggling at school who cannot get the right diagnosis and cannot get a timely education, health and care plan and children who end up in the mental health system, joint working is really important.

Obviously, it is not just children with SEND who struggle. One in six children are now said to have a probable mental health condition, up from one in nine in 2017. More than 400,000 under-18s were referred for specialist mental health care between April and October last year. These are children at the more severe end of the spectrum—those who presented with suicidal thoughts, self-harming or eating disorders. The number of attendances at A&E by young people with a diagnosed psychiatric condition has tripled since 2010.

We know that CAMHS is at breaking point. There are huge waiting lists, and severely mentally ill children are being cared for in inappropriate settings or being sent hundreds of miles away from home for treatment. It is said that half of all mental health problems are established by the age of 14, rising to 75% by the age of 24. If we do not want today's children to be tomorrow's suicide statistics, we need to do much more, much faster, to help them now, and I just do not see that sense of urgency from the Government. This consultation is all wrapped up in a 10-year plan, but we need a 10-day plan. We need action now.

One issue we discussed at the event in Speaker's House was how schools could better nurture children's creativity and give them an outlet for their emotions

through music and art. We also talked about whether the current trajectory of education, with schools very focused on grades—someone described them as “exam factories”—places undue pressure on children. I agree with that to a large extent and worry about cuts to things like music education, which mean that creatively inclined children do not have that outlet. It is not plain sailing for the other 50%, the academic ones, either. Just because a child does well in education does not mean that they are set up for success in the wider world, whether that means higher education or the world of work.

I am sad to say, as a Bristol MP, that Bristol University has become known for the number of student suicides in recent years. It is obviously not the only university to have experienced this, but it has come to particular attention. There needs to be a constant process of reflection and review. We have just had the court ruling in the tragic case of Natasha Abrahart. She was a very able student at Bristol University, but she suffered terribly from social anxiety and just could not handle the oral side of her course and having to do presentations. Rather than trying to force all young people into one model of what success and achievement look like, institutions need to adapt to them. I hope that Natasha's parents will be able to pursue their campaign to ensure that that happens in the future.

I have also spoken to various groups about data sharing, which I appreciate is a complicated area. When should parents of university students, who are adults, after all, be informed? What are the boundaries of patient confidentiality? Some students might be deterred from speaking to mental health services at uni if they think that their parents might be told, particularly if they are grappling with something like their sexuality or if they have become involved with drugs. There are all sorts of things that young people would not want their parents to know about. Some might come from abusive family backgrounds and their parents would not be helpful or supportive, but in many cases the parents would have desperately wanted to know that their child was struggling to the extent that they were.

Steve Mallen from the Zero Suicide Alliance thinks that more could be done within data protection laws to protect students, and I hope that that is under active consideration.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I was at the Speaker's House reception, and one of the most shocking things I heard was that two thirds of people who commit suicide have never sought any support for their mental health. What does my hon. Friend think are the consequences of that, and how should we be trying to deal with it? I think that we need to ensure that we have a holistic approach that offers support, because we all have mental health needs; we all need support. What does she think?

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend and agree with him, but I have some reservations about going down that path. A lot of the conversation about mental health in recent years has focused on the importance of getting people to open up and talk about their problems, and an obstacle in the way of doing that is that it can be very difficult for people to access GP appointments or to get the help that they need. I very much support

Labour's policy of publicly accessible mental health hubs in every community, as well as mental health support in every school. There needs to be swift and easy access to talking therapies or even to something less formal—just to someone who will sit there and be prepared to talk to the person. There is also campaigning to try to get people just to ask others how they are feeling, and that would help. I am a bit worried because there is a danger that we will focus totally on the softer end of things and talk a lot less about the more difficult areas, where people are well past the point where a nice cup of tea and a friendly chat would make a difference. At the moment, there certainly seems to be a huge problem where people are considered to be past the point where talking therapies would help. It might be that they are too high risk or too unwell to benefit from primary mental health services but not quite ill enough to access secondary services, such as the community mental health teams; they are not totally at crisis point. Often, they are left to fester somewhere in the middle, and when they reach crisis point, they finally get help, but that is too late in many cases to actually turn their mental health around. Too many people fall by the wayside because the right pathway is not available.

Currently, 40% of patients waiting for mental health treatment are forced to contact emergency or crisis services before they receive treatment. One in 10 of them ends up in A&E, and I have real concerns about whether A&E is appropriate, particularly if someone has experienced psychotic episodes. I cannot think of anything worse for them than being in an A&E department, with the sirens, flashing lights and people who have probably turned up there because they have drunk far too much or are off their heads on something or other and have got into fights on a Saturday night. Some hospital trusts are experimenting with trying to triage people very quickly away to mental health provision in A&E, which I think is a very good move.

We have waited a long time for the Government to bring forward the mental health reforms outlined in the Queen's Speech. We are right to be concerned about the misuse of powers under the Mental Health Act 1983. We have heard terrible stories of people with autism being detained long term against their will, and the disproportionate use of those powers against people from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly young black men. I hope that, as part of that debate, we can also talk about how the system fails people who do need to be in hospital, whether by voluntary admission or being sectioned, because a lot of people would benefit.

We see people on the streets talking to themselves, heads bowed, and everybody side-steps them. Sitting on public transport next to someone who is clearly unwell can be uncomfortable. If people have physical health problems, the expectation is that the health service is there to treat them. I know there is a question of capacity and whether people consent to treatment, but I feel we write people off when their mental health reaches a certain state, unless it gets so bad that they are a danger to themselves or others. The system needs to gear up to help people who are broken to that extent. It might not be possible to fix them, but their lives could be made better.

The number of beds in NHS mental health hospitals has fallen by a quarter since 2010, with almost 6,000 beds lost in England alone, despite big increases in the number

of people needing mental health support, and cases where people are sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Figures obtained through freedom of information requests show that on a single day in February this year, all of England's high and medium-security hospitals were operating above the Royal College of Psychiatrists' maximum bed occupancy rate of 85%. The NHS pays £2 billion a year to private hospitals for mental health beds because it does not have enough of its own. Nine out of 10 mental health beds run by private operators are occupied by NHS patients.

It was also revealed last month, again through FOI requests, that over a five-year period from 2016 to 2021, more than half of the 5,403 prisoners in England assessed by prison-based psychiatrists as requiring hospitalisation were not transferred from prison to hospital. Those were not people with what might be called run-of-the-mill mental health concerns; they had major psychotic illnesses or chronic personality disorders. They needed to be in hospital, not in prison, but they did not get those transfers. We can only speculate on the problems that might store up for the future.

Where there are hospital beds, the pressures on the wards and staff are immense. There are way too many tragic stories of patients being discharged too soon, being wrongly assessed as low risk, and not getting the help they needed, with inevitable results. For example, 22-year-old Zoe Wilson died at Callington Road hospital in my constituency in 2019. She was put on a low-risk ward, despite ongoing psychosis. In January this year, the inquest jury returned a narrative conclusion, having found that multiple failings contributed to her death. The prevention of future deaths reports—the regulation 28 reports—published with the latest coroners' statistics, make very grim reading. So many of the reports point to failings such as those noted in Zoe Wilson's case.

I am not convinced that lessons will be learned from these reports, because what is required in many cases is not actions by individual hospital trusts. I should explain what happens. The coroner notes that an institution—a university, or any organisation that might have had contact with the person prior to their death—should learn a lesson and do something in future to try to save a life. Those comments are usually directed at a hospital trust or another organisation, but I would like to know what notice the Government take. Patterns showing where there are failings in the system emerge in these reports. I would be reassured if I felt that, rather than just informing the actions of an individual institution, the reports also informed future suicide-prevention strategy. I am sure the Minister will tell us how much more is being devoted to mental health spending, but we need to acknowledge the simple fact that, despite any figures she might produce today, our mental health services are drastically underfunded, under-resourced and under-staffed, which is why they are at crisis point.

I want to finish today by paying tribute to people who have spoken up about their own family experiences, as Mr Speaker did at the event in Parliament. He spoke so powerfully, because he was clearly very upset about what had happened. I, too, lost someone to suicide last year, as many other people will have, including people who are listening today. I started off by talking about how Bernard and Stephen from Joy Division/New Order came to speak about how, even 42 years later, they are still affected by the death of their singer Ian Curtis.

[Kerry McCarthy]

Another musical genius and a musical hero of mine, David Berman, took his own life a few years ago. His last album, "Purple Mountains", was basically a suicide note. He can be very funny at times—he has this real lyrical genius—but listening back to the album now, you can see where he is going. He suffered from depression for a long time, and he has this song, "Nights That Won't Happen", which says,

"The dead know what they're doing when they leave this world behind..."

When the dying's finally done and the suffering subsides
All the suffering gets done by the ones we leave behind."

I will finish on that note, because that is very true. He felt that he was escaping from something. He escaped from it, but I hope that support services for people who have recently been bereaved by suicide is at the top of the Minister's agenda, because those are the people who really need it.

9.51 am

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this enormously important debate, and for her excellent introduction to it.

The first thing I want to say is that, according to the most recent figures we have, 4,912 deaths by suicide were registered in 2020 in England alone. Men aged 45 to 49 are at greatest risk of death by suicide, and sadly for me, the north-east region is the area with the highest suicide rate, at 13.3 per 100,000. I am certainly unhappy about that and I am working with people locally to address the issue.

Some of the issues I want to touch on have already been covered, such as the refreshed national suicide prevention plan. This is hugely important, and something I have raised with Ministers before, as the Minister is aware. The consultation is welcome, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East that we must make sure that suicide is properly addressed within it. It is enormously important that we have that dedicated attention and drive forward innovation in this area.

We also have to talk about funding for suicide prevention services. The NHS long-term plan allocated £57 million for suicide prevention and bereavement services, which are hugely important to local areas, but £25 million of that funding only ran until 2021, and all funding supporting local areas will cease in 2023-24. We need renewed ringfenced funding, which is also something I have raised as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention. I know from speaking to my local services, both NHS and public health, how important it is that the funding is there to continue that collaboration and detailed work at local level.

Another thing I want to touch on is the situation for middle-aged men—one of the highest-risk groups. Suicide is the leading cause of death among men under 50 in the UK, and men account for three quarters of all suicides. As I have said, men aged 45 to 49 are most at risk; rates among this group have been persistently high for many years. Men who are less well off and live in the most

deprived areas are up to 10 times more likely to die by suicide than more well-off men from the most affluent areas.

I am grateful to the Samaritans, who provide the secretariat to the APPG, for telling me about some in-depth research they have done with less well-off middle-aged men who have been struggling with their mental health, including having suicidal thoughts over a period of time. The themes those men told the Samaritans about included a lack of many meaningful social connections, often throughout their life, and having relationships connected to substance abuse. The other main theme was financial instability, which could include an erratic work history or long-term unemployment. There is no getting away from the fact that socioeconomic factors—deprivation, unemployment and other issues—have a real impact on the figures. It is really important to recognise those issues and work with colleagues in other Departments on them.

The Samaritans are calling for a focus on early intervention and support through the full range of statutory services that men may be in touch with. Research suggests that nine out of 10 middle-aged men who died by suicide in 2017 had been in contact with at least one frontline service or agency a week prior to their death. We also need further investment in voluntary sector and community provision to provide the services and initiatives that middle-aged men often find helpful in building connections and having conversations.

The other group that I want to refer to is people who self-harm. The all-party group conducted an inquiry into self-harm in younger people. We know that not all people who self-harm proceed to suicidal ideation or completing suicide, but there is a clear link. We need to ensure that people have readily available access to support at an early stage, because self-harm is such a strong risk factor for suicide.

In that inquiry, many people told us that they were considered too high-risk for primary mental health services, but not ill enough for secondary health services such as community mental health teams, or CAMHS in the case of younger people. We need to increase capacity and build expertise within talking therapy services to support people who self-harm, allow self-harm to be discussed in a safe, supportive way, and carry out assessments of people who disclose self-harm. We should get away from the stigma, because it still happens that, when people self-harm, they are thought to be attention-seeking. Instead, we need to ensure that it is picked up as a possible sign of a path. Preventive issues are also key. Having access to the appropriate services quickly is really important, so that people can get support.

On inequality and levelling up, I mentioned that people in disadvantaged communities faced the highest risk of dying by suicide, and that financial instability and poverty could increase suicide risk. Insecure income, unmanageable debt, unemployment and poor housing conditions all contribute to higher suicide rates, so we really need a cross-Government approach that recognises those risk factors and does something to address them. Specific actions would be to prioritise in the plan tackling inequalities as suicide risks across Government policy interventions, including through employment support, social security and economic planning. We should ensure that money advice and financial support is consistently available to everyone. We should better utilise what the

Samaritans call the touchpoints of the state, such as work coaches in jobcentres and others that people come in contact with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East mentioned the need for real-time suicide data. That is being developed, and it is absolutely essential. We cannot continue with the system of waiting for the coroner's inquest to decide the cause of death. We need to know, so that we can highlight issues early and respond.

On the Online Safety Bill, which I have raised previously with Ministers, it is important that health takes a leading role to ensure that people do not have easier access to sites that promote self-harm or suicidal plans. There need to be new offences, and suicide and self-harm content needs to be addressed.

On alcohol use and suicide, I am sure others will speak in more detail, but we had a quotation from a Samaritans survey respondent:

"My hope is that professionals start to see that alcohol use is often the result of an underlying issue and not simply tell people to sober up without offering further support for how to deal with the root cause"

of the problem. We need integrated commissioning and provision of mental health and alcohol treatment services, training for all healthcare staff around the relationship between alcohol and suicide, and further funding for local drug and alcohol recovery and treatment services, many of which have seen huge cuts in the last 10 years.

Finally, suicide is preventable, not inevitable. It is important that we take real steps to ensure that we prevent unnecessary deaths and have real plans in place to make that happen.

10.1 am

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this debate. I can see that the subject is really difficult for her to talk about and I thank her for sharing her experience. I was struck by what she said at the end about how it is the people left behind who take on the suffering. I have had a bit of an insight into what she talked about.

I have a constituent here today, Mr Philip Pirie, who I am glad has been able to join us; he is in the Public Gallery. Philip's son Tom took his own life in July 2020. I have been working with Mr Pirie since then and talking to him about his experience of suicide and how it has impacted him and his wider family and Tom's family and friends. Mr Pirie highlighted a particular issue in Tom's experience, and I have been happy to work with him on a campaign. We have previously spoken to the Minister about it.

Tom was a schoolteacher. He loved to travel and spoke three languages. He was much loved by his friends and family. Subsequent to his death there was a memorial football match, which was held to commemorate him, between his former school and club teams. Tom did seek help for his mental health issues, and he spoke to a therapist just a day before he took his own life.

A troubling feature of Tom's experience is that he was assessed by his counsellor, at that meeting the day before his death, as being at low risk of suicide. That is something that has caused Philip and the wider family a great deal of distress, because if Tom had not been deemed to be at low risk of suicide, more might have

been done to save him. So Philip has taken up with me the issue of suicide risk assessments by counsellors and how they are being used. It is a big issue.

We heard from the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) about the extent to which suicide is a public health issue. The thing that has struck me is that suicide is the most common cause of death among young people aged 20 to 34—that is how much of a risk it is to our young people. More than anything else, that is how they are losing their lives.

Of the 17 people who die by suicide every day in this country, five would have been in touch with mental health services. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) mentioned that that is not enough, because so many people do not seek help. Of the five who have been in touch with mental health services, four will have been assessed as at low or no risk, as we have seen Tom Pirie was. That raises questions as to how we assess suicide risk, and I would like the Minister to address that.

Mr Pirie and I have organised an open letter and had a wide range of signatories to it. These include Steve Mallen from the Zero Suicide Alliance, who has already been mentioned, Mind, Samaritans, Papyrus, General Sir Nick Carter—we were very privileged to have his engagement with us—and a cross-party selection of MPs. This is really about discussing the current suicide risk assessment procedure, because we think that it needs some serious and urgent attention. We think that the standardised risk assessment tools as they are currently being used are poor predictors of suicide, and national guidelines have determined that they should not be used for that purpose. There is widespread concern that risk assessment tools are being used ineffectively, and that it is leading to the outcomes that we have seen in the case of Tom Pirie and others. We think that suicide risk assessment tools have a positive predictive value of less than 5%, which potentially means that they are wrong more than 95% of the time.

In its "Self-harm and suicide in adults" report from July 2020—the month that Tom Pirie took his life—the Royal College of Psychiatrists stated that

"the current approach to risk assessment is fundamentally flawed."

The Government published a suicide prevention strategy for England in 2012, and they have recently announced a review and issued a call for evidence. The National Suicide Prevention Advisory Group is preparing to issue its recommendations for the review of that strategy, and the letter asks that:

"The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care ensure that the new suicide prevention strategy includes a review of the use of suicide risk assessments in breach of current guidelines and to take appropriate steps to ensure that existing guidance around not using these tools to assess suicide risk be strictly followed by both the public and private health sectors."

That is a really important point, because there is a lot of mental health support that happens outside the NHS. Informal and unqualified support can sometimes be provided, and it is really important that the public understand and can have faith in the kinds of people who are advertising their support services for mental health patients, and that there is guidance and regulation around what is available.

In 2007, the Department of Health published a document entitled, "Best Practice in Managing Risk", which underpinned and gave approval to some suicide risk

[Sarah Olney]

assessment procedures. That important document is relied on by a number of institutions, including the Care Quality Commission and the coroner service, but has not been updated since 2009. We would really like to see the Department of Health and Social Care commit to updating the document alongside the strategy review, to ensure that the best current guidance is available to mental health practitioners in all sectors, that there is appropriate use of suicide risk assessment tools, and that we do not see a repeat of the situation that happened to Tom Pirie, who was assessed as a low risk the very day before he took his own life. I learned, in speaking to Tom's father Philip, that it gave Tom the sense that he was not being listened to, and that his concerns and troubles were not being taken seriously. Obviously we will never know, but that cannot have been a helpful indicator for him at that moment in his life.

I pay tribute to Philip, who has been incredibly brave, and I know this has been a very difficult time for him. I am here today to urge the Minister to take on board my asks around risk assessment tools, because it would be a great tribute not just to Tom, but to Philip and his wider family.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): It might be helpful to say that we have three Back Benchers trying to catch my eye. I have to start the wind-ups no later than 10.30 am, so each Member has six or seven minutes max.

10.9 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate, and for her opening speech.

Many people in the UK are, and have been, fighting silent battles for quite some time. The Government have shown their commitment to tackling this by removing the dedicated Minister for Suicide Prevention. I have struggled with mental health from a young age and in recent years, due to online abuse, threats and other life events, I have suffered with mental ill-health and suicidal thoughts. I have had to have brave conversations with my children and family but, luckily for me, I have pulled through due to my family support network, my friends and colleagues, and my access to therapy and coaching.

However, many people across the country do not have access to a strong network, as I know through my lived experience of my own struggles. Having been a trained Samaritan volunteer for a number of years in my local branch in Bradford, as a former NHS commissioner and a former chair of one of the largest black, Asian and minority ethnic mental health charities outside of London, I know that accessing mental health services through the NHS is extremely different. It has been extremely difficult previously, but covid-19 has exacerbated that, particularly in areas like Bradford.

The Office for National Statistics recorded that in 2020, 5,224 suicides were recorded; those were 5,224 preventable deaths. In 2021, 4.3 million referrals were made to mental health services in England, which the Royal College of Psychiatrists rightly labelled as an "unprecedented demand" for services. According to public health data,

there were 99 cases of suicide among men or boys aged 10 or over in Bradford between 2017 and 2019; that means that the area's male suicide rate was 15.6 in every 100,000 men, up from 14.6 between 2016 and 2018. Men accounted for the majority of suicide deaths in Bradford over that period.

While the Government have rightly committed to a national suicide prevention strategy to reduce the rate of suicides in England, clinical commissioning groups across the country are experiencing high demand, backlogs and stretched budgets at a local level. The reality is that the Government must not only reduce the backlogs but provide a fully-funded recovery plan for specialist mental healthcare provision, which should include race equality programmes, be impact-assessed, be UK-wide and also level up access to mental health provision.

A survey conducted by NHS Digital found that one in six children in England had a probable mental health condition in 2021. Over the years, many families in my constituency have contacted me regarding their inability to secure child and adolescent mental health services, such as autism assessments or mental health provision, for their children. Indeed, I have spoken about that in Westminster Hall.

It is shocking that children in my constituency of Bradford West have to wait longer for assessments and treatment than their wealthier peers. Psychiatrists have accurately described that disparity as a scandalous postcode lottery. A child in Bradford had to wait 807 days to access CAMHS services, while in Staffordshire children waited an average of seven days—800 fewer days than a child in Bradford. The Government must urgently address that disparity and provide a plan of action to ensure that people no longer suffer in silence. I look forward to the Minister's response in today's very important debate.

10.13 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As my party's health spokesperson, I am happy to speak in this debate and to look at how we can improve the mental health services we have in place.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and congratulate her on her consistent efforts in tackling issues around suicide prevention and normalising the feeling of not being okay. There is no doubt whatsoever that more needs to be done to support those feeling low and I am pleased we can discuss that today.

This is a difficult subject to address because we all know people who have passed away as a result of anxiety or depression, and whose difficulties meant ultimately they could not cope with life. The framework for the NHS five-year plan in tackling suicide was first published in 2012. It aimed to help those directly affected by suicide and recognised the lasting impacts suicide can have on family and friends. I am grateful that the Government, and the Minister in particular, have set aside £57 million in funding allocated for mental health services by 2023-24. We should welcome that because it shows that the Government and the Minister have recognised the need to do something specific. I hope that that will address issues across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as I understand some of those moneys will come to us in Northern Ireland through the Barnett consequential.

For me personally, the subject of the debate is quite difficult. The current suicide rates back home in Northern Ireland are devastating, and I use that word on purpose, because they are. Figures indicate that suicide has increased since 2015, with levels increasing from one registered suicide in 2015 to a shocking 100 in 2019. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has not yet provided the figures for registered suicides in Northern Ireland over the two-year period of the pandemic, but I have no doubt in my mind that, unfortunately, some may have struggled all too much over the covid period. That is not to mention that, in 2018, it was revealed that more men died by suicide in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom: an average of 29.1 per 100,000.

My constituency of Strangford has unfortunately had those experiences as well. In Newtownards, the largest town that I represent, there was a period that saw a spate of suicides among young men—a group of young friends. If someone takes their life, those around them are deeply affected. What thoughts does the Minister have on how to address that issue? Every one of us here can probably confirm that that is an issue—I know that I can. It was quite difficult when some of the funerals took place: that circle of friends was decimated and devastated by what took place. In addition, data is presented in the year the suicide was registered, so as inquests are a long process, there are many still to be discovered. I see that in my own constituency.

There is more that can be done in all aspects of government. In health, education, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and transport, there is a lot of room for much-needed improvement in suicide prevention. There are also increased suicide rates among young children. Another thing that grieves me and, I think, others in this House is that social media is one of the most prominent confidence-killers in modern society: children being nasty to other children online. We read truly horrendous stories in the press of young boys and girls taking their lives because they feel pressurised by other children, or sometimes exploited by adults. We have a duty to ensure that, through legislation such as the Online Safety Bill, they are protected and not subject to abuse. I understand that that is not the Minister's responsibility, but it might be helpful if she can tell us about any discussions with other Ministers on how the Government can address those issues.

We have spent a lot of time discussing the pandemic and its impact on our daily lives, which is not always good—sometimes it is uplifting, but sometimes it is quite disheartening. We must not underestimate the effects of isolation on mental health. As we come out of the pandemic—in England, there are no longer requirements for isolation—people have the opportunity to seek proper face-to-face help. The issue is now whether the support is readily available and accessible for all, which is where we must step in to help with suicide prevention. We should be ever conscious of where we are and how we move forward. I know that the Minister is a lady with a deep interest in her portfolio, and that she understands the issue only too well. I am hopeful that in her response to all our requests, she will speak about what extra help there will be after the pandemic to ensure that those who face today's complications, problems and overwhelming issues will receive the assistance that they need right now.

Suicide affects many people, and it leaves a nasty scar for friends and loved ones left behind. That is the story in my constituency, and in the cases that I have seen; there has been a spate of young lives lost. As the hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned, Mr Speaker made some powerful comments on the death of his beloved daughter. He stated:

“When it happens, you never get over it”.

How true that is for everyone. For those I know who have lost loved ones, that scar, deep pain and hurt are right in their heart. We can see it in their eyes; they do not have to say a word—look at them, and there is the story. We must learn from this and put our words into action; through legislation, through support, through normalising talking and breaking barriers, we can tackle suicide and initiate support for those who need it. Everyone here is all too aware that there is a fine line and balance between normalising talking and keeping your life, and perhaps tipping over the edge. We all have to face that line; some people have faced it and unfortunately ended their life as a result. It is about how we step in, how the Government step in and how the Minister steps in to make a difference.

Mental health has been characterised as a silent killer, but it affects us all at some stage, through our families, through our friends and through our constituencies. We all share the heartache of suicide and what it can do to families. I commend and thank the hon. Member for Bristol East for bringing forward this timely debate on such a crucial issue. As a former member of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention, I can assure her that in this House we all share the desire to do everything we can to help to address suicide prevention. We look to the Minister, as we often do, for the answers to our questions, which we seek not for ourselves, but for our constituents.

10.21 am

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing the debate, in which we have heard some really powerful contributions. I add my support to what has already been covered in the debate, including for a new suicide prevention plan. I will concentrate my remarks on suicide in the LGBT+ community, and on the important role of alcohol in this debate.

According to surveys, young LGBT+ people are three times more likely to self-harm, and twice as likely to contemplate suicide as their non-LGBT+ peers. Depending on the study we look at, gay people are between two and 10 times more likely as straight people to take their own life. We are twice as likely to have major depressive episodes. Surveys of gay men regularly find that three quarters of the community suffer from anxiety or depression, abuse drugs or alcohol, or are in abusive relationships. That is the case despite social progress and greater acceptance, and despite the fact that we have got rid of many discriminatory laws. Rates of depression, loneliness, substance abuse and suicide among gay men remain many, many times higher than for the general population.

A book that was very important to me was “The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World” by Alan Downs. The important message in that book is that when someone comes out

[Dan Carden]

about their sexuality or gender identity, the trauma is not overcome at that point. Growing up gay leaves trauma, so many people in the LGBT community require support to overcome trauma, shame and other issues of that nature. That is why counselling and therapy are important.

When we in this House talk about mental health, we rarely mention or acknowledge that addiction is a chronic mental health condition; addiction is an illness. Alcohol is a depressant that can exacerbate low mood and suicidal thoughts. It is probably the most normalised way of coping with mental health issues, trauma or suicidal thoughts; it is a fast-acting way to change how we feel. The relationship between alcohol and suicide is well established and a cause for great concern. Research by the Samaritans shows that people who are dependent on alcohol are two and a half times more likely to die by suicide. In England, nearly half of all patients who are in the care of mental health services and who die by suicide have a history of alcohol misuse. They account for almost 600 deaths a year on average.

Despite that harrowing evidence, there has been no national alcohol strategy since 2012. I welcome the Government's recent efforts on tackling illicit drugs and gambling and tobacco harm. My question is: where is the effort on alcohol? To fully understand the current scale of alcohol harm, and to provide targeted recommendations to improve outcomes for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol-use conditions, I would like to see the Government conduct a Dame Carol Black-style independent review of alcohol harm. I hope the Minister will respond to that point.

I will finish by mentioning a place in my constituency that I have visited over the years. Paul's Place was set up by the parents of Paul Williams; Paul and I went to school together, and he took his own life in August 2015. Paul's Place offers bereavement support to families who have lost members to suicide. I invite the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson to visit Paul's Place to talk about the important work it does for communities across Walton, and how its funding can be sustained.

10.26 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and commending her work—she is an absolute champion for this matter. She spoke extremely powerfully on the need for data collection, which I think is the crux of taking good service delivery forward. She spoke very emotively about her own personal experience, and her words resonated with many people here when she advocated for services for those families who are left behind. I thank her for being a champion of this important issue. It is often neglected, and is something that for many years has been difficult for people to speak about. The more that it can be spoken about and raised in this place, the better for everybody right across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke about how difficult it is to access mental health services, particularly for children and young people.

I think there are gaps—chasms, actually—in waiting times across the United Kingdom that need to be addressed. As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I hear about that constantly. No matter where someone lives, it is very difficult for them to access services. It takes far too long and people are falling through those gaps. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) spoke about the importance of levelling up regional and gender disparities. I am interested in the point she made about adult males being particularly at risk.

There has been good work going on across Scotland—I am sure these exist across the United Kingdom—through the Men's Sheds developments. I have two in my own constituency that I have visited—one in Lesmahagow and Blackwood and one in the Stonehouse area. They are doing fantastic work to reduce loneliness and isolation, and to create environments where people can begin to speak about issues and receive important social support from like-minded people. We still have a society where there is more stigma for men who speak up about those issues, so such developments are crucial. The hon. Member for Blaydon is also an advocate for this issue in her role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention. She has made key recommendations for the Government to take forward.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) spoke about the LGBT community and about alcohol-related harm. What is key—and I know this from my professional life prior to Parliament, working in psychology—is that often having an addiction diagnosis on someone's medical records can make it more difficult for them to access mental health services. That just should not be the case because, exactly as he says, having alcohol or drug-related problems is, in itself, a risk factor for suicide. Therefore, it should be something that heightens people's access to services, rather than diminishing it. I would therefore like to thank him once again for the work that he does on these matters.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—who is in his place in most of the debates that I happen to attend because he is such a strong advocate for his constituents—spoke about the devastating suicide rates in Northern Ireland, and something else that is very important, which was the impact of and bullying on social media. I think that that is something that really must be tackled. I know, from some work I have been doing with the Diana award in Parliament, that it has been supporting young people's advocates across schools in the UK—anti-bullying ambassadors to give children and young people peer support—because often young people prefer to speak to peers than to parents. I know that myself, particularly from having adolescents at home who do not want to be seen with or speak to me at this stage in their life.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) also raised an important constituency case—I am so pleased that the family is here today—that families are not listened to enough. Well, if we are not listening to families, who are we listening to? Families know people better than anybody else. I think that long gone is the time when we say, "Well, professionals know best." It should be an assessment that involves everybody, wherever possible. Families who want to reach out to services are doing that because they have anxiety that something

that is traumatic is going to happen in that case. They know that person better than anybody else, so they must be listened to.

When I worked in mental health, the training and risk assessment were very clear; it is not a static assessment; it is dynamic—it changes. That is the thing about it. The British Psychological Society issued guidance on risk assessment. A risk assessment is not a questionnaire; it is a clinical judgment with tools that help that. However, it also must highlight risk indicators. Importantly, it is not just that an assessment is completed; it is that there is a risk-management plan as well—people are aware of their risk indicators, they know when risk is heightened, they know who to seek help from, and that there is a risk-management plan that can protect them and prevent harm coming from risk. The point made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park is key, and I wish her all the support that I can give for her campaign for these matters to be taken forward and for key frontline staff to be given adequate training in risk assessment.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I hear constantly that the bar is set too high for access to services. Some of the things said are that because someone might have a personality disorder, they could not benefit from treatment. Well, we know that people with personality disorder diagnoses still suffer from mental distress, so of course they should be able to access treatment for that mental distress. That should not be a barrier to treatment. There are also psychological therapies that have been shown to be clinically valid for use in those cases, but people cannot access them.

People who have drug or alcohol problems may present at accident and emergency and be told, “Well, you’ll have to deal with your addiction and then come back and deal with your mental health problem.” However, that is not right either, because we know about the risk and the importance of services being integrated and created for dual diagnosis. Where people have more than one clinical condition, it is very important that both are treated together because, as has been said, mental health might be one of the triggers for alcohol and drug use, which, of course, exacerbates it.

Dan Carden: It is really important that we send a clear message that it is absolutely nonsense to send people away to recover from their addiction without the mental health support they need, as happens up and down the country. We should send a clear message that the guidance needs to be rewritten, and that support for mental health and addiction services must be delivered.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. I wholeheartedly agree. If we are serious about preventing harm and suicide, and about helping people, their care must be looked at holistically. We cannot syphon off parts of people’s diagnosis and say, “Deal with this first, then that.” People’s lives are not like that. As we know, the formulation means that it is interwoven, so both conditions must be dealt with simultaneously.

Other things I have heard include, “It is attention-seeking,” “It is a behavioural issue,” “It is not a psychiatric illness,” “There’s no diagnosis,” but surely people who suffer acute psychological distress should have access to services without having to qualify in diagnostic terms as having a major mental illness. Many people need help at

such time, and it should not need to be exacerbated to the point of mental illness if we can use prevention. Equally, many people who go on to harm themselves and even commit suicide never have a diagnosis of a mental illness such as depression or schizophrenia, but they still deserve help, so there must be services for them.

GP access is very important, as has been said. I know from my constituents and from chairing the all-party parliamentary health group that that is another issue that must be dealt with. People find it very difficult to see GPs face to face, and if they are in mental distress, speaking to receptionists on the telephone is really not adequate. They must be able to sit down and speak to a GP they know. It is hard enough to open up at that point, but without that access, I am afraid that so many people will fall through the net.

The Scottish Government have committed £120 million for a recovery fund following covid. They are committed to doubling the current £1.4 million of annual funding for suicide prevention, and they have a new strategy coming out.

I thank the services in my constituency, which have been on the frontline when people have been languishing on waiting lists, including the Trust Jack Foundation, set up because someone lost their life. The lady in charge of it is a wonderful individual who has taken her personal tragedy and turned it into support for other people across our constituency. Victorious People in East Kilbride is providing counselling for young people, and Talk Now in East Kilbride is providing services for trauma survivors. That is just to name a few of the fantastic services that have been developed.

I plead with the Minister to fill those gaps and make sure there are services for people suffering acute mental distress, crisis and suicidal ideation. They should not have to have a mental illness diagnosis to access treatment. That is why we are losing people, and families are being hurt in the process.

10.38 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Bone.

I first thank those of you in the Public Gallery. It cannot be easy to be here today, and you are a testament to the love you hold for the ones you have lost. You are incredibly brave, and I want you to know how much we value your presence here and how important you are to our discussion. Part of our fight to make this better for people around the country is thanks to your work and your never-ending belief that things can get better. Thank you so much for being here. We see you. We recognise your pain and we send all our love and condolences to you.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this extremely important debate and all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. Shadow Ministers often attend debates in which we have to make the closing remarks, and we do that because it is part of our job, but sometimes, although people might not know it, we have a personal and deeply vested interest in the subject matter. Today’s debate is of great importance to me for many private and professional reasons.

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

Many of us were together a few weeks ago in the Speaker's chambers thanks to the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East, who put together a heartfelt event to mark the 42nd anniversary of the death of Ian Curtis. I applaud my hon. Friend for placing the issue of suicide at the heart of Parliament, bringing together parliamentarians, metro Mayors, staffers and musicians, and encouraging people to talk of their own experiences, which is never easy.

I thank my hon. Friend for sharing her personal experience of a loved one passing from suicide last year. We all send our condolences and are sorry for my hon. Friend's loss. She did not share that experience in order for us to do so, but I would like her to know that we send our condolences.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)—eloquent and insightful as always—highlighted the issue of self-harm, in a safe and supportive way and rightly placed particular importance on combating stigma around the issue. I thank her for all the work she does in that space.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) was such a powerful advocate for Tom, Philip and their whole family. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), whom I am proud to call a friend, was so honest about her own experience and emphasised the scandal—that is what it is—of the postcode lottery for people seeking child and adolescent mental health services in Bradford. Unfortunately, the people of Bradford are not alone in what they face because it is rife across the country. That has to be addressed.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) characteristically made many heartfelt points, and we always value his contributions to such debates.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) that I would be delighted to visit Paul's Place, and I will set that up with him at the first opportunity. I thank him deeply for his comments on LGBT mental health, especially as June is Pride Month. It takes a certain bravery for someone to put their head above the parapet and talk about multiple personal experiences in a way that can effect change. My hon. Friend is testament to the fact that we can use the most painful parts of our lives to change the lives of others.

I want to draw on my personal professional experience as an A&E doctor in addressing the point made by the SNP spokeswoman—the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), with whom I love sharing a platform—about addiction and mental health services. I cannot stand to have another night shift in A&E when I yet again have to tell someone who has come in while intoxicated with alcohol or following a drug overdose that I cannot plug them into mental health services because they tick the addiction box. I cannot stand another shift begging the drug and alcohol liaison team to come to see somebody who has also admitted that they have mental health issues. This is a deeply flawed system, Minister. I know her to care about the issue greatly, but it absolutely has to be addressed because lives are being lost as a result.

We have a duty in this place to break down barriers and improve people's lives, and breaking down the stigma around suicide and mental illness is an area in

which there is still so much more work that needs to be done. It is a tribute to people's hard work that we are hosting events and debates in Parliament to break down the stigma, and we are getting fantastic coverage such as that in *NME* so as to reach more and more people, but four decades on from the tragic death of Ian Curtis, there should not still be so much work to be done to tackle suicide rates.

Over the past decade, it has been incredibly welcome to see the strides taken to tackle suicide and mental illness at a parliamentary level, to hear talk of parity of esteem and to hear colleagues open up about their own struggles, but since the publication of the national suicide prevention strategy a decade ago, what progress can the Government genuinely be proud of? We are talking about a life or death issue here: we need more than warm words while people are still losing their lives, and there are things we can tangibly do to resolve it.

A commitment was made in 2016 to reduce the rate of suicide in England by 10% by 2020, but by 2020 the rate was almost the same. In 2018, the Health Secretary announced a zero-suicide ambition for mental health patients being treated in hospital. That has still not been met. If the Government are genuinely serious about achieving their zero-suicide ambition, they need to look at the impact that social factors such as debt, employment, housing and benefits have on mental health. It is evident that insecure housing and employment, racism and discrimination, being pushed into debt and poverty because of cuts to universal credit or to other benefits, and loneliness and isolation have a considerable impact on a person's mental health. We know that and must do something about it.

Three quarters of suicides are of men, and the rates of suicide in England are significantly higher in the north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber than in London. Those figures cannot be ignored. We must have the data to ensure that there is not simply a one-size-fits-all approach. That is a crucial point that must be addressed if the Government are serious about tackling the issues once and for all. I am proud to back the Samaritans' call for the Government to launch a national real-time suicide surveillance system, in line with what is in place in Wales. We need to understand what is happening now, not two years down the line. How is anyone supposed to tackle a problem that they simply cannot see?

I urge the Government to work with the mental health sector, and consult on what is truly needed to drive down suicide figures. There is a looming mental health crisis in the wake of the pandemic. The backlog for treatment was already huge before covid. Now, with the sheer rise in referrals, the NHS is at risk of being completely overwhelmed and patients are unable to receive treatment.

That is why Labour is committed to improving access to mental health services. We will guarantee access to treatment within a month for all who need it, and expand the workforce, recruiting 8,500 additional staff to ensure a million more people can be seen. Crucially, we understand the need for prevention, reaching people before they hit crisis point. That is why the next Labour Government would ensure that every school had access to a mental health professional, and every community

would have an open access mental health hub to ensure that every young person could access the support they need, safely and securely.

It is about offering people respect and dignity in their treatment. As it stands, two thirds of people who take their own lives are not in touch with mental health services in the year before they die. We have heard that this morning. Services need to reach out to people; they have to be accessible and be designed with the service user and families in mind. At a time of economic turmoil and after two incredibly difficult years, it is so vital to have this conversation, but please let us not lose any more lives needlessly to suicide. I urge the Government to act on what has been said today, and make real change in memory of those lives lost.

10.47 am

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this debate on suicide prevention and for hosting the recent event, “Breaking the Silence”, during Mental Health Awareness Week. I have a feeling there will be many such meetings and conversations, to which I look forward. Awareness is something we often struggle with in Government, to ensure that people are aware of what we are trying to do and the consultations to hear their voices. That event was brilliant and put a spotlight on that. I also thank Bernard and Stephen, who came along. It was powerful to hear from them, as they marked the death of Joy Division singer Ian Curtis 42 years ago, as well as all the other personal experiences expressed there.

I very much agree with my shadow Minister that such personal experiences are so important. They are important in every aspect of my job, but none more so than in suicide prevention. I must admit that when I first saw that in my job title, it felt overwhelming. Every life lost to suicide is a tragedy. Everybody wishes they could go back and reverse time. It is so, so sad. We heard from the Speaker about his personal tragedies. Every single suicide is a tragedy, but every suicide is, on some level, preventable. That is what we are here for: to work towards preventing as many suicides as possible.

Sadly, like many here today, I know the pain of losing a family member—we lost my cousin Sallie, who I babysat for from a very young age. When someone takes their own life, it affects everybody. I thank Mr Pirie and Mr and Mrs Ritchie, who I have met before, for sharing their stories of Tom and Jack, and for coming up with constructive suggestions on how we can work to help other people who are in those situations, to improve our systems and to learn from those experiences. We know that the right support at the right time can provide hope and prevent a crisis, and can prevent a crisis from becoming a tragic loss of life. We look forward to continuing to work with Mr Pirie and Mr and Mrs Ritchie, and many others.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I wonder whether the Minister will address gambling-related harm. This is a complex issue—we all get that—and it will require cross-departmental co-operation to find some sort of solution. There is an imminent opportunity coming along—there is a White Paper on gambling reform due, I am told, within weeks. Will the Minister engage with

the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and help it to understand the issue, so that it can strongly regulate gambling, which would help to alleviate the number of gambling-related suicides?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Gentleman has my assurance that I will definitely work cross-Government, with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) who actually sits in the office next door to me—he finds it very difficult to escape. I think that answers the questions from the hon. Member for Bristol East about whether there are ongoing conversations, which will also continue into the future.

I am happy to visit Paul’s Place. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) knows, I am often back in Liverpool, visiting my parents and friends. The first visit I made in this role was actually to James’ Place, also in Liverpool, which was set up by a constituent of mine, Clare Milford Haven, who set up the charity after the tragic death of her son, James. We met in Liverpool, but she was a constituent of mine down in Chichester. Every time I go to one of these places, I learn—every time. There are so many families trying to help the next family avoid the tragedy of losing a loved one.

I also met Tim, Mike and Andy—the 3 Dads Walking. They have done a fantastic job, walking round the whole country. They came to tell me the stories of their three daughters, Sophie, Beth and Emily, who all tragically died by suicide. They told me about the number of people who came out to take part as they walked around the country. There is that saying, “Walk a mile in someone’s shoes.” They were walking a mile together, talking about their experiences. They said that many people had never spoken about their experiences before, because they still felt there was some stigma attached to it. One of the fantastic things about having these conversations is the de-stigmatisation of not only suicide, but mental health conditions in general.

One of the things I have learned as Minister for Mental Health is that anybody can have a mental health issue at any point in their lives. One, two or three things happen that they were not expecting, and anybody can be in that situation, but everybody can recover and manage their mental health. If I can achieve one thing in my role it would be for everybody to really understand that and for us to put the services in place to address it—that is what I hope to do.

I recognise that the last two years have been exceptionally difficult. They have impacted on the mental health and wellbeing of many people, and many will have experienced harmful or suicidal thoughts. The shadow Minister for Mental Health, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), raised the concern that too many people are having to resort to A&E in a crisis. That is why mental health service providers worked across the country at pace during the pandemic to establish a 24/7 urgent mental health helplines for anybody of any age in crisis. Those services are now operational in every area of England, handling 230,000 to 250,000 calls each month. That service was not there before the pandemic; we have tried to respond and to respond quickly.

The long-term plan also committed to increasing the forms of provision for those in crisis, including safe havens and crisis cafés, providing a more suitable alternative

[Gillian Keegan]

to A&E. We know we need to do that. There are some excellent examples throughout the country, including the Evening Sanctuary at the Mosaic club in Lambeth.

Kerry McCarthy: In the case of my friend Ric, we learned at the inquest last week that he had phoned a mental health crisis helpline. In that conversation, he revealed that he was in the middle of a psychotic episode. When he later went to A&E at the suggestion of the helpline and spoke to a mental health nurse, he did not reveal that. In the prevention of future deaths report, the inquest recorded that there should have been real-time updating of his medical records, because the people at the hospital would not have let him leave A&E that night if they had realised that part of the problem was psychosis. I talked about taking note of what is said at inquests, and I hope that we can pick up the recommendation on real-time updating.

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. I read all the prevention of future deaths reports, which come to me, and I take them very seriously. There is always so much to learn from them, and I agree with the hon. Lady. Sharing data between services sounds easy and trips off the tongue, but it is actually quite difficult to ensure that data is there in real time. That does not mean that we do not have the desire to achieve that; we absolutely do.

Talking therapies were mentioned by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), and we are improving access to those. I remind people that they can self-refer, rather than going through a GP. I am sure that many people are not aware of that. We are building up mental health support teams in schools. They will really help by providing our young people with first-level support in school, but we realise that we have to invest more in mental health. That is why we have £2.3 billion more to invest in mental health services in 2023-24. We need to build up the workforce, which is a challenge, because it takes a long time to train people for many of these roles. In fact, I had another meeting on this issue earlier this morning.

I want to address the use of risk assessment tools. I am running out of time, but I am happy to respond on the situation; it is important, and I definitely want to take the time to do so, particularly as Mr Pirie is in the Public Gallery. The guidelines published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in 2011 make it clear that risk assessment tools should not be used to predict future suicide or repetition of self-harm, or to determine who should or should not be offered treatment, as the hon. Member for Bristol East said. We would expect health professionals to have regard to that, but it is clear that further work is needed, and discussions are under way right now to find out what further actions are necessary to achieve this.

I acknowledge the valuable role of the voluntary sector in complementing all the things we do. We have given more money—£5.4 million—to voluntary and community organisations. That money has supported 113 organisations, which do a fantastic job at helping people who are struggling. They are in lots of areas, and have often been set up by families who have lived experience. We have also provided funding to support the Hub of Hope, which was set up by a charity in Liverpool, and which is crucial in signposting people to services locally. For people who are at risk, we now have a fantastic opportunity with the call for evidence on mental health and the updated suicide prevention plan.

We have learned a lot more, and we know that there are a lot of things that we need to fix. We have mentioned debt, drugs and alcohol, and men's sheds—I have visited those, and they are fantastic. Our LGBT expert advisory group is meeting tomorrow to discuss suicide prevention, and to see what more we need to do. I know that Members present are genuinely committed to working with me on situations that it is difficult to prevent, and we are absolutely convinced that we can do a lot better. We will work with colleagues across the Department for Education—we have mentioned the SEND review—and DCMS. It is vital that we work cross-sector, cross-Department and cross-party, because everybody has a role to play in suicide prevention. It is not just my job—if it was, it would be overwhelming. We all have a role to play.

There have been a lot of significant steps since the national suicide prevention strategy was published in 2012. Professor Louis Appleby is mentioned a lot in these circles and has put a lot of work and effort into this endeavour. Real-time surveillance is on the agenda, and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group will continue to work towards making things better. We have made a lot of progress, but everybody accepts that there is more to come. We have recently launched a call for evidence, and we have had about 2,500 people respond so far, but I would like a lot more to do so—particularly those from marginalised groups, or groups that find it harder to talk about these subjects. We need to hear their perspectives and get hon. Members' help in making sure that everybody responds to the call for evidence, which is an opportunity. I am serious about this, as is the Secretary of State. I thank everybody for their contributions.

10.59 am

Kerry McCarthy: I think I have just about time to thank everybody for coming, and I hope that this debate continues. I am sure that it will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government action on suicide prevention.

Historical Discrimination in Boxing

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

11 am

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I will call Gerald Jones to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered historical discrimination in boxing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. Keen observers of proceedings in this House will be forgiven for thinking that this is not the first time I have led a debate on historical discrimination in boxing. For those who might not be glued to proceedings in this place, I will recap.

Cuthbert Taylor is a local sporting legend in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. An amateur and then a professional boxer, he had over 500 bouts in a career lasting almost 20 years between 1928 and 1947, many in his native Merthyr Tydfil and across south Wales, but also across the United Kingdom and Europe. He was knocked out only once in his entire career. Justifiably, Cuthbert Taylor was once described as “the best in Europe”.

In 1927 he won the flyweight championship title. He defended the title in 1928, when he also became British amateur flyweight champion. That same year, he represented Great Britain at the Amsterdam summer Olympics, reaching the quarter-final stage in the flyweight category. He was the first black boxer to represent Britain at the Olympics. Although well known by some in his hometown of Merthyr Tydfil, and despite a very successful and exciting career, Cuthbert Taylor never got the same recognition on a national or international stage as other boxers. That was because of one simple thing: the colour of his skin.

Cuthbert Taylor was born in 1909 in Georgetown, Merthyr Tydfil, to parents of different ethnic backgrounds. His father, also named Cuthbert and formerly a notable amateur boxer in Liverpool, was of Caribbean descent. His mother, Margaret, was white Welsh. Cuthbert Taylor was judged at the time to be “not white enough to be British”

by the British Boxing Board of Control, and he was prevented from ever challenging for a British title or a world title professionally by the body’s colour bar rule.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have spoken to the hon. Gentleman before about this. There is a modern-day example, which I feel quite concerned about. I have written to the Secretary of State and I have spoken to the hon. Gentleman about Rhys McClenaghan in my constituency. He is a superb gymnast who is up against discrimination; it is similar to what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. He has been made aware that he is unable to compete in the Commonwealth games for Northern Ireland because he has previously represented Ireland, as is his right under the Belfast agreement. Cuthbert Taylor deserves an apology, but does the hon. Member agree that Rhys McClenaghan needs immediate action as well?

Gerald Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is important that all forms of discrimination, particularly in sport, are not allowed to go unchallenged. I wish him well with his campaign.

The colour bar rule was in place between 1911 and 1948. It stated that fighters had to have two white parents to compete for professional titles. Due simply to the fact that his parents were of different ethnic backgrounds, Cuthbert Taylor would never have the professional recognition and success that his remarkable talent deserved. That was all because of a rule that left a stain on the history of one of our country’s most popular and traditional sports—one that has otherwise been known for bringing together people from many different backgrounds and communities.

The colour bar rule serves as an uncomfortable reminder of a very different time. Although we cannot go back and give Cuthbert Taylor the professional titles and success that his career deserved, we can ensure that he has true and just recognition for his talent and abilities, and that his name is not forgotten in boxing history merely because of the colour of his skin.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I want to mention Len Johnson, the famous Manchester boxer, who held a British Empire middleweight title. He was known for his exceptional boxing skills, and he also campaigned for racial equality and against the shameful colour bar, which applied in some pubs in Manchester. Will my hon. Friend and the Minister join me in recognising Len Johnson’s contribution to British boxing, sports, and his campaign for racial equality and dignity for everyone?

Gerald Jones: It is important that we recognise how bad the colour bar rule was, even though it was many years ago. Even at that time, it should not have caused discrimination to people in sport and across our communities. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

It is a sad fact, but there is no doubt that had Cuthbert Taylor had two white parents, instead of one, he would have gone on to challenge for British and world boxing titles, and he may well have been successful. His is by no means an isolated case in British boxing, as we have heard, let alone in other sports. Many black or mixed-race British fighters in that period were held back by the racism of the colour bar rule.

Cuthbert Taylor’s family still live in Merthyr Tydfil, and for many years they have been campaigning for an apology from the British Boxing Board of Control for the injustices of the colour bar rule. After previous debates, some have argued that such apologies are merely gimmicks—pointless, empty gestures—but I could not disagree more. Winston Churchill is often quoted as saying, “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Shamefully, however, the British Boxing Board of Control has refused to engage on this issue with the family, with me as the local MP, and with the Minister. After debates and questions in this House, countless stories in the press and personal correspondence from families of the victims of the colour bar rule and MPs, I had hoped that the British Boxing Board of Control would do the right thing and offer a long-overdue apology. Its intransigence only compounds the historical wrong of the colour bar rule and its effect on the families of its victims.

[Gerald Jones]

British boxing today is a wholly different sport. It is inclusive, and a showcase for a diverse, modern Britain. However, as long as the boxing authority refuses to acknowledge the sins of the past, this stain will remain, not just for the families but for Britain as a whole. I hope the Minister will join me in calling on the British Boxing Board of Control to engage with Cuthbert Taylor's family and me, and right this historical wrong.

11.8 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for securing a debate on this subject again. I also thank those who participated in it. We last discussed historical discrimination in boxing in October 2020, but I warmly welcome the opportunity to revisit the topic today for the reasons the hon. Gentleman outlined.

I fully appreciate the frustration the hon. Gentleman feels in his ongoing campaign for an apology for the discrimination faced by Cuthbert Taylor and other boxers, including Len Johnson—mentioned by the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra)—Dick Turpin and others, all of whom were denied the opportunity to fight for a British title between 1911 and 1948 simply because of their race. I applaud the efforts of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney to commemorate Cuthbert with a plaque, which was unveiled in October 2021.

I should say at the beginning, in response to the hon. Gentleman's request that I write again to the BBBofC for an apology, that I will be happy to do so. I am somewhat disappointed, as he is, that he has not received the response that he would have liked, so I will put in that request again. This is a very important topic.

I recognise, of course, that some of the institutions and bodies with responsibility for boxing are now different from the entities that existed at that time. However, sport needs to look back on its history, and those entities—whatever they are—need to acknowledge past events and take some responsibility for them, although we recognise that the people in charge now are not the people who were in charge then, and that the world is different. We think differently and things have moved on, but stories like Cuthbert's should not be forgotten. They are part of our social history, and as we noted before and has been highlighted again today, the history of boxing contains fascinating tales of triumph and defeat. It also tells us much about social trends, norms and prejudices of the past. Sport is an integral part of our national life, and we should not be surprised that it often reflects the values of the time—values that are not necessarily shared today.

By modern standards, the prohibition that was in place in the early part of the last century was blatantly racist. We must not brush uncomfortable truths about past discrimination under the carpet; we owe it to those who suffered to understand what they went through, in order to learn from the past and make sure that future generations do not have to go through the same painful experiences. I want sport to be welcoming to everyone and a reflection of our diverse society.

Today, boxing is one of our most diverse sports, and some of our highest-profile sporting stars are boxers from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Boxing has made great progress across other aspects of diversity, too, with its great reach into deprived communities, inclusive boxing hubs for people with a range of health conditions, and the nurturing of female boxing talent. Women's boxing, in particular, has gone from strength to strength since Nicola Adams won the first female Olympic boxing gold in London in 2012. The recent fight between Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano at Madison Square Garden in front of a 20,000-strong fan base has been lauded as the greatest women's boxing fight in history. That incredible encounter lived up to all the hype and showed sport at its best.

For a long time, though, women were barred from boxing competitions. It was not until 1997—so very recently—that the British Amateur Boxing Association sanctioned its first boxing competition for women, and the BBBofC sanctioned the first domestic professional fight the following year. As we know, women's boxing only fully entered the Olympic games in 2012, so change can be slow to happen, but women's boxing appears to be on a clear upward trajectory, and long may that continue. We want to help the sport nurture the next superstars of the future and give everyone the opportunity to take part, no matter their background. That is why we continue to support our elite boxers through UK Sport funding. We also support community boxing clubs across the country through Sport England funding and the National Lottery Community Fund.

Navendu Mishra: I welcome the Minister's comments regarding inclusion, particularly in boxing. He and I discussed the ongoing racism scandal in cricket when I tabled an urgent question a few months ago, and I thought the Government were reasonable on the matter, but did not go far enough. Will the Minister comment on current issues, such as the lack of progress for men and women of colour in cricket, and the long-standing issues with governance in that sport? I take his points about football, and I welcome them.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his ongoing interest in this matter. I will come on to some of those points in a moment—it relates to some other sports and I do not want to test the Chair's patience by diverging too far from the topic of the debate—but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Entities, particularly those that receive Government funding or public money in some way, shape or form, such as through Sport England, have an obligation and a duty—a requirement, in fact—to make sure that they are truly open to all, not discriminating and making efforts to be inclusive. If they are not, they will not and should not get public money. Of course, many other sports are private entities and self-organising bodies, but we still expect them to put in place parameters and governance structures through their governing bodies to do the same things—to be inclusive and open to all.

We have seen some very unfortunate, high-profile incidents in certain sports recently that have let everybody down. They should not taint everybody involved in those sports. We all know that sport is a great unifier and can bring people together in a way that very few other things can. Some of the incidents are extremely

worrying, but they should not taint everybody, because a lot of people work day in, day out in all sports across the country to be inclusive. Those people have been somewhat disappointed by incidents they have seen happen in their own sports, because they are working day in, day out to do the exact opposite of what they are seeing in the newspapers and on television.

We should not underestimate the incidents that have happened—unfortunately, particularly in cricket. We are keeping a close eye on it, as is the whole House. We have had multiple debates and will continue to do so, because we expect and need further change. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Stockport. I will continue with my speech, because his point is very much the theme of my next few pages.

Sport does not need to rest on its laurels. We must take steps to ensure that discrimination and inequality are identified and addressed. Like many sports, boxing continues to look at what more it can do to promote inclusion and diversity. England Boxing published the results of its equality, diversity and race review in January this year. The report made a number of recommendations around training, leadership and culture, all of which England Boxing is implementing. I am pleased to see the sport engage with the issues in that way.

We know that it is not only boxing that is facing these challenges. In June 2021, Sport England, UK Sport and the other home nations' sports councils published the results of a detailed, independent review into tackling racism and racial inequality in sport. The review brought together data and gathered lived experiences of racial inequalities and racism in the sector. The findings make clear that racism and racial inequalities still exist within sport in the UK—it is sad that I have to say that. These are long-standing issues that have resulted in ethnically diverse communities being consistently disadvantaged.

The sports councils agreed on a set of overarching commitments that they will work on together, relating to people, representation, investment, systems and insights. Updates on progress are being provided every six months, and I am keen to ensure this momentum is sustained over the long term. In addition, last year, Sport England and UK Sport published an updated version of the code for sports governance that sets the standards all sporting organisations must meet in return for public funding. As I said, if they are not performing in that way, they should not receive public funding.

The code has proved successful in setting clear expectations around good governance and diversity since its launch in 2017. However, four years on, I called on the two sports councils to review the code with a particular focus on equality and diversity, and that is what they have delivered. The updated code places an increased focus on diversity in decision making and on ensuring that sports organisations reflect the community they serve.

The code now requires sports organisations to produce individual diversity and inclusion action plans. These have to be agreed by Sport England and/or UK Sport, published and updated annually. This process, combined with support provided by the sports councils along the way, will help sports set clear ambitions for improving diversity and inclusion throughout their organisations, and not just at the senior board level.

The Government feel strongly about diversity of representation and thought, and I hope the changes in the code will help the sport sector become even stronger in that respect. Diversity and inclusion are essential to sport. We want people to enjoy taking part in their chosen activity, and we want to attract and retain talented athletes. That cannot happen if people do not feel welcome or respected.

It should go without saying that there is no place for racism, sexism, homophobia or any other kind of discrimination in sport, and we continue to work with our sports councils, sport governing bodies and others to ensure everyone feels welcomed and can enjoy sport. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney has raised many important points today, and I thank him for his ongoing interest and passion for this subject. History cannot be changed. For Cuthbert Taylor, and many others like him, nothing can bring back the chance to fight for a British title. We must acknowledge the past and learn for the future. I have made the BBBofC aware of this debate, and I will also write another letter.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised a point about the situation we have with the Commonwealth Games and gymnastics—I am aware of the situation. The sports team at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Commonwealth Games Federation are in discussions with the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique to make it aware of the sensitivities and concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We are engaged in constructive dialogue, and I continue to appeal to FIG to change its decision because, as the hon. Gentleman said, it is inconsistent with existing agreements. I hope FIG will understand that.

Jim Shannon: I want to thank both the Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who I know is directly involved in this matter. We hope that the combination of all of us together—MPs, the Secretary of State and the Minister—can make the difference. It is central to the Belfast agreement, so I cannot understand why the issue has not been addressed. I am hopeful that the endeavours of the Minister and others will make a difference. If the Minister does not mind, I would like to be kept aware of what is going on.

Nigel Huddleston: I absolutely commit to making sure that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues are aware of the situation. We have respectfully appealed and provided the full information, background and sensitivities regarding those three athletes. We all want them to compete and to proudly represent Northern Ireland—that is what they want to do. This issue is somewhat unique to gymnastics, because no other sport seems to have taken that approach. We are respectfully asking FIG to reconsider the situation and I will keep the hon. Gentleman informed of developments.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today and I thank the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney for securing this debate. I will do what I can to ensure that the BBBofC hears what we have said today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Ofsted: Accountability

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accountability of Ofsted.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, for the first time, I think.

I applied for the debate after I was contacted by a small village primary school in my constituency which has recently had a difficult experience following an Ofsted inspection. I thank everyone at Naburn Church of England Primary School, as well as the residents of Naburn for their engagement in the issue, with a special mention for headteacher Jonathan Green, for his invaluable input and for his skilful leadership of the school in these challenging times.

I also thank the Chamber engagement team here in Parliament for all their work in publicising the debate and for organising a survey of members of the teaching profession. My sincere thanks go to everyone around the country who took the time to complete the survey and to provide their own experiences of the Ofsted inspection process. Little did I realise when I organised the debate how widespread some of the concerns about Ofsted are among those involved in our school system. The survey for the debate alone attracted nearly 2,000 responses. Time prohibits me from mentioning every contribution, but I hope to provide a useful summary to inform discussion and the debate today, grounding it in first-hand experience of teachers and governors.

Last month, I attended a packed public meeting in the village of Naburn to discuss the future of the village school. The school is small, with only 56 pupils across two classes, but its importance to the community life of the village is significant. The school was inspected by Ofsted in 2007, when it was found to be “outstanding”. As a result, there was a 14-year gap before the next inspection in December last year, a gap that in itself I find worrying. The result of the inspection has been a finding of “inadequate”, which has put the school in the precarious position of having to find an academy sponsor within a tight timeframe of just a few months.

Many of the concerns expressed by Ofsted in its report were fair, but there was widespread frustration with how the inspection was carried out and the unconstructed nature of the findings, above all the fact that the school and the local community felt completely powerless to challenge oversights or omissions, or to add any sort of context to the report’s findings. That left them asking an important question, which I would like the Minister to answer today: to whom, if anyone, is Ofsted ultimately accountable?

To me, there seems to be no obvious answer to that question, which I find quite staggering. The Ofsted website sets out a four-stage process by which a school may pursue a complaint. Three of the stages are internal, with only the final stage bringing in external lawyers from the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution to make non-binding findings on the narrow question of whether Ofsted has handled the complaint in line with its own procedures. Above and beyond that, the only means by which a school can ultimately force an about-turn

by Ofsted is through the courts—an expense that is, to be honest, completely out of the question for the vast majority of schools. Over the past 10 years, I think, there has only been a handful of such cases, but the Minister will have the figures.

Turning back to the first stage of its complaint process, Ofsted is, to its credit, good at encouraging schools to take an active part in the inspection process and to discuss any concerns with the inspectors informally; inspectors are under an obligation to record and acknowledge any such concerns before continuing with the inspection. As the report is being drafted, there is an ongoing opportunity for the school to comment, to object on any issue in any particular way, and to contest the accuracy of the facts given, particularly in the report; and the lead inspector must then respond to those comments.

That may sound like a collaborative process, and for some schools that have positive experiences of Ofsted inspections it is. However, what comes through very strongly from the feedback that I have received from teachers is that inspection really is a lottery, and the experience depends to a large degree on the attitude of the inspector.

Of the nearly 2,000 respondents to the survey, just over half reported experience of the complaints process. Within that sample, there were plenty of examples of the system working well, with some respondents asking the inspector to see something in action during the course of the inspection, to correct the false impressions. There was praise for the flexibility of the system, with schools challenging the findings of the inspector partway through and finding that their grade was raised by the end of the process by that individual inspector. After the inspection, challenges to specific statements in the draft report were duly accepted and the wording was amended in the final report.

I think we can all agree that that is how the system should work. An Ofsted inspection should not be a walk in the park; it should be a rigorous process by which we ensure that appropriate standards are being maintained. After all, teachers and schools are given an enormous social responsibility of looking after and educating our children. However, there should be some humility on the part of Ofsted to recognise the fact that what its inspectors see during an inspection is, in the words of one of the respondents to the survey, “a snapshot in time”, with the outcome of the inspection not always capturing the reality of the school.

Time and resources permit inspectors to see the school for only one or two days, and in quite highly pressurised and therefore unrepresentative circumstances. It is right, therefore, not only that a significant opportunity is given to teachers to add context or to correct the record, but that appropriate weight is given to this feedback when the final assessment is being made. The unfortunate truth, however, is that that was the minority experience among respondents to my survey, with most of them reporting real concerns about how receptive inspectors were to comments and complaints at that stage.

Several teachers were frustrated with the “rude and dismissive” attitude of the inspectors and the lack of professional respect given to teachers. Many respondents felt that they were not given significant opportunity to highlight evidence of the excellent work done in classes, with the inspector focusing only on perceived weaknesses. Consequently, they felt that Ofsted inspection was a

blinker, tick-box exercise—or worse, an exercise in picking them apart on specific issues—rather than a fair, holistic assessment of how well the school was performing.

Respondents also highlighted unprofessional conduct by Ofsted inspectors, referring to deliberately combative attitudes and inspectors making judgments based on preconceptions. Points of concern included thinly disguised prejudice against faith schools and a perceived agenda against the type of school under inspection or the teaching methods being used. As one respondent put it:

“Some come in with a preconceived idea and nothing that they see or do will change it.”

Another respondent was of the view that the inspectors’ line of inquiry was very much about proving that their own initial decision was correct. If that is the case, it is extremely concerning.

This is more a criticism of the system than of individual inspectors themselves. Indeed, the headteacher of Naburn School was at pains to highlight the pressure put on the inspectors by operating to such a short timescale, and clearly a great many inspectors uphold the high professional standards expected of them. However, a recurring complaint in the feedback that I received was about the rigidity of the inspection criteria and the lack of focus on the context of the school. This was a concern among parents and teachers at Naburn.

One of Ofsted’s primary concerns in its report was the poor attendance rate and the steps that the school had taken to address it. On the face of it, that is a fair criticism, but it does not take into account that about a third of the children at the school are from a local Traveller community with very specific and well-documented issues around school attendance—something that is arguably beyond the sole control of the school leadership. Lauren, a constituent of mine who teaches at another local school, said that although she thought the outcome of her school’s last Ofsted report was fair, she was concerned to see how little Ofsted seemed to take the area and its demographics into account. She works in a school that has a higher than average pupil premium rate, with high numbers of students on free school meals and those for whom English is an additional language, but the school is judged in exactly the same way as schools without these difficult challenges. When such concerns are raised, schools feel that they are falling on deaf ears because they do not form part of the inspection criteria, and that a major part of the factual background to explain the school’s weakness is simply being overlooked. The complaints procedure does not seem able to accommodate these sorts of concerns.

If the subject of a complaint is the conduct of an Ofsted inspector, the situation is arguably even more difficult, because the complaint is reviewed in the first instance by the individual who conducted the inspection, leading to frustrations about how objective the exercise could really be. The informal complaints procedure is therefore an important part of the process. It can be valuable and effective when it works well, but it is important to recognise its limitations and the need for a robust mechanism by which the substantive findings of the report can be independently reviewed.

At stage 2 of the complaints procedure, schools are given a short window to submit a formal complaint prior to the publication of the final report. This is the only opportunity given to schools to put their substantive case before anyone who is not the initial inspector.

The final two stages narrow to an almost exclusive procedural focus, in which an internal scrutiny panel reviews how a stage 2 complaint has been handled. If the school decides to take it further, the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted will perform a similar exercise. It is specifically not within the remit of the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted to review the professional judgment of the decisions made by Ofsted, meaning that there is no external means of challenging the outcome of an Ofsted inspection, short of going to court—a reality that my constituents in Naburn found unbelievable.

Even within its narrowly prescribed remit, the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted faces certain limitations. Its determinations are not binding on Ofsted; all it can do is offer an independent view on the complaints and provide individual recommendations, advice and guidance to Ofsted to help it achieve best practice in the complaints-handling procedures. Ofsted does not have to comply with the recommendations, but if it does not comply, it must explain its reasons. In short, far from being an ombudsman-type of service with real teeth, the role of the ICASO is more of a mediator, albeit in a relationship in which the power balance between Ofsted and the school is heavily skewed towards the former. Its limited role is reflected in the small number of cases it reviews every year—about 20, which represent a tiny proportion of Ofsted’s overall workload. That figure is surely not reflective of the number of schools with concerns about their Ofsted inspection that are simply unable to ask for a review under one of the heads of complaint available.

Given the problem that I have set out, the question is: how can the system be improved? By way of comparison, it is useful to look at the complaints procedure used by the Independent Schools Inspectorate. The inspectorate also accepts contributions from schools during the inspection and drafting process, but it is treated as a given and is not explicitly part of the complaints procedure. Schools have the opportunity to submit a formal complaint for internal review, much like Ofsted’s procedure, but they are given a 10-day window, which seems much more reasonable than the five-day timeframe given by Ofsted. Crucially though, there is then a procedure by which the complaint can be submitted to an independent adjudicator, whose decision is considered final and binding on both ISI and the school. The independent adjudicator has before them all the relevant documentation and, crucially, can both investigate whether the complaint was handled correctly and adjudicate on whether the decision was reasonable. As a result of the adjudicator’s findings, the report can be amended on a full or partial reinspection ordered by ISI at its expense.

I appreciate that the comparison is slightly limited, as the case load and remits of ISI and Ofsted are very different, but it does provide an example of the sort of checks and balances that would go a long way to alleviate many of the frustrations felt by schools that have had difficulties dealing with Ofsted.

Another point worth considering is the relationship between Ofsted and the Department for Education. First, I recognise and acknowledge that a system where a Minister can be accused of intervening in an individual case on the basis of political pressure is undesirable, and it is completely right that Ofsted operates at arm’s length. However, the result is that parents, schools and

[*Julian Sturdy*]

local communities feel completely powerless in the face of an organisation that does not appear to have to justify its decisions to anyone.

If there is reluctance to reform the standard complaints procedure to give the independent element more teeth, one alternative could be to create a safety mechanism by which the Secretary of State can order a reinspection with a new team of inspectors or an independent review, so that Ofsted can no longer mark its own homework, which it seems to be doing on a regular basis. This mechanism would have the dual effect of providing an outlet to enhance accountability for local communities if they feel their school has been treated unjustly, while ensuring that the final decision is taken independently of political pressure and purely on the basis of the relevant criteria.

There is a debate to be had about the school inspection system more generally and its impact on the wellbeing of teachers and the effectiveness of the education system. I was interested to receive feedback in my survey on those points, and I am sure they will be picked up by many other colleagues. I have sought to confine my comments to the specific issue of the accountability of Ofsted and the procedure available to challenge its decisions. I am not opposed to having a robust school inspection system, and I believe that a strong inspection body is central to achieving that. Many teachers, as evidenced by my survey, have had nothing but positive experiences with Ofsted, but it is also clear that there are many who have not.

My concerns came to a head when I spoke to teachers and parents at Naburn school in my constituency. They are frustrated at how powerless they felt and incensed at the lack of accountability. The national response I have had since publicising this debate shows that their concerns are not isolated, but are widely shared in the teaching profession. The Government need to address this issue, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I know him well, and I am sure he will take a lot of what I have said on board.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Members will see that we are not greatly oversubscribed today, but that does not give them licence, as I am sure they will appreciate, because the Minister will want time to respond to the points that have been made.

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, not just because you are the Chair, but because you are a colleague and a friend. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), who presented the case. We are debating the accountability of Ofsted, but the Minister will know that we have different arrangements back home in Northern Ireland. I always like to sow into these debates the things that happen in Northern Ireland.

I endorse what the hon. Gentleman said. I share his concerns and I want to talk about some points that concern me. In recent years, there has been a breakthrough in the education system. We have tried to improve our educational standards by miles, and I believe we are on

the right path to ensuring that every child has a fair shot at education. That is the ambition. Some people will say that we are on the pathway to achieving that, and others will say that we are not there yet. Saying that, we must address some of the current issues, so it is great to be here today to discuss how we can move forward.

The hon. Gentleman said that Ofsted visits give only a “snapshot in time”. It is important to recognise that the inspection does not sum up all that happens in the school over a 12-month period, as it only captures the things that happen in that one-day snapshot. I understand the purpose of Ofsted and why inspections are necessary, but let me explain why I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the stress that inspections have on teachers, schools and pupils. He said that some faith-based schools have expressed concerns, and are particularly annoyed at Ofsted inspections. Some felt, rightly or wrongly, that they were targeted because of their faith. I am sure that is not the case, but some felt it to be.

Something has to be done about the situation if the only way for schools to challenge the conclusions of the Ofsted inspection is on a legal basis. I very much look to the Minister for a response to that point. There cannot always be a legal challenge to the inspection's conclusions and recommendations. The Minister always replies sympathetically and helpfully, as he did when he was in the Northern Ireland Office—we miss him there, although we are very glad he is here to respond to this debate.

Ofsted is accountable for school inspections and the inspection process. The devolved nations are covered by different arrangements, but I like to give a Northern Ireland opinion in these debates. Back home, the Education Training Inspectorate is responsible for school inspection duties. Although we are grateful to it for ensuring that our schools are of the highest standard, there are undoubtedly issues to be addressed. When it identifies issues, it highlights where improvements can take place, and it does so in a way that encourages schools, but also ensures that they make the necessary changes.

I have been contacted by many teachers who first and foremost must deal with the ongoing pressures of inspections. It is usually the principals who take on that responsibility, but the teachers and pupils are also part of it. While an inspection is a necessary procedure, it can severely disrupt the routine of the school day. There is often a slight disregard for the disruption that inspections can cause to not only the school day, but the pupils. There is a need to be sympathetic, careful and cautious when it comes to inspections.

We are all aware that our respective Education Ministers in all the regions have worked tirelessly to support pupils with special educational needs and to provide an organised, strict routine to help them learn. My plea is on behalf of those with special educational needs who are disrupted by Ofsted inspection, and who find that it affects them as individuals and in their schooling.

The discomfort and frustration that pupils with special needs can face when their routine is disrupted is unnecessary and could be handled much better. Ofsted and other inspection agencies must be held accountable for ensuring normality in the school day. In addition, our teachers have been feeling extreme pressure to perform as “perfect” in their profession. None of us is perfect. As you know, Mr Paisley, there is only one person who is perfect: the man above. We are just humble human beings with all our frailties and mistakes.

The National Education Union has stated,

“Able teachers, repeatedly assessed as ‘outstanding’, still have their preparation, teaching, management of behaviour and marking of students’ work evaluated incessantly. The pressures created by Ofsted cascade down through the system, increasing teachers’ stress and workloads to the point of exhaustion and burn-out.”

How are Ofsted inspections affecting teachers? Is consideration being given to teachers as it should be, ever mindful that teachers are under incredible pressure as it is? They have a responsibility to deliver for their pupils and they want to do that well, so they do not need extra pressures.

The NEU also notes that Ofsted has failed to address the impact that poverty and the cost of living are having on children’s learning. Other factors need to be considered when Ofsted carries out its inspections and draws conclusions about education. One such factor is poverty and the cost of living. The money that parents have for their children has an impact on them when they are in school. Another is the responsibility of schools to ensure that pupils have a meal to start the day and are getting fed. Sometimes—I say this very respectfully—a child may not be the best dressed or the tidiest, but that may be because of pressures at home. What is being done to consider that?

The pandemic has already seriously disrupted the education of pupils without the familial and technological resources to study at home. With the increasing fuel and electricity payments, it is estimated that thousands more will be plunged into working poverty, with 3.9 million children having parents who are in in-work poverty. What consideration has been given to the direct impact of in-work poverty on pupils?

There needs to be more support for our teachers. After a horrid, terrible two years due to the pandemic, there has been much judgment as to how schools are operating. I gently suggest there should be a wee bit of flexibility in Ofsted inspections, to ensure that all those factors are taken on board and the pressures of the inspection do not overload teachers and schools.

The workload pressures are concerning, with many teachers working late into the night as it is. There have also been judgments of schools based on limited evidence. The hon. Member for York Outer referred to the pressures on schools, and the importance of ensuring that there is evidence to back up the Ofsted inspections. Most pressures are due to the pandemic. Indeed, many feel that Ofsted inspections should be more circumspect when it comes to other factors—life outside of schools—that have an impact on schools. Ofsted must address basic errors and misunderstandings, and work alongside Ministers to support schools and teachers.

I look forward to the Minister’s response, and I will conclude, ever conscious that others have the opportunity to speak. I welcome the debate and hope that we can be a voice for our education system—to help make teachers’ and principals’ lives easier, to ensure that pupils in schools are not disadvantaged by all the things that are happening outside school that have an impact inside schools. The Minister always strives to give us the answers we look for, and I look forward to hearing him, but I am ever mindful that there can be difficult periods of inspections, which, by their very nature, disconcert, annoy and disrupt school life.

3 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and it is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing the debate, and highlighting some of the challenges of the Ofsted system.

Everyone recognises the importance of having a school inspectorate that is independent and able to support schools to uphold the highest standards, but there are undoubtedly imperfections in the current inspection regime, which have been highlighted admirably by my hon. Friend.

I want to draw on an example from my constituency that I hope will help the Minister to understand where the Ofsted inspection regime could be improved. Thomas Mills High School has always had outstanding academic results. It is now an academy, but was a high school when I first became a Member of Parliament and I still slip into calling it that. Its academic prowess is well known in Suffolk, with a high proportion of students annually progressing to Russell Group universities, including Oxford and Cambridge.

The school had historically always been considered outstanding. During the pandemic it was inspected by Ofsted and was unfortunately rated as inadequate. In many areas, the school was still considered outstanding, but on the issue of safeguarding, the school was unfortunately rated inadequate. As the Minister will be aware, that forces the global rating of the school to be inadequate.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer commented on the challenges of monitoring pupils from deprived and marginalised communities, and he mentioned the Traveller community. Indeed, Thomas Mills academy had challenges supporting some pupils during the pandemic who came from more difficult backgrounds. I believe that was the primary reason for the inadequate rating.

It is unfortunate that that one issue—in an inspection carried out at a particularly challenging time—resulted in the global rating being downgraded to inadequate. As a result, the regional inspector of academies has been involved and taken action. The normal step taken in such situations would be for the regional schools commissioner to send in additional support to the academy from other schools. The great irony is that the headteacher at the Thomas Mills academy, Mr Hurst, is the very person that the regional schools inspector has gone to in the past to be that troubleshooter in other failing schools, and he has been instrumental in helping to turn some of those schools around. The school knows that the appeals process is challenging to navigate. It is now likely to be asked to become part of a larger academy schools trust, which in itself may bring challenges.

I think it is worth the Minister considering how we can help schools that have previously been outstanding—and are still outstanding in many respects, in their inspections—not to be dragged down or judged on one single aspect of that Ofsted inspection. That has had far-reaching consequences for Thomas Mills and the future of the academy. Joining a multi-academy trust—possibly one that does not have links to Suffolk—will have significant consequences for the way in which that

[Dr Dan Poulter]

school is managed and run, when it has always been considered to be an outstanding school, until recently, by Ofsted.

The other point that the inspection regime raised was the challenges that schools experience in attracting high-quality governors, or trustees in the case of an academy. Clearly, attracting a governing body, or a trustee body, with the right skillset to support schools in an increasingly complex modern environment—navigating safeguarding issues through to issues relating to the mental health and wellbeing of pupils—is important, but many schools find it challenging. Often, that group of trustees or governing body is there to support the headteacher or the school in navigating inspections successfully.

I wonder what comments the Minister may have on how we can support schools—not just Thomas Mills in my constituency, or the school mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer, but all schools—in attracting the governing body or trustees that will provide the necessary skillsets to support them, and ensure they put in place the right governance and processes to ensure the pupils have the best education and are safeguarded in everything that they do.

I hope that my brief contribution has been helpful in highlighting some of the challenges for schools and why they have concerns with the current Ofsted regime. We must recognise that this is about moving beyond the impression of one inspector, or one group of inspectors, looking more globally at a school, and recognising some of the challenges those schools have had in supporting people from marginalised communities and supporting pupils during the pandemic. That should all be considered as part of an Ofsted inspection. One inspection can now have far-reaching consequences for the future of single academies or smaller schools.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. If he will excuse me, I have another school from Suffolk visiting me this afternoon, so if I do have to leave early, I look forward to reading his remarks. I thank him for his time and congratulate, once again, my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer on securing today's debate.

3.8 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) for securing this important debate. As we have heard today, the role of Ofsted is an issue that prompts much discussion among teachers, parents and constituents.

The hon. Member for York Outer spoke about concerns shared with him by a village school in his constituency, and the impact on staff, parents and the wider community. He cited the impressive response to his efforts to seek the views of others, on which I congratulate him. It is great to hear that nearly 2,000 responses were received, but it is also a sad reflection of the concerns about existing inspectorate arrangements. He raised particular concerns about the complaints processes and the limited effective opportunities to challenge the inspectorate and its outcomes; those points were well made.

We also heard, as ever, from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who shared his insight and considered views from a Northern Ireland perspective. He spoke passionately about the pressures that Ofsted

places on teachers and the need for more support for them, which I will address later in my speech. Finally, the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) also shared helpful insight from his constituency about the impact on schools and communities of one-word judgments.

It is true that the majority of schools are now rated good or outstanding, but that masks an estimated 210,000 pupils stuck in schools that for 13 years or more have received ratings of inadequate or requires improvement. There are also significant regional inequalities. More than 200,000 primary-age children live in areas in which there are no good or outstanding schools. Eleven out of 12 local authorities in the north-east have a higher-than-average share of pupils attending underperforming schools.

School inspection must be a crucial part of our education system to deliver the best for our children, but I fear that the framework drives a tick-box culture, as echoed by other Members in the debate. It does not necessarily encourage the delivery of excellent education to every child. It also contributes to a growing recruitment and retention crisis in the teaching profession, which will inevitably have an impact in the classroom. For too many school leaders, teachers and governors, inspection has become emblematic of all that is wrong with the profession. Time and time again, in conversations that I have had since becoming shadow Schools Minister, teachers tell me that they feel punished, not supported, by Ofsted.

Earlier this year, I visited the National Education Union advice line in Doncaster. I spoke to teachers desperate to find a way to stay in the profession that they love, but the pressure of inspections was listed by teachers and staff as a significant factor in their decision to leave. I visited a school in Gillingham where people described the relief that the inspections were suspended during covid, because they could then

“focus on doing what was best for the children”.

That seems completely counterproductive to me, and to many parents and teachers too.

I want to say to school leaders, teachers and governors: “I hear you loud and clear.” Unlike this Government, Labour has a clear plan to tackle the challenge. This year, Ofsted turns 30 and, in that time, the role of schools has changed immeasurably; so, too, must the inspection framework. Getting the best out of people means respecting their efforts and supporting improvement, as well as challenging their performance. Ofsted should be an ally to every teacher and school leader, determined to set their school on the right path. In government, therefore, Labour will undertake fundamental reform of Ofsted to ensure that it supports school improvement proactively, and does not just deliver high-stakes, one-word judgments on the hard work of teachers and governors.

First, we would free up inspectors to work more closely with schools requiring improvement. They would be empowered to put in place plans to deliver sustained change in struggling schools, similar to the peer-to-peer support that worked so well in the London challenge. We would connect teachers and leaders with the training they need. Next, we would require Ofsted to report on a school's performance relative to other schools in its family, or those with similar characteristics. That would recognise the short and long-term improvements that teachers plan, helping parents understand inspection

results more clearly. We would also require Ofsted to report on areas of excellence within a school, so that we can celebrate what is great as well as what needs improvement. Working with school leaders and staff, we can reset the adversarial culture and refocus on the delivery of excellence for every child.

While important, however, reform of Ofsted is not a panacea. I recognise that the challenges that children and teachers face, and that this Government choose to ignore, go beyond that. As I said, the inspection regime is contributing to an increasing recruitment and retention crisis. Ministers have met teaching recruitment targets only once in the past decade. DFE data released earlier this year shows that the number of applications to initial teacher training has plummeted by almost a quarter from the same time last year. Forty per cent. of teachers now leave the profession within four years.

I am clear that the world-class education we want for all children need not come at the cost of the high-quality teachers we need. That is why Labour has introduced the most ambitious programme of school improvement for a generation, which contains practical steps to tackle the day-to-day issues that teachers face in the classroom. First, we will recruit 6,500 new teachers to help close the vacancies gap, and we will make a real investment in teachers through a professional development fund that gives them access to the skills they need during their career. Aspiring headteachers will be given the support they need to lead outstanding schools. Our excellence in leadership programme to support new headteachers throughout their first years in the job will be well supported. We will work together with school staff and leaders to give them time to teach and to deliver the outcomes we need for our children. Labour is clear that inspection should apply to the whole system, with multi-academy trusts properly responsible for provision in schools, as Ofsted itself has called for.

Labour is relentlessly ambitious for children's success. We want to build an education system where children thrive once again and staff have the time to teach. Making that a reality requires curiosity, an understanding of the problem and a real plan, but what we see from this Government is a White Paper full of bluster and gimmicks and a Schools Bill that fails to tackle the day-to-day challenges facing our school system. Yet again, Conservative Ministers simply do not have the answers that teachers, children and parents need. That is why the next Labour Government will transform education again, as we did in the past, and place children at the centre of our national approach. That is the very least they deserve.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I commend the Chamber Engagement Team on their production of an excellent piece of work, which has helped to inform and assist today's debate.

3.16 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, for what I believe is the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) for opening the debate. I greatly value the opportunity to listen to his insights and the detailed research that he has done, supported by the Chamber Engagement Team, before holding the debate.

I extend that appreciation to other colleagues who have spoken today and brought up individual cases. It is always a great pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); that is not unusual for Ministers responding to a Westminster Hall debate, but it is a particular pleasure for me. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) raised an important case in his constituency, as did my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer. I will try to address those cases towards the end of my remarks, so I fully understand if my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich has to leave the Chamber before then. It is rare to have an opportunity to speak at such length in the Chamber, but I remember PPS-ing one debate in Westminster Hall in which I was asked by officials to pass a note to the Minister saying, "You don't actually have to use all the time, you know." The Minister was not entirely pleased to receive that advice from his officials, who clearly felt he was being much too long-winded.

As the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) has pointed out, the debate is timely, given that it comes in a symbolic year for Ofsted with its 30th anniversary. Such occasions rightly demand that we pause to reflect, and I am pleased that the debate has provided another opportunity to do so. I will try to set out some of the context and some of the broader points about accountability that my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer has asked me to address, and then come to the specific cases towards the end of my remarks.

This period in Ofsted's history has added significance, with the resumption of routine graded inspection programmes taking place at the start of this academic year—an important milestone that comes after a period of enormous disruption to our society caused by the pandemic, which has required significant adaptation in the education and children's services sector and in Ofsted as an inspectorate. I join my hon. Friend in thanking teachers and heads for all they have done through that period. It is right to acknowledge the enormous pressures they have been under and the additional work that heads in every school, no matter its rating or relationship with Ofsted, and their teachers and all school staff have been facing.

The fact that schools and other providers face challenges and disruption in their work only reinforces the importance of parents, the Government and Parliament having independent assurance through Ofsted that children are receiving the best possible education and are safe at this critical time. It is encouraging that when inspections have taken place this academic year, the outcomes have often been very positive and in many ways similar to, or an improvement on, what was there before the pandemic. For example, the large majority of good schools continue to be good, or have improved to outstanding, and a large majority—a higher percentage than before the pandemic—of schools that were previously less than good are now being graded as good or better. It is the case that a significant proportion—around half—of formerly exempt outstanding schools, which are often receiving their first Ofsted visit in a decade or more, have not maintained their former grade. However, even the change from outstanding has more often than not been a change to good.

[Mr Robin Walker]

As we turn to recovery, it is clear to me that every part of the education system, including Ofsted, has its role to play. Before moving on to the specific matter of Ofsted's accountability, it is worth reflecting for a moment on the significance of Ofsted within our system.

Ofsted, or the Office for Standards in Education, was established in 1992, introducing for the first time universal, regular and independent inspection of all schools, with inspectors working to a national, published inspection framework. Much has changed over the years and I do not want to go into a detailed blow-by-blow account of all that, but it is worth noting that Ofsted's remit has grown over the years to encompass early years, children's services and skills. It was reconstituted, as the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, by the Labour Government in 2006. The legislation establishing Ofsted in its current form—the Education and Inspections Act 2006—also stipulated a set of responsibilities for Her Majesty's chief inspector and, separately, Ofsted's statutory board, comprising a chair, members and Her Majesty's chief inspector.

The fact that Ofsted was established by a Conservative Government and expanded under a Labour Government signifies the broad cross-party consensus for its independent inspection role that has existed for most of the last 30 years, and I was pleased to hear from the shadow Minister's comments that he is restoring at least a degree of that consensus in his approach.

Despite the various changes and developments over the years, Ofsted's central role in our systems has remained a constant. Inspection provides key and trusted information for parents. When it comes to choosing a school, school proximity is usually the decisive factor in making the final choice, followed by the ethos of the school and then Ofsted's judgment. That shows how important the judgment is, and 70% of parents feel that Ofsted reports are a reliable source of information on their child's school. Beyond that, though, Ofsted's inspection gives recognition and validation to effective practice where it is seen and prompts self-improvement. It provides assurance not only for parents but for the wider community and it triggers intervention where necessary. It also provides evidence both to Governments and to Parliament.

In that context, it is entirely legitimate to reflect on and examine the inspectorate's accountability. It is of great significance that Ofsted was established as, and remains to this day, a non-ministerial Government Department and an independent inspectorate, a duality that brings benefits as well as a degree of complexity and which has implications when it comes to considering accountability.

Starting with a rather obvious point that will not have escaped the attention of hon. Members, I am standing before Members in Westminster Hall today, not Her Majesty's chief inspector. That reflects Ofsted's non-ministerial status and means that the Government have a line of accountability to Parliament for Ofsted and its work. Sitting beneath that, however, are lines of accountability between Ofsted and the Secretary of State, between Ofsted and the Government more generally, and directly between Ofsted and Parliament. I will address those lines of accountability now.

Even a cursory look at the legislation underpinning Ofsted demonstrates a clear link between Ofsted and the Secretary of State. For example, the Education and

Inspections Act 2006 provides that, in addition to specific inspection and regulatory responsibilities, Her Majesty's chief inspector has a general responsibility to keep the Secretary of State informed about the quality and effectiveness of services within Ofsted's remit. The chief inspector must provide information or advice to the Secretary of State when requested, and in carrying out her work must have regard to such aspects of Government policy as the Secretary of State may direct. Inspection legislation also places a duty on Ofsted to inspect schools when requested to do so by the Secretary of State. Furthermore, although the position of Her Majesty's chief inspector is a Crown appointment, the chief inspector holds and vacates her office in accordance with the terms of her appointment, and those terms are determined by the Secretary of State.

It is clear that Ofsted's relationship with the Secretary of State and Ministers provides one important dimension to its accountability, and means that Ofsted inspects within the context of the Government's policies. I, the Secretary of State and my colleague in the Lords regularly meet Her Majesty's chief inspector—the regularity varies from about once a month to every six weeks—to discuss a wide range of matters relating to Ofsted and its work. The debate has certainly given me some further issues that I will raise and discuss in such meetings.

As for examples of Ofsted's broader accountability to Government, hon. Members will wish to be aware that Ofsted is expected to comply with various Government rules, for example those set by Her Majesty's Treasury and the Cabinet Office that relate to Departments. For the purpose of illustration, these include requirements to publish equality objectives and to report on them annually, and requirements to publish information on pay, gender and so on.

I turn now to Ofsted's accountability to Parliament, starting with a simple example. On a day-to-day level, Ofsted regularly responds directly to correspondence from hon. Members, and Her Majesty's chief inspector also responds directly to written parliamentary questions relating to Ofsted's work, with a record of her responses being placed in the Library. Her Majesty's chief inspector can also be called to give evidence to Select Committees. In practice, that line of accountability usually operates through the Education Committee, which I understand holds regular sessions on Ofsted's work, but it is also the case that Ofsted may appear before other Committees, such as the Public Accounts Committee. That scrutiny of course extends to the other place, where I know that Ofsted recently gave evidence alongside me on the issue of citizenship education.

Dr Poulter: Accountability implies a sense of responsibility. It is right that Ofsted should respond to Members of Parliament, but at the regular meetings that my hon. Friend, Secretary of State and the Minister in the Lords have with Ofsted, what ability do Ministers have to influence Ofsted?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. The meetings often involve frank discussions in which we do not always necessarily agree. We are certainly not in a position to give Ofsted orders, but we have the opportunity to raise concerns that have been expressed by colleagues, and those meetings can be influential and important. I will give an example. During the course of

the covid pandemic and in the immediate recovery, we had many discussions about the process of deferrals. Ofsted brought forward a generous deferral policy that allowed schools that felt that they were facing disruption to defer their inspections, and many schools took advantage of that and benefited from it. However, there has to be a degree of independence, and that is all part of the balance.

Beyond the accountability mechanisms in place that relate to the Government and Parliament, the Government's arrangements for Ofsted also provide a separate line of accountability. As I mentioned earlier, the 2006 Act established a statutory board for Ofsted with a specified set of functions relating to setting its strategic priorities and objectives, monitoring targets, and ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of Ofsted's work. The board has an important challenge and support role in relation to the inspectorate's work and performance, and it is notable that Her Majesty's chief inspector is required to agree her performance objectives and targets with the chair. It will also be of interest to hon. Members that Ofsted's board is currently carrying out a routine board effectiveness review, as confirmed by Dame Christine Ryan when she gave evidence to the Education Committee last September. I understand that Dame Christine will update the Education Committee on this work in due course.

So far I have provided an outline and we have discussed various elements of the accountability that applies to Ofsted, but I turn now to the other side of the coin, which is its independence. Independence is a necessary pre-requisite for the inspectorate, providing credibility and value to Ofsted's work. Ofsted's ability to inspect and report without fear or favour remains as relevant today as it always has been, and it has to be carefully guarded. Operating within the constraints of legislation and broad Government policy, Ofsted has appropriate freedom to develop and implement its own inspection frameworks through consultation, and to offer advice on matters relating to its remit.

Ofsted is also responsible for the conduct and reporting of its inspections, and it is perhaps here that Ofsted's independence is most apparent. No Minister or Committee member in this House, however powerful, can amend Ofsted's professional judgments, and I recognise that that is one of the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer. Parliament has chosen—I believe rightly—to protect the inspectorate from interference in these matters. To put it simply, when it comes to inspection judgments, Ofsted has complete independence. The buck stops with Her Majesty's chief inspector.

I absolutely recognise that independent inspection can sometimes mean that there are difficult messages for individual schools, colleges and other providers about the quality of their provision. I am conscious that Ofsted's independent view can sometimes result in uncomfortable messages—even for Ministers—but as challenging as that can be at times, the benefits of independent inspection and reporting are undeniable and should be carefully protected in the interests of pupils and parents, as well as staff and leaders, across the country. There will always be debate when it comes to judgments on quality, and I accept that. After all, an inspection is not, and should not be, a tick-box exercise. It requires professional judgment to weigh up multiple factors that contribute to a school being assessed as good or, much less often, not good.

When it comes to assessing safeguarding of pupils, I hope hon. Members will agree that we need Ofsted's assessments to be robust and absolutely clear where there are concerns. It is also important that Ofsted's inspection approach is proportionate to risk, with more extensive and frequent arrangements for weaker schools. That is not over-surveillance but responsiveness to provide additional scrutiny and the assurance that parents, Governments and Parliament need.

With the power to provide a published judgment on the provider comes the clear responsibility to ensure that those judgments are evidence-based, fair and accurate. I know that Her Majesty's chief inspector is absolutely committed to ensuring that inspections are of the highest quality. That requires, among other things, a careful selection of inspectors, effective training led by Her Majesty's inspectors, and strong quality assurance arrangements, all of which are taken extremely seriously by Ofsted.

In that context, it is particularly encouraging that the evidence from Ofsted's post-inspection surveys indicates that the vast majority of schools with experience of inspection are satisfied by that experience. The data shows specifically that almost nine in 10 responding schools were satisfied with the way in which inspections were carried out. A similar proportion felt that the inspection judgments were justified based on the evidence collected, and nine in 10 agreed that the inspection would help them to improve further. I think that is a strong sign that the inspection framework can and does support schools. I recognise, however, that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich has his own survey data, and it is important that we look at that in detail and take it into account.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), the shadow Minister and I referred to the impact on teachers. I am not saying that the Minister's figures are not right, but if we are all getting that sort of feedback about teachers, perhaps it is not as straightforward as nine out of 10 schools saying that inspections are okay.

As I said during my speech, I am conscious of those with special educational needs. We all know that it does not take a lot to throw those children out of kilter for a while, so sensitivity and caution around them are important. The Minister was perhaps going to respond to those questions anyway, and if so, fair enough, but I would like answers to them.

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an absolutely fair point. He is right: I was coming on to the workload challenge. I think we have to be honest and accept that independent inspections leading to a published report will inevitably be a source of some pressure on schools. I recognise that he and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer have raised concerns about the workload impact on teachers. I have discussed that many times with Her Majesty's chief inspector, who is committed to ensuring that pressure is kept to a minimum and that inspectors take all reasonable steps to prevent undue anxiety and minimise stress.

As part of that, Ofsted has taken steps through its new framework—for example, including a section designed to dispel myths about inspections that can result in unnecessary anxiety and workload in schools, and ensuring

[Mr Robin Walker]

that inspectors consider the extent to which leaders take into account the workload and wellbeing of their staff as part of an inspection. We at the Department take seriously our responsibilities when it comes to workload. That is why we have worked with the unions on a workload-reduction toolkit for the sector and on a well-being charter.

I recognise that there is a balance to be struck here. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer raised the issue of the short period of inspections. Of course, under previous inspection regimes, there had been a longer period of inspections, or notice given for inspections, and that was criticised for increasing workload because it required people to spend more time collating and preparing data for Ofsted visits. That is a challenging balance to strike.

There will be some occasions when providers are unhappy with their inspection experience or outcome, and yes, there will be occasions when inspectors do not get everything right first time, despite the quality assurance processes that we all want, but it is important to see that in perspective. Ofsted's annual report and accounts documents provide interesting data on complaints about inspections. They show that, across Ofsted's remit in 2018-19, 1.8% of inspection activity led to a formal complaint being received. In 2019-20, that figure was 2.5%, and in 2020-21, which I appreciate was a different year in many respects, it was just 0.3%.

Julian Sturdy: I want to give a little context on that point. My local primary school in Naburn, which I mentioned, felt that there was no need and that it was irrelevant to complain because nothing in the process would change. The worrying aspect is the lack of accountability in individual cases. Some schools do not challenge inspections because they feel that there is no opportunity to do so. I would like the Minister to address those concerns.

Mr Walker: I recognise that point, and I recognise that my hon. Friend said that the school has not submitted a formal complaint. I will come to that school in a bit more detail in a moment.

Of the 320 complaints that were that were closed last year, 26% had an aspect upheld or partially upheld, which shows there is a degree of responsiveness in the complaints process. I encourage that school to submit a formal complaint so that its views can be taken into account. In most places where a complaint was upheld, that was because an aspect of the process could have been better or a small change was required to the report. In three cases, Ofsted decided to change the overall effectiveness judgment following complaint investigations, and five inspections were deemed to be incomplete, which in turn led to inspectors carrying out a further visit to gather additional evidence.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Strangford raised questions about the complaints procedure. I am very interested to hear the detail of the survey that my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer conducted, and I will be happy to meet him to discuss it in more detail after this debate.

Ofsted gives careful consideration to its complaints procedures and introduced some improvements in September 2020 after consultation. As step 1 of the

process, providers can now submit any comments on their draft reports—I believe my hon. Friend's school will have engaged with that already. Inspectors consider them and write a response in a cover letter with the final report. Once the final report is issued to the provider, that opens the five-day complaints window, to which my hon. Friend referred.

A complaint received during that window triggers step 2 of the process. It means that the report publication is held until the complaint response is sent. Ofsted investigates the concerns and sends an outcome letter. Five days later, it publishes the inspection report with any changes identified in the outcome letter. If a complainant remains dissatisfied on receipt of the step 2 letter, they have 15 working days to request an internal review. That review will consider whether Ofsted's policy or procedures on handling complaints were followed correctly at step 2, based on available information from a step 2 investigation.

At the end of a review, a panel will discuss how the complaint was handled and come to a final decision. Panels are never held in the region where a complaint is from to ensure added independence. Where available, the panel includes an external attendee, such as a head-teacher or a nursery manager.

If the provider remains dissatisfied, it can then complain to the independent adjudicator to Ofsted, appointed by the Secretary of State, and the adjudicator will consider Ofsted's handling of the case and come to a view on it. Ultimately, as my hon. Friend said, schools and providers have the option to pursue a judicial review, although I absolutely accept that there is a high bar to that, and we hope that is not where most people need to go.

My hon. Friend asked whether I knew the number of cases that had gone to judicial review. I have to be honest: I do not, but I do have some figures, which are hopefully helpful to him, on the complaints reviewed by the independent adjudicator. The numbers are small. For example, there were 13 in 2019, 17 in 2020 and six in 2021. The adjudicator consistently reports that Ofsted takes very seriously any recommendations put forward. In 2021, none of the six cases were upheld, and there were no recommendations for the inspectorate to improve its complaints arrangement.

My hon. Friend, totally understandably and quite rightly, has spoken up for and championed a small rural school in his constituency, as any of us would want to do as MPs championing our constituencies. The Department absolutely recognises the importance of rural schools and the need to maintain access to good local schools in rural areas. Rural schools are often at the heart of their communities, which is why there is a presumption against the closure of rural primary schools. The possibility of closure would be a hugely difficult issue for all involved. The legislation requires that decisions be made by local authorities, which are required to follow a well-established statutory process, including a period of representation when they must gather comments and opinions from affected groups, and they must consider them during the decision-making process.

Our national funding formula reform has meant that the funding schools attract through the sparsity factor has more than doubled from £42 million in 2021-22 to £95 million this year. That is one of the ways we are supporting rural schools.

My hon. Friend rightly raised concerns about the length of the gap between the 2007 inspection and the more recent one. It is absolutely vital that we remove the exemption to ensure that schools and parents have an up-to-date assessment of the quality of education being provided in every school. I would have made that change myself on my appointment, but I was very pleased to find that the decision had already been taken by my predecessor. I think it was not before time. The Government were rightly concerned that over time the exemption was starting to lead to a loss of confidence in the outstanding grade, particularly as many exempt schools were judged outstanding under previous Ofsted inspection frameworks. Over time, we have increased expectations in order to raise standards across all schools. Ofsted's new framework presents a tougher test for a school to be judged outstanding. It is also the case that Ofsted is focusing at this time on those schools that have gone longest without inspections, including those that have gone a decade or more without inspection.

Where Ofsted inspects and finds a school is no longer outstanding, it makes a point in the report to recognise that the declining grade is not necessarily a reflection of the work of the current leadership in the school. The vast majority of former exempt outstanding schools inspected since September 2021 have been judged either outstanding or good.

I recognise the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich has raised regarding Thomas Mills High School. I will raise the issue with Her Majesty's inspector when we next meet. However, I should reflect that in the many debates I have listened to and attended over the years, I would be pressed hard to make sure that we did emphasise the importance of safeguarding.

I am happy to discuss with my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer all the opportunities in the White Paper on how to attract strong trusts to his area. He also asked about guidance and support. We have been looking at revised guidance on behaviour and attendance, and at clear guidance on keeping children safe in education to support governors and school leaders to navigate their responsibilities more effectively.

My hon. Friend raised concerns about the outcome of the inspection at Naburn primary school and the implications for the future of the school. Our priority is always to ensure that pupils receive a high standard of education. That is why the regional schools commissioner, acting on behalf of the Secretary of State, will take responsibility for ensuring that an inadequate maintained school becomes a sponsored academy as swiftly as possible.

Our expectation is that schools with directive academy orders convert within nine months. In the case of Naburn primary school, following an Ofsted judgment of inadequate and the subsequent issuing of a directive academy order, all parties are acting quickly to support the school, particularly as safeguarding concerns have been identified. The local authority, the Department for Education and Ofsted are in agreement that the standards at Naburn were not good enough, as pupils did not have access to high-quality provision. The Ofsted inspection report from December 2021 indicated that the school curriculum is not developed and does not meet the needs of pupils, that the teachers do not have high expectations for all pupils and that there is not a strong culture of safeguarding at the school. This does put pupils potentially at risk.

The Ofsted report also notes that the local authority identified the school as being vulnerable in 2019 and gave leaders extra support. However, the support provided has not prevented the overall decline. The local authority knows that intensive support is now needed in order to ensure the quality of education becomes acceptable. The diocese agrees with the local authority that there are significant areas of the school's work that need improvement. There are a number of strong trusts already operating in the York area that collaborate well across the York Schools and Academies Board, but we need to be realistic about some of the challenges that my hon. Friend has raised on the viability of the school, given the small number of pupils currently on roll and the lack of applications for September. This is a small school with 57 pupils on roll and at 66% capacity. At this point, there are two sponsors who have conducted due diligence on Naburn primary and early indications for sponsorship are promising. Should a potential sponsor be identified, that sponsor will need to explore options it might take to rapidly bring about the necessary changes at the school.

The Department has made it clear that school closures are necessary only in exceptional circumstances, which are detailed in our statutory guidance. We will continue to work with my hon. Friend and with the local authority to try to make sure that this situation reaches a good outcome for the school and the community that he represents.

I have tried to cover a lot of ground this afternoon, and I hope I have addressed some of the specific points raised by hon. Members in what has been a thought-provoking discussion. I take into account the concerns that have been raised. I want to make sure that we explore fully the outcomes of the survey that my hon. Friend has conducted and discussed today.

I have outlined the various lines of accountability for Ofsted which, taken together, provide what I believe are appropriate checks and balances, with Ofsted being answerable to Government and Parliament and to its statutory board, but at the same time having appropriate and demonstrable independence in carrying out its work. Its independent insight and judgment remain just as important today as they were 30 years ago, perhaps even more so as we seek collectively to ensure that all children, pupils and students are able to recover following a period of substantial disruption to their education and lives more generally. Ofsted has its part to play—a key part, as I have outlined—and while we must never be complacent, I believe that the accountability mechanisms are in place to allow for appropriate challenge and support as it carries out its work.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister. I think that is one of the longest speeches a Minister has ever made in response in a 90-minute debate in this Chamber. I saw his Parliamentary Private Secretary twitching—he was going to send one of those notes, but he resisted. Mr Julian Sturdy, you have the opportunity to wind up the debate.

3.45 pm

Julian Sturdy: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for his response, but I want to pick up one quick point before thanking everyone else. He talked specifically about Naburn school, which is what led me to bring this

[Julian Sturdy]

debate on Ofsted's accountability to the Chamber. The new headteacher, Jonathan Green, has been tasked with turning the school around. He has the full support of the parents and is doing an amazing job, but he was in place for only 24 days before Ofsted came on site to inspect the school. Is that normal, or should he have been given more time to try to turn the school around? There was a huge amount of frustration in the local community that that was how the inspection came about, and that context needs to be laid out in response to what the Minister has said.

I would like to thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for their valuable contributions and for raising different aspects of Ofsted's accountability. I agree with one of the points made by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) that many schools, headteachers, teachers and parents, at times, feel punished by Ofsted. We have to change that.

I agree with the Minister on the issues of the overall accountability of Ofsted and its wider policy. He raised the fact that he and the Secretary of State have regular meetings on that. However, it still goes back to the real concern over individual cases and how schools can challenge decisions made by Ofsted. I do not think that that has been properly addressed. There is real concern out there.

The Minister referred to the ICASO review, but we have to remember that it is not binding on Ofsted, as I said in my speech. I wonder whether the Minister feels that a change such as making those findings binding on Ofsted could ensure more individual accountability when schools feel aggrieved by an Ofsted inspection and need some form of redress to be able to challenge that. I do not feel that they have the confidence to do that at the moment.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the accountability of Ofsted.

3.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cancer Care: Young Adults

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I will call the Member to move the motion and the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, unfortunately, because this is a 30-minute debate and that is the convention. I understand that several Members have indicated to the Member moving the motion that they intend to make an intervention, and she has very kindly agreed to allow that.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cancer care for young adults.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Normally I would say that it is a pleasure to be here in Westminster Hall speaking on a particular issue but, of course, it is not a pleasure today. I wish I was not here raising the issue of cancer in young adults.

It is an issue that is horrible to confront and contemplate, but what I feel is nothing compared with what Simon and Andrea Brady feel. Every day they have to confront the reality of what happened to their daughter Jessica, who tragically passed away on 20 December 2020, aged just 27. They are here today because of Jess. I am here because of Jess. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) is here because of Jess, and the Minister is here because of Jess—I thank them both for that.

I pay tribute to Simon and Andrea. They are utterly determined in the face of their terrible loss to effect change in Jess's name. I hope I can do justice to them and to Jess in supporting their call for that meaningful change. We are asking for Jess's law—a practical change designed to save lives. Jess's law would be that after the third contact with a GP surgery about a condition or symptom, a case should be elevated for review. After five contacts, it should be red-flagged and set procedures and guidelines should be followed, including a referral to a specialist.

We are clear that this should not be a tokenistic exercise, such as a simple, inconclusive blood test with the patient given an all-clear. The investigations need to be thorough and conclusive to make a real difference and to save lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this debate forward. I am moved by her plea on behalf of her constituents. I thank her for her dedicated efforts and for consistently raising the importance of cancer care for young adults like her constituent Jessica, who she has spoken about on a few occasions.

In Northern Ireland, trusts that run screening tests for certain types of cancer, such as breast, cervical and bowel. Does the hon. Lady agree—indeed I think she is asking for this—that it is time to introduce early intervention blood testing for those with symptoms of cancer to ensure early detection? Doing that would mean catching these cancers earlier.

Julie Marson: The hon. Member is quite right. Early diagnosis saves lives. I will mention some of the figures that prove that using technology and the right processes and procedures during that diagnosis phase is critical to saving lives. These are real people and real lives. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Lady has done excellently in getting this debate today. I have done a lot of work with young adults and children, and quite often with children bruising, rashes and tiredness are dismissed. Parents are told, “That is just children” or “That is just the way they are.” The danger is that conditions get picked up far later than they should be. We really need doctors to start thinking outside the box and looking at what these conditions could actually be, rather than just saying, “Oh, it is all fine.”

Julie Marson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will go on to talk about the danger of not expecting to find symptoms of cancer in children and young adults, and the terrible consequences that delays and misdiagnoses can have, as they did in Jess’s case—it is too often the case.

I want to talk about Jess, because to understand how important this is, and why the Brady family are so committed to this approach, it is important that I tell Jess’s story. In mid-2020, Jess was feeling unwell with abdominal and back discomfort. It was during the pandemic, and Jess was given an online consultation at her GP surgery, and prescribed antibiotics for a suspected kidney infection. Over the ensuing weeks she was prescribed numerous other medications, including more antibiotics and steroids. Jess contacted her surgery on more than 20 occasions in five months. None of the four GPs who provided her with a consultation—17 of which were conducted remotely—took her symptoms seriously. Her requests for blood tests were granted, but a raised D-dimer was dismissed after a preliminary scan, and not investigated further. Blood results showing poor liver function were left for a six-week follow-up review, which proved fatal.

Jess was told for months that she was suffering from long covid, despite two negative coronavirus tests. She was finally diagnosed with cancer following a private referral on 26 November. Her dependency on oxygen from that date meant that she did not leave the hospital or ever return home. Jess discovered that she had stage 4 adenocarcinoma with an unknown primary. It had spread throughout her body to her spine, liver, stomach, lungs and lymph nodes. Jess was a talented satellite engineer for Airbus. She had so much potential and so much life to live. Her loss has shattered her family’s world.

Devastatingly, had someone taken the initiative to closely review Jess’s case and examine the evidence, cancer screening would have been an obvious requirement. A consultant recently said to her parents:

“If a diagnosis cannot be made from initial tests then not enough tests are being carried out”.

In Jess’s case, a request to be referred to an ear, nose and throat specialist was laughed off. Letters written to the surgery listing her symptoms, including dramatic weight loss and vomiting, were ignored. Jess felt powerless and distressed. She tried so hard to be heard and taken seriously. It was heartbreaking for her family to watch her deterioration.

It is obvious really, but when people are desperately ill and at their lowest ebb, they do not possess the stamina to fight the system—nor should they have to. Jess’s age was a key issue. Many people, including GPs, do not expect to see, as the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said, a young adult with cancer, and that affects their diagnostic processes and judgment.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I join my hon. Friend is expressing admiration for the way in which the Brady family have campaigned on this issue. In reality, is it not necessary for each general practice to have at least one doctor who is seriously knowledgeable about cancer diagnosis and able to take a lead, so that if the symptoms are not diagnosed that doctor gets to look at the case and perhaps send it to a rapid diagnosis centre? Otherwise the patient is being let down. The Health and Social Care Committee, in its report on cancer services, said that we need more support for GPs in that area. I commend my hon. Friend for what she is doing and ask if she agrees with me?

Julie Marson: I appreciate my right hon. and learned Friend’s intervention. I will come on to talk about some of the things he raised, because he puts his finger on some of the most important aspects of how GPs manage their diagnosis process. The diagnostic centres are fantastic, but they need to have patients referred to them, which goes back to what we are trying to achieve with Jess’s law.

Cancer charity CLIC Sargent found that around half of young people visited their GP at least three times before their cancer was diagnosed. Almost 10% of all new cancers are diagnosed in people aged between 25 and 49, with almost twice as many cases in females as in males in that group.

Simon and Andrea Brady created a petition in Jess’s name. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire and I joined them to hand it into Downing Street. Its plea was to increase the awareness of diagnosis of cancer in young adults. It currently has an incredible 240,000 signatures, and has highlighted the scale of the problem for young adults. The petition makes for heartbreaking reading. Countless people tell stories of their young family members who have had their lives curtailed by late or non-existent cancer diagnoses. The disproportionate occurrence of females is also deeply troubling.

Being told you are too young for cancer has been happening for years, and it is simply not acceptable. Young people have their symptoms explained away with other diagnoses. As I said, Jess was told she had long covid, despite never having tested positive. The explanations given to other patients for poor health are endless: irritable bowel syndrome, pulled muscles, fatigue, stress, migraine—the list goes on.

I welcome the significant roll-out of rapid diagnostic centre pathways across hospitals in England. I know we have just achieved one million tests and scans via our community diagnostic centres, which is a huge achievement and critical in tackling the covid backlog. Of course, patients still have to be referred by a GP, and that vital link is what we are focusing on here today, particularly the escalation of patients with undiagnosed symptoms within a GP’s surgery or to a specialist, as per Jess’s law.

[Julie Marson]

There are other issues that relate to GPs, including having a dedicated GP lead for a patient. The general practitioners' contract requires practices to provide a named accountable general practitioner to all registered patients. That GP must take the lead in ensuring that any primary medical services considered necessary to meet the needs of a patient, including appropriate referrals to specialist care and liaison with other health professionals involved in the patient's care, are co-ordinated and delivered to that patient.

However, Jessica's case demonstrates that that does not always happen. Jessica was not seen by just one GP at her surgery. In her case, four doctors spoke to her and prescribed medication. Although Jess was told on one occasion that she had been discussed at a practice meeting, it was obvious that there was no one person overseeing her case. She was never seen or contacted by her named GP. It is also vital that GPs are required to maintain their continuing professional development through up-to-date training and awareness of cancer, including in young people.

CLIC Sargent's Young Lives vs Cancer is a charity dedicated to supporting children and young people with cancer, and ensuring that their voices are heard in the context of cancer care. It has identified several challenges faced by GPs that hamper early diagnosis. Those include limited training and awareness, and time pressures. Of course, the effect of the pandemic is exacerbating existing issues. One third of GPs reported inadequate opportunities to gain experience in the care of children and young people during their initial training as one of the top barriers to identifying cancer in children and young people.

The Health and Social Care Committee's review into cancer services, published on 5 April, concluded:

"The single most effective way to improve overall survival rates will be to diagnose more cancers earlier. Diagnosing bowel cancer at stage 1 means that 90% of people will live for five years compared to just 10% of people diagnosed at stage 4."

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The hon Lady is making a powerful speech. I apologise for missing the start of it. My condolences to Jessica's parents. That point on early diagnosis is absolutely key. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer and vice chair of the APPG on breast cancer. I have done a lot of work in this area. The number of people—especially women with ovarian cancer—who are diagnosed only in A&E, when it is almost stage 4 or too late, really has to stop, and that all starts with symptom awareness. What is being called for in that petition, therefore, is so necessary. Sometimes people have been back and forward to the GP so many times. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the one thing that would have made a massive difference in Jessica's case?

Julie Marson: I very much welcome the hon. Lady's intervention. She is absolutely right. Her work to raise awareness of ovarian and breast cancer is all part of that hugely important process. I lost a dear friend to ovarian cancer, and it is a very difficult and unspecific thing to diagnose, or even for someone to realise that they might have the relevant symptoms. Breast cancer we have made a lot of progress with, and we have to

keep that up. There are different cancers, with different symptoms, and awareness of the range of symptoms and how those might impact on different people is key to early diagnosis, to self-diagnosis so that people say, "Let's go to a GP now", and to get that GP to take things forward to identify the real underlying issue. I thank the hon. Lady.

The pivotal role that general practice doctors play in diagnosing patients early cannot be overstated. People—our sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, family, friends and neighbours across the board, regardless of age, race, sex or any characteristic—are equally deserving of diagnostic testing and referral. Patients must be accorded the time, space and physical contact to voice their concerns when presenting with recurrent and progressively aggressive symptoms. Listening and acting are key.

I know that the Minister is listening. We have met and discussed the issue, and her own experience in the nursing profession gives her great empathy and insight. I look forward to hearing her response in a moment. I also take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who is arranging to meet Mr and Mrs Brady to discuss Jessica's experience, what we can learn from it and how we might be able to implement Jess's law.

I am also grateful to all those who have contributed today, in particular my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire, who stands shoulder to shoulder with the Brady family. Finally, but most importantly, I reiterate my thanks to and deepest sympathy for Simon and Andrea Brady and their family. We do not want to hear tragic stories such as Jess's—not because we do not care, but precisely because we do.

To conclude, I will repeat a detail of Jess's story that I think illustrates the high regard in which she was held. On the day of her funeral, a satellite that she helped to design was launched into space from Cape Canaveral. It was inscribed with the words, "Thank you, Jess!" In honour of Jessica Brady, let us implement Jess's law, so that other young adults who face the trauma of cancer in future can also say, "Thank you, Jess."

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I too want to acknowledge the presence of Simon and Andrea Brady in the Public Gallery.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) for securing the debate, which as she said is not one we want to have but is one we need to have. I offer my apologies and condolences to Simon and Andrea, who are with us today. Nothing we say in the debate will make things easier for them, but if we can prevent a similar tragedy from happening to another family, we must do absolutely everything we can to make sure we do.

In Jess's case, it is true that two factors did not help her diagnosis. First, cancer is not as common in children and young people as it is in the rest of the population. It is not unusual for a GP, or even a GP practice, to see only one or two cases across the lifespan of their service. Just under 4,000 young adults between 15 and 29 are diagnosed with cancer in England each year;

across the country, those are small numbers, so GPs often do not have experience of dealing with young people who present with symptoms that—as the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said—are often non-specific and can be attributed to other causes. The other factor is that if there is an unknown primary, those cases are more difficult to diagnose across the board for all age groups, because there is not an obvious breast lump, an obvious shortness of breath or an obvious mole that has changed. That often makes it difficult for GPs to get to the bottom of what is happening.

Despite that, it is very clear from Jess's case that there were many opportunities where further investigation could have revealed what was going on. She should not have had to go back so many times with the same symptoms without being investigated further. That is precisely why the Government have put a lot of funding—£2.3 billion—into the roll-out of community diagnostic centres, so that patients with non-specific symptoms that GPs cannot get to the bottom of can be referred straightaway. They do not need a hospital referral to an oncologist or a surgeon to investigate: GPs can refer those patients directly to the community diagnostic centre, where a range of tests is available, including MRI scans, ultrasounds and CT scans, to get that early diagnosis as quickly as possible. If it is not cancer, those patients can then pop back to the GP for further referrals elsewhere, but if it is, they can get started with treatment as quickly as possible. We are also introducing non-specific symptoms pathways, in order to do exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford has said: bring together diagnostic equipment, expertise and support, so that discussions do happen about patients who are coming back on a frequent basis and for whom a diagnosis has not been helpful.

To mention two additional things that the Government are doing, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the nub of this issue is getting people diagnosed as early as possible, so we have now set a target that, by 2028, 75% of all cancers should be diagnosed at stages 1 or 2. Doing that means diagnosing people as early as possible. Screening will help, although it would not have helped in Jess's case. However, the rapid diagnostic and community diagnostic centres definitely will help. This is about enabling pathways through which, if GPs are not able to find the source of a problem, they can get some extra expertise or diagnostic tests that will help them to do so.

Meeting that 75% target means addressing all cancers, not just the ones that are easier to spot, either because they have screening tests in place or because they give rise to more obvious symptoms. It includes the rarer cancers and those that have no known origin, so I hope that that gives some reassurance that we are absolutely focused on trying to diagnose people as early as possible. We are also piloting a nurse specialist route into pathways, so if someone like Jess was meeting their GP regularly and still not feeling that they were getting to the bottom of their problems, they would be able to phone the cancer nurse hotline. If the cancer nurse feels that that person needs to be seen by a cancer specialist or to go into the cancer pathway, they can do so as quickly as possible. Again, this is not about blaming GPs, but it will be another route through which patients can access specialist services.

Turning to Jess's law, the Secretary of State is currently formulating the 10-year cancer strategy. We are looking at that in detail, and I can reassure my hon. Friend the

Member for Hertford and Stortford that the strategy will contain a section on children and young people, because they have specific needs, particularly around diagnosis but also around treatment. I am very happy to discuss a flag-style system with the Secretary of State, as my hon. Friend has. There may be some technical difficulties with that: I am doing work with GPs on a flag system for gun licensing, and the issue we have, from a purely practical point of view, is that most GPs have their own independent IT system—they are not part of a national IT system—so if we introduce one nationally it will be quite difficult for each GP practice to implement it. My hon. Friend has made some suggestions, and it is not beyond the realms of possibility to introduce a system that ensures that, if a young person is seen four times and is still coming back with the same symptoms, that is raised to another level—a red flag level, as my hon. Friend said—to indicate that interventions need to take place.

Many of the points that my hon. Friend made, particularly on named GPs, are very important and I will certainly follow them up with her. In terms of the timing of this debate and the 10-year strategy, including some of work she has done within the cancer strategy would be a real opportunity.

Julie Marson: The Minister makes a really important point about the practicalities and technicalities of implementing something such as Jess's law, and I absolutely appreciate that. The example she gave of IT systems being different across GP practices illustrates how important it is to standardise procedure. Patients should not be reliant on whether a GP has a particularly efficient or good procedure; practice should be standardised across the board.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are introducing non-specific pathways so that if someone does not have a specific, clear diagnosis and the GPs are not sure what to do, there is a pathway to follow, consistent across every GP practice throughout the country, and people do not slip through the net. Early cancer diagnosis is one of the priority areas in the Core20PLUS5 approach, which we introduced last year to reduce health inequalities across the country. It is crucial that we use that opportunity to flag some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised.

Crucially, GP training across the board is important. Because many GPs will not have come across a young person with cancer in the course of their practice, Macmillan Cancer Support, CLIC Sargent and Cancer Research UK are doing work to roll out training with regular updates—it is not just one-off training—for GPs and other members of the primary care team. It is much more common now for people to be seen by the practice nurse, the paramedic or the physio if they have back pain or joint problems. It may seem like a physio problem, but there could be an underlying cancer diagnosis. It is important that we educate and keep up to date the whole team, not just the GP.

I am very happy to take away my hon. Friend's suggestions and to see whether we can put in place some proper measures that will reduce the chances of this happening again. We will not necessarily be able to make sure that no one is missed, but my hon. Friend raises some flags that cause me concern and that suggest

[Maria Caulfield]

we are not where we should be. There are certainly things that we can put in place to stop cancer diagnoses being missed in young people with non-specific symptoms.

Question put and agreed to.

Solar Farms and Battery Storage

4.30 pm

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered planning for solar farms and battery storage solutions.

May I say what a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley? This is the first time it has happened to me, and it may well be a less pleasant experience than I am anticipating, but let us hope it all goes according to plan.

Let me divert any suggestion that may arise during the debate that I am somehow anti-solar, anti-renewable or anti-environmentalist. On the contrary, I suspect that everyone in the Chamber is a passionate environmentalist. I went to the first COP, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, as a special adviser, and I have been on the Environmental Audit Committee ever since. I am passionate about the north and south poles, which I have visited often, and where we can see the effect of climate change, and in every way I would consider myself to be an environmentalist. I would not want my credentials to be lessened by my remarks this afternoon, and I am sure other right hon. and hon. Members around the room feel the same.

I am proud of the fact that we have a proud environmental record in Wiltshire. We declared a climate change emergency in February 2019, and we plan to make the county carbon-neutral by 2030. Renewables play an extremely important part in that, and I am proud of the contribution that we have already made with regards to solar. For example, at the former RAF Lyneham in my constituency, we have a 250 acre solar farm with 269,000 solar panels, providing 69.8 MW—enough energy to power 10,000 homes as well as the base itself. That is not a bad way to do it, but the point is that it is entirely invisible. It is on the base, it is on former Army land, it is within the wire and it is entirely invisible to anybody nearby. Equally, RAF Wroughton, which is nearby, has 150,000 solar panels on 170 acres. A number of similar ex-military sites are invisible to the passer-by and are making a huge contribution to renewable energy. By contrast, at Minety in my constituency, planners recently agreed to a solar farm with 166,000 panels on 271 acres of agricultural land despite massive local opposition, which seems to go against what is said in the national planning policy framework. I will come back to that in a second.

What seems to be happening in Wiltshire, Dorset and one or two counties in the west country is that the grid is full in Devon and Cornwall. It is no longer possible to get a link from a solar farm to the grid in Devon and Cornwall, and developers have moved north. I am told that the connections to the grid in Wiltshire are nearly full, but that gives me little satisfaction, because the technology is moving so fast that the situation may well change in time. Secondly, even if Wiltshire became exempt, as it were, from further solar farms, all we would then do is move the blister further north or east, and many Members present would find that their constituents were being targeted just as much as mine are.

Right now, we have a gigantic number of applications in my constituency for solar farms—I know of at least four. Many of them would feature battery storage units, which are horrible, industrialised containers that often take up an entire field. There are some safety risks attached to them, as they burst into flames from time to

time, so they are quite dangerous. They are turning a rural area into an industrialised centre, which is really unacceptable.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned the NPPF, which I understand is meant to be updated in July this year. Does he agree that there should be rigorous rules around planning permission for solar panels and that we should use commercial units for them first, instead of using agricultural land?

James Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, which I will come back to in one second. The NPPF is central to this, and when the Government come out with their update to it, it must include strict rules on solar farms.

We in Wiltshire are being targeted. I have huge sites at Derry Hill and at Leigh Delamere, and many sites have huge battery storage facilities attached to them. Something like 25 battery sites are currently being considered by Wiltshire Council. There is a proposal for a huge battery farm at Lea near Malmesbury. It is perfect, first-class agricultural land. I went to a public meeting in Lea the other day on the subject, and 250 people turned up in that tiny village—that must be more than the entire population of the village. That shows the strength of local feeling, but none the less the battery farm may go ahead—we will have to see.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I testify to my hon. Friend's environmental credentials. He wrote the excellent book “Poles Apart”, which I have read, about the Arctic circle—in fact, I visited the North Pole with him some years ago. I completely agree that we need solar farms and sustainable energy and that we need to diversify our energy sources, but I also agree that we need to ensure that planning does not override the current use of agricultural land, nature reserves and sites of special scientific interest, which often happens with solar farms. I therefore agree that any review of the planning guidance needs to ensure that those other factors are fully taken into account, rather than being overridden by solar farms on their own.

James Gray: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am grateful to him for the plug. The book is only £10 and it is available in decent bookshops near you, or I could perhaps arrange for it to be sent directly. He is absolutely right: we must not allow the planning system to override good environmental and nature principles because of some need to have renewables.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): This is not just happening in the west country; we are getting it in Hertfordshire. We have a number of applications for quite substantial areas of productive farmland. We are talking about 150 or 200 acres, and quite a few of these pieces of land are all in one area, which is causing a lot of concern. It is probably right, when we look at revising the planning framework, that we look at the balance between productive agricultural land and sustainable energy, because both are important. I will just mention Protect the Pelhams and the Bygrave Action Group, which asked me to make that point.

James Gray: The action group will be reassured that my right hon. and learned Friend takes a keen interest in the matter.

Before I come back to the national planning policy framework, which must be central to this afternoon's debate, I will touch briefly on battery storage solutions, which are springing up all over the place. They are absolutely hideous. There is a fire risk attached to them, and they do not make a single contribution towards renewables. All they do is store electricity that has been produced at a cheap time, when there is low demand overnight, instead of at an expensive time, such as during the day. In other words, they increase the electricity producer's profits but do not reduce the amount of electricity used, even slightly. They do not increase the amount of renewable energy produced; they are merely a convenience for the developers. They are a hideous new development. Technology will soon overtake them, and we will be left with hundreds of acres of countryside with these vast industrial sites on them. They will then be redundant and the planners will turn around and say, “They are brownfield sites. Let's put houses or factories on them”—on what was, until recently, farmland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is raising an important issue. In my constituency, one farmer diversified by putting in a solar farm—one that is acceptable because, as the hon. Gentleman said, it is not obtrusive and it is not seen. After substantial consultation, the local community agreed with it as well. As we look ahead to the need for green energy, and as we look to the war in Ukraine, it is clear that the demands on highly productive land will be greater than ever. Does there come a time when solar farms and battery installations have to take a backseat to food production?

James Gray: The hon. Member makes a good point. Of course, food security will be central to our considerations as we go forward. He made an interesting point: he said the solar farm in his constituency was built with the enthusiasm of local people. That is, of course, how it should be. There will be places where local people say, “I am committed to environmentalism and renewables. I want to see a renewable farm near my village or in my town. I want to see it behind a high hedge,” and they will lay down certain conditions under which it can be put in. That is great. By contrast, when local people—such as the people of Lea, in the public meeting I mentioned a moment ago—are absolutely unanimous in their determination not to have one, they must be listened to. That becomes an important part of the consideration.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this important debate. Is there not a danger that we swap the drive towards energy security for food security? Should we not set a balancing target for food security in this country from the current 60% to, say, 75%, where it used to be? That would prevent planning consent being given for sites such as the one near Old Malton, in my constituency, which is 70% best and most versatile land. Does he agree that giving consent for such land is absolutely inappropriate, and that councils should take food security into account in their decisions?

James Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great considerations that we are currently battling with is the question of food security. Post-Ukraine, or during Ukraine, we are facing a real crisis in food

[James Gray]

production in this country. Why we are taking perfectly usable agricultural land and covering it with vanity mirrors and industrial battery storage units, I simply cannot imagine. It is extraordinary.

Just yesterday, we had a debate in this Chamber on a similar subject—the question of housing in planning—and, to some extent, we are discussing the same thing. Developers should, of course, be encouraged to reuse brownfield sites in town centres, but, given the choice between a brownfield site in a town centre or a greenfield site in the countryside, they are going to go for the greenfield site. We therefore have to change the planning system to focus house building on previously used land. A little off the subject, Mr Paisley—thank you for not picking me up on that.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating speech. Does he feel that there is a need to prioritise brownfield land and particularly to look at brownfield in urban areas, as well as in rural areas?

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. We have car parks that are good places to put overhead solar farms, as they do in many other parts of the world. Every factory that is built should have solar panels on the roof. Massive areas in town centres should have solar panels attached. However, those solutions cost developers quite a lot more money, and they are not going to do that if they can just buy a nice greenfield site and stick the solar farm out there. It is much easier for them to do that. That is why the planning system has to constrain what they do, so that they are forced to come back into our town centres and use the kind of solutions he describes.

We ought to move on to the central question, which is about planning. Wiltshire Council is being particularly targeted at the moment because it is being a little too cautious. The council is very concerned that, if it turns applications down, unless it can demonstrate that the application absolutely did not fall within the current planning guidance, the inspector will overturn that decision at appeal, and the council will then be faced with substantial barristers' costs.

Wiltshire Council is saying, perfectly reasonably, "We need to be guaranteed that we are within planning law when turning down these applications." That is why the detailed definition of planning law and the NPPF is incredibly important in order to give some comfort to councils such as Wiltshire Council when they say, "This is going to be turned down. Here's why." The wording of the NPPF should therefore be clear. I have been saying to my council that, at the moment, it is clear. Paragraph 155a of the NPPF says that local plans should provide a

"strategy for energy...while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed...including cumulative landscape and visual impacts."

The guidance says:

"It is for each local authority to determine a planning application to include the consideration of intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, as well as whether the best quality land is being used for agricultural purposes. Large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes."

There is not one inch of Wiltshire that is not undulating, so, if that were to be applied in detail, there would be no solar farms in the county of Wiltshire.

As has been said, guidance also states very clearly that solar farms should be focused on

"previously developed and non agricultural land...that is not of high environmental value".

The guidance actually says that at the moment, leaving aside the upcoming review.

On 9 March, in this Chamber, the Science Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), confirmed that interpretation of the NPPF. He said:

"In 2021, the Government set up a national infrastructure planning reform programme,"

which will be reviewed

"later this year".

We would be interested to hear when that happens; we want to know the outcome. He continued:

"As part of that, the Government are reviewing the national policy statements for energy."

Importantly, speaking as a Minister from the Dispatch Box, he said:

"It seems to me that"

we need

"a clearer national policy statement...The draft revised national policy statement for renewables includes a new section on solar projects, providing clear and specific guidance to decision makers on the impact on, for example, local amenities, biodiversity, landscape, wildlife and land use...It requires developers to justify using any such land and to design their projects to avoid, mitigate and, where necessary, compensate for impacts"—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 127-8WH.]

on agricultural land.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. The comments that we heard earlier from colleagues about the use of agricultural land is a particular concern in my constituency as we have a proposed large solar farm that is nationally significant infrastructure because of its size. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important for local communities to be at the heart of that decision-making and be consulted properly, so that they can ensure that these solar farms—which we are not opposed to in principle, but they must be in the right places—do not take away from things that we want to preserve?

James Gray: My hon. Friend is right and I am grateful for his intervention. It must be done with local consent and enthusiasm. The notion that solar farms can be good for biodiversity is, of course, complete nonsense. No shepherd worth his salt would graze his sheep on a solar farm. The grass is low quality. I do not think there is one single solar farm in the west of England currently being grazed, and the notion that they could be is nonsensical. Equally, the notion that, somehow, wildflowers thrive on solar farms is simple nonsense; it is simply not true. There is not a single wildflower that I have ever seen on any of the solar farms that I have ever visited. Therefore, the notion, which the developers put forward, that solar farms are somehow biodiversity-friendly is absolute nonsense.

The heart of the problem is that Wiltshire Council, and probably many other councils too, interprets the nation policy framework very conservatively. For example,

the NPPF seems to indicate that it thinks that grade 3a land should not have a solar farm on it, but that grade 3b land could do. It is not absolutely clear, but it seems to be moving in that direction. Anybody who knows anything about a farm will know that some of it will be grade 3a and some will be 3b; it is extremely hard to make out which is which. One field may be half 3a and half 3b. Therefore, what we should be saying is that all viable agricultural land should not be used for solar farms—full stop. Never mind grade 3a, 3b, 2 or 1: all agricultural land should be exempt, under planning law, from solar farms.

Equally, we ought to be making much more use of carve-outs for protected designations such as national parks and areas of outstanding national beauty. Most of my constituency is an AONB, and if AONBs were exempted, there would be no solar farms. We must take account of a landscape's special characteristics, which we are not doing under the NPPF.

Councils also ought to be more ready to make the argument about the cumulative impact of solar farms. The NPPF seems to intimate that cumulative impact is allowable, but the planning inspector is unclear about that. We must be certain that the more solar farms there are in a particular place, the less likely it is that planning permission will be granted.

We must also develop arguments about food production as a legitimate economic consideration. Under the NPPF, if there is a legitimate economic consideration connected to a planning application, it will not go ahead. It is currently unclear whether food production is a legitimate economic consideration. Officers—and indeed, I think, officials in the Department—have said that it is quite hard to know whether or not agriculture could be classed as a legitimate economic consideration. I think that it definitely should be.

Let me give the Minister a list of things that I would like him to consider. He will not be able to answer them this afternoon, I am sure, but I have taken the opportunity of sending the list to the Department, so that he can consider it at his leisure if he wants to. I and—it seems—many of my colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon have a wish-list. There should be changes to national planning policy, allowing local authorities more scope to object to applications so that they can object on a much wider scale. Perhaps we should make the process similar to that for wind turbines. At the moment, it is much easier to turn down a wind turbine plant than a solar farm, but I think that solar farms and wind turbines should be treated in the same way in planning applications.

As I have said, there should be a prohibition on using grade 3 land, whether it is 3a or 3b, and we must not allow battery storage solutions to take land out of food production for use for solar. There should be much more of an imperative towards smaller installations on barns, factories, warehouse roofs and all the kinds of places that the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) mentioned a moment ago, instead of huge installations on greenfield sites and farmland.

An interesting point is that the prescribed limit on the distances involved must be shorter. We cannot have these solar farms 10 miles away from grid connection; the distance to grid connection must be shorter, so that we have solar farms where there is a grid connection. At the moment, partly by using battery storage solutions,

developers are coming up with sites that are miles and miles away from the connection to the grid, which of course produces even further damage to the countryside.

Visibility is an important point. In my opinion, no solar farm should be generally visible within one mile of listed buildings or protected landscapes; I think the Minister would probably agree with that. That limit should also be extended to cover views, which planning law does not currently cover. Under planning law, people have no right to a view and a view cannot be considered under planning law. In the case of solar farms, a view is terribly important and therefore we should allow people to object to a solar farm because it damages their view. The views in the countryside are incredibly important. Such a change would demand a change to the NPPF, but only a very small one, and I think that allowing local people to object to a solar farm because it would destroy the view is perfectly legitimate.

In general, the point I am making is that at the moment local authorities are scared. They are scared that if they do not interpret the NPPF correctly—if they get one word wrong—the inspectors at appeal will, perfectly correctly, overturn their decision. What our local authorities need is absolute clarity. At a time like this—post-Ukraine—we value our agricultural land and we do not want to see our countryside being covered in solar farms and battery storage solutions. We think that producing food is important; indeed, food security is an incredibly important issue for the future.

We must provide local authorities with clarity of language in the revised NPPF, so that they can say straightforwardly, “No, you will not have that solar farm on this particular piece of agricultural land”, with the confidence that the inspector will agree with them rather than overturning their decision, which is what seems to be happening more or less automatically at the moment. We need to give local authorities that strength, that clarity and that power. If we do so, and if the developers, who are watching this debate today, know that they will not get permission for a development, they will not put in the application and will go somewhere else.

I just want that clarity. When the NPPF review comes out—I hope that will be shortly and certainly this year: the Minister may be able to update us on that soon—let us see some of these things written into it, to give local authorities that clarity and that strength when they come to turn down some of these ghastly applications.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I will see who else is bobbing and feels worthy to follow Mr James Gray today, after his Sermon on the Mount. Members themselves can see who is bobbing. I want to call the Opposition spokesman at around 5.10 pm, so we are talking about four to five minutes each for each contribution; I do not want to set a formal time limit.

4.53 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Paisley, and it is a pleasure to serve under you as Chairman.

I thank the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) for securing this debate and I obviously thank Mr Speaker for granting it. It is very timely, certainly for me and for my constituency, because we, too, have an application for a battery energy storage system in an

[Valerie Vaz]

area called the Duckery—hon. Members can imagine what it is like—in Chapel Lane. It is a beautiful part of Walsall South and has a large amount of green belt around it, with St Margaret's Church, Great Barr, very nearby. Anesco Ltd put in a planning application on 6 December 2021: I always worry about applications that go in just before Christmas, which makes it really difficult for local residents to be consulted.

The hon. Member is absolutely right—he does have green credentials. I have served on the Environmental Audit Committee with him. In fact, I seem to remember he was arranging an expedition to the south pole. Sadly, I will not be able to take part because I am not on the Committee anymore, but I might join him anyway. Maybe another book will come out of that.

I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman focused on the national planning policy framework, because that is key, as it says the green belt should be protected. That is why it is concerning that this battery energy storage system is going to be placed on green-belt land. The Black Country core strategy says that green-belt land should be protected, and the Walsall site allocation document reaffirms that. In the main Chamber at the moment, they are discussing the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Notes on the Bill state that green-belt land will be made greener. We might think that means it will be protected, but we cannot be sure that will happen, which is why it is important the Minister gives us confirmation that green-belt land will be protected.

The area of Walsall South, near the Duckery, is grade 1 and grade 2 agricultural land. Previously, rapeseed oil was grown there. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the Ukrainian war means we are short of sunflower oil and are looking to alternatives, which is why it is important that the area should be protected and not built on.

On 26 May, Anesco Ltd put in further documents looking at alternative sites. Let us look at those alternative sites. The planning officer from nearby Sandwell has said that the applicant should demonstrate why this development is necessary at the sensitive location of the Duckery on Chapel Lane, and why this proposal could not be adjacent to a substation power line on nearby land. There is a place called the Oldbury national grid substation, which could be used. It is near the national grid and that is where this facility should be placed.

My concern is that councils do not always take into account what is said and so I want a commitment from the Minister. A planning officer can make a recommendation in a report, and then the application goes through the cabinet or the planning committee, and they do not take local residents into account. I have suffered such a case for a site in my constituency, where 2,000 residents were against a particular site called Narrow Lane. We want a commitment from the Government and the Minister that they are committed to protecting the green belt. I ask the Minister to confirm that commitment, which is set out in the national planning policy framework, the Black Country core strategy and the site allocation document.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire also mentioned that there have been fires in battery energy storage systems in Australia and California. Has an assessment been done on the safety of these sites?

The bottom line is that my constituents do not want green-belt land to be built on. They want it preserved. The pandemic has shown, like never before, how they need green-belt land and that such areas need to be protected.

4.58 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) for securing this important debate, which gives me the opportunity to speak about solar. I, too, would like to stress that I am not anti-solar or anti-renewables and I am not anti the environment. I have the privilege of being the Member of Parliament for a beautiful rural constituency. The subject of planning for solar farms is incredibly important to rural communities.

As the MP for Ynys Môn, the island of Anglesey, I represent communities particularly concerned about the threat of mega solar farms on our landscape, our culture and our heritage, in particular a proposal by Lightsource BP for a 1,200-acre solar farm on Anglesey. Yes, that is correct—1,200 acres. To put that huge amount of land into some perspective, it is equivalent to around 900 football pitches. It is the largest project in Lightsource BP's development portfolio.

Our island community, like other rural communities, is under threat from a slew of solar proposals. Smaller applications are managed by the Isle of Anglesey County Council, with local councillors representing the views of the community. It has rejected some previous applications, including one for a 200-acre site near Cemaes. However, larger applications are considered by the Welsh Government, who are six hours away in Cardiff, and local communities are concerned that that will take large-scale development decisions away from them.

In 2019, 27% of energy in Wales came from renewables, of which solar formed a very small proportion. In recent months we have all felt the problems caused by being dependent on other countries for our energy. Like the Welsh Government, we are fully behind the move to net zero, and we recognise that renewables must form part of our future energy strategy.

We must implement solar with extreme caution. For developers, it is an attractive solution, as land is relatively cheap, solar panels can be imported at low cost, and there is minimal upkeep and maintenance, which means that little local employment is generated. That must be balanced against the energy generation capacity. The huge 1,200 acre solar farm proposed by Lightsource bp for Anglesey would generate enough energy for 133,000 homes. A new nuclear plant such as Hinkley C in Bridgwater has a small fraction of that footprint, but with the potential to generate energy for 6 million homes.

There is another, possibly more important, consideration. Ynys Môn was known historically as Môn Mam Cymru—Anglesey, mother of Wales—because our fertile agricultural land fed the Welsh people in times of need. We need a strong agricultural community, and it is those great swathes of fertile, historical agricultural land that are particularly attractive to solar farm developers. Earlier this year, FarmingUK wrote that the UK is on the verge of food security concerns not seen since world war 2, and in 2020 the UK imported 46% of the food we consume.

I hope that the Minister will take on board the risk that, in the rush to achieve net zero, however laudable, we may sacrifice vast areas of agricultural land, and hence our food security, to solar panels, which do not offer the dependable, large-scale solution we need to the energy crisis.

5.2 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and the other speakers, who made some very interesting points.

I am very much in favour of a sensible approach to this issue that balances the importance of energy security and tackling the climate emergency with not creating eyesores in the countryside. I am proud of our record in my area of central Berkshire. I represent an urban seat, but we have a strong tradition of solar power from our borough council and neighbouring local authorities, and in land nearby. Much of it is on the roofs of buildings and on brownfield land. I want to get across the positive message about using those types of land. There is a large amount of brownfield land in southern England, although I appreciate the points made by colleagues from slightly further west. There is also the issue of developers looking for land in the south, where sunlight is slightly more plentiful.

I want to say a few words about Reading Borough Council's excellent work over many years of putting solar panels on the roofs of council houses, schools and other public buildings. Wokingham Borough Council was Conservative-run—I am afraid to say to Government Members that it is now under a different administration—when it planned a large solar farm in its area of Berkshire, which is suburban and semi-rural. The councils there were mindful of the visual impact, and I respect their work on that. I hope we can progress in a sensible, cross-party and consensual way and look at the opportunities.

I want to pay tribute briefly to the private individuals and charitable bodies that have driven alternative energy schemes in our area. I also want to highlight the importance of low-flow hydro. We have a small scheme on the Thames, the Queen has one at Windsor castle, and other landowners along the Thames have such schemes. They use water power, which in the past would have been used to drive mills, to generate electricity. It is a simple, low-tech but very effective form of hydroelectric power at a local level, which has a very limited impact on the environment near the river.

I understand the concerns raised by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, but my experience of solar farms has been somewhat more positive. I draw his attention to the site at Pingewood in Berkshire, which is next to the M4—indeed, he may well drive past it. It is on a former landfill site next to a motorway, and is very close to grid connectivity because of the pylons running through our county. It makes one realise that there are actually sites in locations that already have visual intrusion from infrastructure, which could be used and perhaps should be prioritised. I had the pleasure of visiting there with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who I shadow. We were looking at the scheme on that land, which is supported by one of the energy providers and is used for pension investments. I know that the

hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) is a huge enthusiast for auto-enrolment. Auto-enrolment savings are being used to invest in solar on brownfield sites. Surely that is the sort of model that we want to encourage.

In the south of England, as the hon. Member for North Wiltshire rightly said, there are sites that used to be airfields or military installations, as well as transport land, the roofs of car parks and many other things, which should be prioritised. I genuinely hope that we can come to some agreement to do that. In my constituency there are many flat building roofs, whether on garage blocks or large businesses. The tragedy is that there is not enough incentivisation to use the large acreage of land that exists in areas with high amounts of solar radiation where it would be ideal to place solar panels, such as in the south of England and London.

I hope the Minister can address that point about whether it is possible for the Government to look at incentivised development of that type of site, and to support local authorities and community groups more. There is obviously going to be an economy of scale with the very big sites. However, is it somehow possible to encourage development in a sensitive way that makes good use of currently wasted space in areas with high levels of sunlight? When large public buildings are built, such as hospitals, schools and stations, could the default position be that solar is included in the roofs? Will the Minister consider that? As a way of removing pressure from valuable agricultural land, and given that build costs would be lower if solar was installed at the point of construction, is there a way of incentivising that through the planning system? That way, businesses would have a genuine incentive to put solar on new builds, in a way and on a scale that does not currently exist.

I think about that every day when I go to Reading station, which is a wonderful new piece of infrastructure in our area, and one that serves colleagues further west. The trains there are electric, so why on earth does that station not have solar panels all over its roof? It is a huge area of space that could be used for solar without any intrusion into green space, and would actually protect rural areas by giving us more capacity. Can the Minister address those points? It has been a pleasure to speak today and I hope we can agree a consensual way forward.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Anthony Mangnall, you have until 10 past 5.

5.7 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Paisley; I shall be brief. You were very kind to describe the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) as a sermon on the mount, and I am happy to be a disciple on this matter. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue; as ever, I find that when we talk about planning there is the opportunity for Members across this House to come together.

I have four points, which I will make quickly. First, as I heard in yesterday's debate on neighbourhood planning, the new NPPF policy will come forward in July. It is absolutely essential, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire said, that we engage with local communities and listen to the voices of both local authorities and residents. We must take that opportunity to do so.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, given the limited time. He is absolutely right that it is vital that local voices are heard when it comes to solar farm planning applications. Will he join me in encouraging all of my residents who may be impacted by the Mallard Pass development to contribute to the consultation? That is a vital part of the process, and their voices can be heard through it.

Anthony Mangnall: It should come as no surprise that even in south Devon we have heard about the issues concerning Mallard Pass. I encourage all residents of Grantham and Stamford to take part in that consultation, and to register their voices—as indeed should all our constituents.

Secondly, we have a food security crisis at the moment, but we also have a global supply chain crisis. We must now have a national target that pushes us to produce food. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned 75% as a potential target, and we should look at doing that. Anything that takes out productive agricultural land from farming must be reviewed. Solar panels have got to be in the sights of Government to stop that from happening.

Thirdly—I will make this point in my last 33 seconds—a year ago, the Local Electricity Bill was tabled as a private Member's Bill. We should look at finding local sources to power the network and feed back into the grid. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) was bright and clever enough to make an excellent point about his station in Reading: every time I pass through that station, I will think about that proposal, and I would certainly support it. Tidal, wind and solar, in the right places and the right spaces and used in the right way, are absolutely essential.

My last point is about brownfield sites. If I understand correctly, the CPRE report on brownfield sites identifies 21,000 sites across the country totalling 26,000 hectares, equating to what would be 1.3 million houses. Let us use those brownfield sites and commercial spaces, and make sure we keep our countryside as beautiful as possible.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Mangnall—an example of less is more. Well done.

5.10 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Paisley. Naturally, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) on securing this important debate and acknowledge his track record on environmentalism, which was stated clearly at the beginning of the debate and throughout.

Many Members have today taken the opportunity to talk about developments in their constituency, with a common focus on what is termed brown-belt and former industrial sites first, such as the roofs of car parks, warehouses, schools and housing developments—I think even trains were suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). That was acknowledged and concurred with by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and others. A significant number of interventions were made by Members who are no longer present.

I have a sizable farming community in my Weaver Vale constituency. At a recent meeting of the National Farmers Union at Warburtons Farms in Frodsham, the consensus was that fertile agricultural land should not be used at scale for solar farms, a point that has been eloquently made in today's debate. Unfortunately, too many farmers feel that they have little choice but to sell land for development, whether that is housing development or solar farms. In part, that is driven by the insecure nature of the financial support in the new subsidy arrangements that farmers now face. They were promised not a penny less, but the reality is somewhat different.

The justified concerns about the local impact of solar farms must be weighed against our inescapable need to build renewable energy, and lots of it, over the coming years in order to meet our net zero target by 2050. Renewable energy, including solar energy, must be built, and it must be built somewhere. It is always easy for someone to say that they are in favour of renewable energy in principle; it is much harder to say that they are in favour of renewable energy in a specific location. Members from across the Chamber have made very considered speeches about the circumstances in which we should build solar farms, and I agree that we need to be clear about the need for a strategic approach, so that we can understand exactly what we need and where it needs to go. However, it certainly needs to go somewhere, and that should be our starting point.

With the costs of fossil fuels soaring, wind and solar power are the keys to bringing down costs for customers, ensuring energy security in the face of the Ukrainian war and fighting climate change, yet the Government are intentionally limiting access to the cheapest, quickest and cleanest forms of new power by stopping the production of enough onshore wind and solar energy to power 3 million homes. Members have today made some great suggestions regarding where that energy capacity should be built. Instead, we have a Chancellor who has just handed a £1.9 billion tax break to producers of oil and gas that could pump nearly 900 million tonnes of greenhouse gases into our atmosphere. Our climate and our constituents will pay the price for the Government doing the unthinkable and backing the fossil fuel industry, despite claiming to have the admirable target of reaching net zero by 2050. What assurances can the Minister give that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's apparent green light for the fossil fuel industry will be revisited with a sense of urgency and with funding redirected to renewables, developed in the right places? Why not incentivise, as people have said? We simply cannot reach the kinds of targets that we need to be reaching by limiting ourselves to small-scale urban solar farms. That will involve larger-scale projects over the 50 MW rate that at the moment qualifies a proposal as a nationally significant infrastructure project.

Where we have common ground in today's debate is in our desire on location. The negative impacts should be minimised using sensitive planning that focuses on previously developed and non-agricultural land that is not of high environmental value. Indeed, that is stated in the national planning policy framework. Surely a locally led planning system should shape developments and they should not be dictated—that could be done by the current Secretary of State or, certainly, future ones.

Unfortunately, the centralisation and power grab by the current Secretary of State is given rocket fuel by proposed new subsection (5C) of section 38 of the

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, in clause 83 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which is having its Second Reading today. That subsection states that any conflict between the development plan and a national development management policy

“must be resolved in favour of the national development management policy.”

I look forward to seeing the amendments, which will inevitably be laid, and attempts to remove that provision in favour of locally led planning systems and arrangements.

Testing has been carried out on the benefits of solar energy, and the overwhelming evidence is that, despite small impacts, the benefits of solar outweigh the costs as long as appropriate land is used. The public support a move to renewables, but they know that we need to build in the right place, using the appropriate land. I ask the Minister—I think the need for this has been reaffirmed today—to look again at some of the clauses in the current Bill that centralise the planning process and override local concerns, but also, very importantly, to incentivise renewables.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): The mover of today’s motion is a polar explorer, a writer of books, and a provider of written interventions for colleagues. Minister Hughes, you have a lot to live up to.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): It is a true pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Not only will my performance not live up to that introduction, but sadly I am a very poor substitute for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, who is currently in the main Chamber and preparing to steer the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill through Parliament. I will not be able to answer some of the questions that have been asked, but I will ensure that we get answers from a very learned source to ensure that hon. Members get some response.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) for his fine speech. We have all acknowledged how well informed it was and how intrepid he is, and his environmental credentials are unequalled in the room. I also express thanks for the contributions from other hon. Members. Some of them have already gone, but they were fine contributions none the less.

In our net zero strategy and British energy security strategy, the Government committed to securing and fully decarbonising the UK’s electricity supply. Crucially, we are considering how the planning system can further support our commitment to reaching net zero. The British energy security strategy sets out our plans to consult on some specific changes to the planning system to support delivery of renewable infrastructure, including solar farms. That energy strategy sets a clear ambition for a fivefold increase in deployment of the UK’s solar capacity, up to 70 GW, by 2035. That obviously means shifting up a gear in terms of deployment, but what it categorically does not mean is seizing large swathes of countryside and turning them into industrial solar farms and storage units. Yes, large-scale ground-mounted farms will be needed, but smaller commercial and domestic rooftop projects will be just as essential.

I will respond to some of the points made in the debate. On toughening up planning regulations in the NPPF to make sure that ground-mounted solar panels

are not blighting the countryside, I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire that we will consult on amending planning rules in England to strengthen policy in favour of solar development on non-protected land. We intend to do this while making sure that local communities continue to have a real say over applications, with all the existing environmental protections remaining in place, and we will publish the consultation in due course. We are also committed to delivering on the commitments we made in the net zero strategy to review national planning policy, to make sure it contributes to climate change mitigation and adaption as fully as possible.

My hon. Friend referred to a few specific examples of planning applications in his constituency, as did others. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will understand that, given the quasi-judicial role of Ministers within the planning system, I am unable to comment on specifics; however, I can explain the Government’s position on planning policy for the matters raised. Currently, planning applications for projects up to 50 MW capacity in England are determined by local planning authorities. The vast majority of solar projects in England fall into that category, although clearly not the one mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie). Councils will consider a range of factors when assessing applications, including the environmental impact.

For projects over 50 MW in England, and over 350 MW in Wales, planning decisions are made by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy through the nationally significant infrastructure project regime. This allows for rigorous scrutiny of such projects through an impartial examination process run by the Planning Inspectorate. Under the NSIP regime, developers must undertake considerable community engagement as part of the application process. Communities can participate in a formal examination process run by the Planning Inspectorate, which gives residents ample opportunity to make their views on a project known long before any decisions are taken. As right hon. and hon. Members will know, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will increase opportunities for community involvement even further.

It is probably a good idea for me to move away from my speech and respond to some of the points that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire mentioned battery facilities being of no use, but my understanding is that where we have battery facilities, we need less solar. The performance of solar obviously depends on the sun shining, whereas a battery facility allows us to capture the energy created while the sun is shining. We therefore do not need quite so many solar panels, because the scheme operates on a more efficient basis.

Regarding brownfield versus greenfield, the Government have a clear preference for brownfield development in many of our planning areas, and that also applies here. An excellent scheme in Wolverhampton has taken a landfill site and built a considerable solar facility that will feed the local hospital. We certainly have a preference for that in the Black Country.

My hon. Friend asked whether it is possible to have grazing continuing in and out of solar facilities. I am sorry to say that there is not a single solar farm in Walsall North, or not many of them, so I do not know

[*Eddie Hughes*]

whether grazing will continue. I will take his expertise on board and I will discuss this issue with our right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing when the opportunity arises. Hopefully my hon. Friend will forgive my lack of knowledge in that area.

The question of roof versus field was raised by the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). At the moment, my understanding is that there is more or less a 50:50 balance between the production of solar energy in fields and on roofs. The Government intend to maintain that balance and we have some interesting things happening—for example, a part L uplift in the building regs, which is coming into force this month. When we change the building regs, we create notional buildings that show how we can achieve the new standard. The notional building for the part L uplift includes solar panels, so we expect that, from now on, further building regs will see more buildings—houses and commercial—built with solar panels in place.

James Gray: I understand that my hon. Friend is not the Minister responsible, but did I understand him correctly to say that he intends to maintain the split between green fields and roofs at 50:50? The whole thrust of the debate this afternoon has been that we do not want that maintained. We want significantly more solar power to be generated on brownfield sites and on buildings, and significantly less on fields. I would like to see it going to 70:30 or 80:20, or, come to that, 100% of solar farms being on reused land.

Eddie Hughes: It was meant to be reassuring. I was just saying that we will maintain the status quo at the very least, and that in terms of that balance it is not our intention to push for dramatically more farmland to be used for solar.

James Gray: I am terribly sorry and I am grateful to the Minister for giving way away. I do not want to enter into an argument, but that is not in the least bit reassuring. The reason why all these Members are in the Chamber today is because solar farm applications are being made in their constituencies. We do not want them to happen; we want them to stop. We want the land to remain agricultural land that can produce food. Just saying, “Oh, don’t worry, ladies and gentlemen, it will be absolutely fine. It is going to remain as it is now,” is no reassurance at all. We want the situation to change. We want to see fewer solar farms on agricultural land, not more or even the same number.

Eddie Hughes: Given that we need to achieve a fivefold increase in solar generation, we are going to have great difficulty in finding places to put that in a way that does not compromise people’s enjoyment of the countryside, at least in some small way. We need to find a way through this that means we achieve our net zero objective while not upsetting too many Members of this House or the public more generally.

Anthony Mangnall: I associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire. If the Minister is going to run a consultation, that has to be run, completed and responded to before the

NPPF is published in July. We must have a consultation that enables us to introduce legislation to allow us, as Members of Parliament, and local authorities to make decisions. Will the Minister commit to that, or at least commit to asking the Department to make sure that the consultation will be brought forward quickly?

Eddie Hughes: In the absence of the Minister responsible for housing and planning, I undertake to share with him the views that have been raised, although I am sure he is aware of this debate and will read it subsequently.

The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) mentioned a current planning application in Walsall. As a planning Minister, I cannot comment on that. I feel a degree of assurance that Walsall Council will be able to handle that application. In relation to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, I can assure her that this Government certainly intend to continue to protect the green belt.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn raised a scheme that I can only imagine is of national significance and therefore will be determined by the Secretary of State for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That falls outside my purview, but I will make sure that BEIS Ministers are aware of her concern.

I share the ambition of the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) to maximise the use of brownfield sites or put more solar on top of existing buildings, squeezing solar in everywhere that will not impact on the enjoyment of the countryside.

Finally, it is good to see the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) at the Dispatch Box again. The war in Ukraine has told us that we need to maximise our energy security by making sure that we have access to oil, because that is clearly how we generate lots of our electricity, while continuing our commitment to a transition to net zero by doing things such as scaling up our solar power production dramatically.

As I said at the start, Mr Paisley, I am a poor substitute for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing. I will convey the thoughts of Members present to him and I look forward to him responding to Members in due course.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): James Gray has 50 seconds to wind up.

5.29 pm

James Gray: It has been a unanimous debate this afternoon, Mr Paisley. All of us, on all sides of the House, agree that we want to see fewer solar farms and fewer battery storage solutions. We want to see agriculture and food production increased.

It was unanimous until we came to the Minister’s response to the debate, which I have to say was extraordinarily disappointing. I am horrified to hear the Government intend to increase the number of solar farms by 500% and that the Minister thinks that a ratio of 50:50 between fields and roofs, which is where we are at the moment, is reassuring. We want to see far, far fewer solar farms in the countryside.

I am extremely disappointed that the Minister was unable to tell us when the NPPF will be renewed. He was not able to reassure me that somehow or other

these matters would be considered in that NPPF. I hope the Secretary of State will listen carefully to what has been said today.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 June 2022

TREASURY

The Double Taxation Convention between the United Kingdom and Luxembourg

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

A double taxation convention with Luxembourg was signed in London on 7 June. The convention reflects the improvements made in the latest version of the OECD's model tax convention. The text of the convention is available on the HM Revenue and Customs pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Library of both Houses. The text of the convention will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS80]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Update: British Virgin Islands

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): On 18 January 2021 [*Hansard*, HCWS716, column 32WS], the House was informed that the then Governor of the British Virgin Islands, or BVI, had launched a commission of inquiry, or COI, into claims that corruption, abuse of position and serious impropriety had taken place in public office in recent years.

On 4 April, the BVI Governor received the report of the independent commissioner, the right honourable Sir Gary Hickinbottom. The Governor announced that publication would follow in June after discussions between BVI political leaders and the UK Government on the report's findings and recommendations. However, the arrest by US authorities on 28 April of the then Premier of BVI, Andrew Fahie, led to the Governor publishing the report the following day.

The report is a thorough, evidence-based assessment of the state of governance in the BVI. The commissioner has identified that serious impropriety and gross failures of governance by elected officials through several administrations is highly likely to have taken place. I have today placed copies of the report in the Library of both Houses.

The report makes 48 recommendations to address underlying issues, including urgent reforms, investigations and medium-term measures. These will help deliver the deep change that the people of the BVI deserve.

The commissioner made a further recommendation, assessing that elected officials in the BVI would not deliver the essential reforms required: he reluctantly concluded that the only way to ensure required change

would be for a temporary suspension of those parts of the constitution by which areas of Government are assigned to elected representatives, and the assumption of related powers by the Governor.

Since the commissioner delivered his report, there have been a number of significant developments, not least with the removal of Andrew Fahie as Premier through a vote of no confidence and the creation of the new Government of National Unity, or GNU. The Governor has also ordered a number of criminal investigations, as recommended in the COI report.

The UK and the Governor have worked with the GNU since its formation to turn its public commitments to reform into a strong implementation plan with a strict and comprehensive set of milestones that need to be met. If they are, that will protect against corruption and ensure the return of good governance.

I believe, in the first instance, that the new Government should have an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to reform through the implementation of the 48 COI recommendations and the further measures they have proposed.

The Governor and UK Government will monitor implementation and assess progress quarterly. Each BVI Government Ministry and Department will also provide a monthly report. The detailed implementation plan will be published by the GNU in due course.

If it becomes clear that this approach is not delivering the reform that the people of the BVI want and deserve, we will take action. This may require the swift implementation of the final report recommendation.

In order to be able to do so quickly if required, the UK Government has submitted an Order in Council to the Privy Council that would allow this administration to be introduced. The Order will be laid in Parliament, but not brought in to force. Should it prove necessary to do so, I will instruct the Governor to make a proclamation in the BVI Gazette appointing a day that the Order will come into force.

The people of the BVI want and deserve change and have made their desire for better governance clear. Elected officials know this. We want to support the new Government in making this change and allow them the opportunity to reform. The Order in Council will provide the people of the BVI with complete reassurance that change will happen.

We have a duty to protect the people of BVI from corruption, criminality and poor governance. We will stand by them.

[HCWS81]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Monkeypox

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Following the increased prevalence of cases of monkeypox in England, and transmission within the community for the first time, I would like to inform the House that as of Wednesday 8 June 2022, the following amendments have been laid and come into force:

The Health Protection (Notification) Regulations 2010 have been amended to include monkeypox as a notifiable disease in Schedule 1 and monkeypox virus as a notifiable causative agent in Schedule 2.

The National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 have been amended to include monkeypox in Schedule 1.

The public health assessment remains that the threat to the public is low. These amendments will support the UK Health Security Agency, or UKHSA, and our health partners to swiftly identify, treat and control the disease, and reduce potential financial barriers to overseas visitors in England who require NHS-funded secondary care services in relation to monkeypox.

Health Protection (Notification) Regulations 2010

From today, 8 June 2022, monkeypox is a notifiable disease and there is now an explicit legal duty on doctors to notify the “proper officer” of the relevant local authority if they see a patient they suspect of having the monkeypox virus in England. While we believe cases have been reliably notified to date, this amendment puts beyond doubt the legal obligation of doctors to report cases of suspected monkeypox. Placing a legal duty on doctors to report suspected monkeypox cases, and provide the relevant patient information, will strengthen our understanding of the virus and its transmission within the UK and, if required, support the implementation of timely prevention and control measures.

We have also placed a legal duty on laboratories to notify the UKHSA if they identify monkeypox virus when they test a sample in England, by listing the virus

as a notifiable causative agent. Positive laboratory samples will be an important core dataset, strengthening surveillance and helping to inform our understanding of outbreak progression and trends to underpin action. Laboratory notification will also help to identify the links between cases and act as an important contingency if case notification by doctors has not occurred.

National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 (“the charging regulations”)

The charging regulations require providers of NHS-funded secondary care to make charges to people not ordinarily resident in the UK (“overseas visitors”) except where an exemption category applies.

We have taken swift action to ensure that, should an overseas visitor in England need NHS-funded secondary care services in respect of monkeypox, they will not face any charge for them. Providing such services without charge removes a potential financial barrier to overseas visitors presenting for NHS-funded secondary care, therefore ensuring that the risk to the public’s health from infected visitors is minimised. This brings monkeypox into line with most other infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and covid-19.

The inclusion today of monkeypox in Schedule 1 of the charging regulations will mean that overseas visitors will not be charged for the diagnosis and treatment of monkeypox. The charging regulations have also been amended so that if any charges have already been incurred during this outbreak, they must be cancelled, or, if paid, they must be refunded.

[HCWS82]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 8 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	795	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Engagements	795	Menopausal Women in the Prison Estate	791
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	785	Regional Inequality	785
Children with Autism: Classroom Support	790	Sign Language	792
Endometriosis	788	Topical Questions	792
Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting	791	Women in STEM Apprenticeships	790
Levelling Up	787	Women's Health Strategy	789

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 8 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	39WS	TREASURY	39WS
FCDO Update: British Virgin Islands	39WS	The Double Taxation Convention between the United Kingdom and Luxembourg	39WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	40WS		
Monkeypox	40WS		

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**not later than
Wednesday 15 June 2022**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 8 June 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 785] [see index inside back page]

Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Health and Social Care Leadership Review [Col. 807]

Statement—(Sajid Javid)

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill [Col. 821]

Motion for Second Reading—(Michael Gove)—agreed to
Programme Motion—(Scott Mann)—agreed to

Parks and Green Spaces: Manchester, Gorton [Col. 917]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Government Action on Suicide Prevention [Col. 327WH]

Historical Discrimination in Boxing [Col. 351WH]

Ofsted: Accountability [Col. 357WH]

Cancer Care: Young Adults [Col. 378WH]

Solar Farms and Battery Storage [Col. 386WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 39WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
