

**Tuesday  
28 June 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 28 June 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Tuesday 28 June 2022*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TREASURY

*The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—*

#### VAT: Domestic Fuel

1. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) stakeholders on the potential merits of zero-rating VAT on domestic fuel. [900757]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):** The hon. Member's question is about the Government's support for those who are struggling with the cost of living. The Government recently announced an additional £15 billion-worth of additional support, targeted particularly on those with the greatest need. Government support for the cost of living now totals £37 billion this year.

**Neale Hanvey:** VAT on domestic fuel continues to be levied on rising fuel bills while one in three Scots households live in fuel poverty. With 8% of the UK population, Scotland has 96% of the UK's crude oil reserves, 63% of the UK's natural gas reserves, 90% of the UK's hydropower and 25% of Europe's offshore wind and tidal resources. Scotland's vast energy potential far exceeds the needs of our people yet we receive no revenue. Can the Minister tell me the true value of Scotland's energy to the UK Treasury, and set out how the Government will service their massive debts when they can no longer fleece Scotland of its energy resources following a vote for independence in 2023?

**Lucy Frazer:** We of course recognise Scotland's contribution to energy across the country and the fantastic industry that we have in Scotland, but the hon. Member will know that Scotland has a record sum this year in terms of money that comes through the Treasury, through the Budget and through the Barnett formula.

**Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): The original question was about heating fuel, and I wonder if the Minister could let us know the proportion of people in London who use heating oil compared with those out in rural areas such as Lincolnshire or even in Scotland?

**Lucy Frazer:** My hon. Friend is right: more people use heating oil in rural areas, and the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are looking at energy across the board to ensure that all people are protected.

### Alcohol Exporters: Customs Requirements

2. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): Whether his Department is taking steps to reduce Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs paperwork for alcohol exporters. [900758]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):** The 2025 UK border strategy sets out the Government's vision for the UK border to be the most effective in the world. We are investing £180 million to build a UK single trade window, which will streamline how traders share information with the Government, making it as straightforward as possible for business to comply with customs requirements.

**Dame Nia Griffith:** We all understand the need to protect revenue and to prevent fraud, but some alcohol exporting companies find that their exports are being hindered by HMRC's refusal to accept standard invoicing as proof of tax paid. HMRC, in requiring additional letters of confirmation, is therefore causing companies considerable hindrance to their exports. Will the Minister agree to meet me to find a way forward that can both protect revenue and facilitate exports?

**Lucy Frazer:** I would be very happy to meet the hon. Member and look at the specific issues that she has raised, but I reassure her that HMRC is currently in a programme to ensure that traders have to fill in fewer forms and that forms are prepopulated, so that customs can be streamlined for the trader.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a trade agreement with India would be a huge boost to our exporters, including our alcohol exporters?

**Lucy Frazer:** The Government are very much committed to trade agreements across the globe and would welcome a trade agreement with India.

### Cost of Living: Northern Ireland

3. **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the impact of rises in the cost of living in Northern Ireland. [900759]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** The UK Government are providing £37 billion-worth of support to help families with the cost of living, and most of that support is being provided directly to households across the United Kingdom. Indeed, we are legislating to ensure that our one-off payments to those on welfare that are worth up to £650 can be paid directly to households and families in Northern Ireland.

**Stephen Farry:** As the Chancellor will be aware, the energy bill support scheme cannot currently be extended to Northern Ireland due to the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, so can he update the House on what steps he is taking to put in place measures to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can avail themselves of that support? I appreciate that it is not due until October, but there is a long lead-in time required in that respect.

**Rishi Sunak:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we want to ensure that equivalent support is provided to all Northern Irish families, and that it will be of the same value. We are currently in discussions with a variety of organisations to see how best to deliver that support, but I can give him the reassurance that it will be there in the same quantity, in the same value and at the same time.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The combined impacts of the £37 billion package that my right hon. Friend has referred to, plus tax reductions such as the cut in fuel duty, are providing really significant support to people in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that that is an illustration of why people in Northern Ireland are better off as a result of the Union and of the fact that we are stronger together as a group of four nations?

**Rishi Sunak:** My right hon. Friend speaks with authority and experience on this topic, and of course she is absolutely right: the UK Government are ensuring that families across the United Kingdom are benefiting from the support we are putting in place. More broadly, we will do everything we can in government to protect and support the United Kingdom.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Many of the fiscal levers the Government could use to support Northern Ireland are not available, because we are under the EU VAT regime and still subject to EU state aid rules, which would rule out many of the measures the Government would take. Is that not a reason why the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill that is going through the House of Commons is essential, in order to enable the Government to use fiscal levers across the whole UK to benefit all of the people, be they Unionists, nationalists or any others in Northern Ireland?

**Rishi Sunak:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. As I said from this Dispatch Box at the time of the spring statement, we were unable to extend our VAT cut on energy-saving materials to Northern Ireland because of some of the provisions in the protocol. He will know that the legislation we have put before this House, which I am glad received support last night, will address exactly those issues.

## SMEs

4. **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises. [900760]

12. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises. [900768]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):** Small and medium-sized businesses are at the heart of our economy, creating jobs and prosperity across the UK. We continue to give substantial support to SMEs by raising the employment allowance; extending the £1 million annual investment allowance; providing business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses; and with the Help to Grow programme.

**Saqib Bhatti:** A couple of weeks ago, I met people from a number of hospitality businesses at Nailcote Hall. They expressed not only their gratitude for the support the Treasury gave during the pandemic, but their concerns about the cost of living and about supply-chain costs, which they cannot necessarily pass on to consumers. What assurances can my hon. Friend give the businesses in my constituency, especially those in the hospitality sector, that the Government will keep them in mind in terms of future support?

**Helen Whately:** It is good to hear that my hon. Friend has been speaking to the hospitality sector in his constituency, no doubt drawing on his expertise in those conversations. As he said, we provided substantial support to that sector during the pandemic. We recognise the ongoing challenges for businesses as we recover, which is why we are giving thousands of hospitality, leisure and retail businesses a 50% cut in business rates this financial year—worth up to £110,000 per business.

**Mr Mohindra:** There are more than 7,000 businesses in my constituency, producing excellent products and services in a range of industries. I have held several informative high street walkarounds in towns across my constituency, hearing at first hand from local entrepreneurs, many of whom are worried about competition from online businesses. Will my hon. Friend explain what steps the Department is taking to support our high street businesses in the face of online competition?

**Helen Whately:** I commend my hon. Friend for his campaign in his local high streets and for the work he is doing with local businesses. I agree with him on the importance of high streets and the businesses on them, which is why we are supporting high street businesses with our 50% business rate cut for thousands of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses; our freeze to the business rates multiplier; and funding through the community renewal fund, towns fund and levelling-up fund.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I hope the Minister is aware that one problem facing small and medium-sized employers in Cumbria and elsewhere, certainly in rural Britain, is a serious lack of workforce. Cumbria Tourism reported that 63% of its members last year had to operate below capacity because they could not find sufficient staff to keep going and so they missed out on vital demand. Does she agree that the two key areas are a lack of affordable housing so that people can live close to the place where they need to work in rural communities, and the fact that the Government have yet to come up with adequate visa provisions to allow employers to supplement a local workforce with an overseas one? What action will she take to support small and medium-sized businesses, especially in hospitality, in Cumbria and elsewhere?

**Helen Whately:** There was a great deal in that question, but broadly it was about access to the workforce for businesses. We have a really successful story on jobs, with record numbers of people in payroll employment, but I also hear about the work that businesses are doing to fill vacancies. We are supporting businesses, for instance, with our successful Way to Work scheme and the investment we are making in people's skills to ensure that they align to the vacancies that employers are looking to fill.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): A big concern for small businesses in my constituency, especially those in construction and engineering contract work, is that they finish the job, the main contractor gets paid, but the people who did the work sometimes wait months to get paid. If the main contractor fails during that time, the money disappears with it. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss the possibility of making sure that those moneys are kept in a protective bond, so that if we cannot prevent the main contractor from going bust, we can at least stop it dragging down hundreds of small businesses with it?

**Helen Whately:** I do have conversations with the construction sector and more widely about infrastructure investment in this country. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about the specific suggestion he has to help the construction sector.

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): If the Chancellor really wanted to help British businesses, he would back Labour's plan to scrap business rates and replace them with a fairer system. He could reverse his tax on jobs and scrap the national insurance hike, and he could use public procurement and other tools to buy, make and sell more in Britain. He has imitated Labour's policies before: why not follow Labour's lead again and help struggling businesses?

**Helen Whately:** Business rates and national insurance are an important contribution to paying for public services, which I am sure the hon. Lady's constituents, like mine, feel very strongly about. I remind her of the scale of support that we are providing to businesses, including a business rates cut worth £1.7 billion this year.

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): I appreciate that the Chancellor cut fuel duty by 5p per litre, but that did not really touch the sides. I urge him to be bolder and cut fuel duty by at least 20p per litre, as requested by FairFuelUK, which would make a huge difference to individuals and businesses in my patch, not least hauliers for whom the cost of running a single truck has increased by 17% in the past year.

**Helen Whately:** I hear my right hon. Friend's request. The combination of the freeze on fuel duty in the Budget and the cut in the spring statement is essentially a £5 billion tax cut. That is substantial support with the cost of fuel for businesses. As I have also said, we are taking further steps to support businesses with business rate cuts. I also remind her of our cut to national insurance, increasing the employment allowance by £1,000, supporting around 500,000 smaller businesses.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clive Efford.

We have a slight problem. Can the Chancellor answer the question as if it has been asked?

### Inflation

6. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of trends in the level of inflation on the UK economy. [900762]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** We are not immune to the global inflationary shocks that many countries are experiencing. Indeed, eurozone inflation is north of 8%, and inflation in the United States is closer to 9%. We have the determination we need to combat inflation and reduce prices, and we have the tools at our disposal, namely strong and forceful monetary policy, responsible fiscal policy and supply-side reforms.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): One of the really insidious effects of inflation is that it imposes more costs on the poorest in society. What steps will the Chancellor take to make sure not just that we protect people today, but that inflation expectations are not locked in, locking in high inflation for the future, which would be the worst thing we could do for the poorest in our society?

**Rishi Sunak:** As ever, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent and thoughtful point. He is right about the regressive nature of inflation, which is why our recent announcements have been specifically targeted at those on the lowest incomes—the most vulnerable in our society—to help them manage through the challenging months ahead. He is also right that inflation expectations are critical, and I know that the Bank of England will act forcefully, in its words, to restrain inflation and inflation expectations, because the quicker we get through this the better for everyone, particularly the most vulnerable.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the Labour Front Bench, Pat McFadden.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is true that inflation is affecting a number of countries, but why does the Chancellor think that the UK has the highest inflation in the G7, and why is UK economic growth forecast to be lower than in any country in the G20 next year, with the sole exception of Russia?

**Rishi Sunak:** When it comes to inflation, there is a variety of reasons. [Interruption.] I was very clear with the House at the time of the recent announcement that we are experiencing not only the energy shock that Europe is experiencing, but the tight labour market that the United States is experiencing. The fact that we have very many people in work and low unemployment is something to celebrate, but, obviously, that contributes to inflationary forces. Beyond that, there are smaller technical things, such as the timing of how the price cap works here and the degree of interventions in energy being upstream or downstream. When it comes to growth—we have had this debate multiple times—the Opposition seem to cherry-pick the figure that they like. Let us look at the period since the pandemic and at our growth performance. Indeed, on the OECD's most recent figures, which the right hon. Gentleman cherry-picked, where were we in that table? We were the second highest in the G7.

**Mr McFadden:** The Chancellor said "celebrate". I am not sure that there is much to celebrate in the figures that I quoted to him. Does he accept that the weakness of the pound, which increases the prices of our imports, is a major contributory factor to the inflation being experienced by our constituents, along with a continuation of the trade frictions caused by the Government's Brexit



deal? Does he have any plans to address that? I am not talking about rerunning the Brexit argument. He could take one step, which is to reach an agrifood agreement with the EU, as New Zealand has. That would reduce costs and bureaucracy for our farmers, for our businesses and, most of all, for our constituents.

**Rishi Sunak:** What the right hon. Gentleman said was very telling. We on the Conservative Benches do celebrate people being in work. It is critically the most important thing that we can do to help manage the cost of living, so every week in this place, we will champion those who are working and we will get others into work and support them. When it comes to the EU and our trading relationship—it is nice to hear from the Labour party that it does not want to rerun the Brexit arguments—it is very clear that there is now a growing faction on the Labour Benches that wants to do one thing and one thing only, which is to take us back into the single market.

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

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Both Labour and the Tories are Brexit parties now—a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for and wants nothing of. This year, the Scottish Government have faced more than a 5% real-terms cut in resource funding compared with last year's Budget, and the spending review took place when inflation was at only 3.1%. It has now tripled and continues to rise. That increase will impact on Scotland's recovery from the pandemic and place severe pressures on public services and public sector wages. Will the Chancellor increase funding to the devolved Governments in recognition of this record inflation over which he presides?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am so pleased to have a chance to answer Treasury orals for the first time since we saw the Scottish Government's spending review, which was a couple weeks ago. It was interesting to read through that, because in spite of the largest increase in public spending in the United Kingdom for some decades—record increases in public spending—it is clear that the Scottish Government are now imposing austerity in local government, in education, in justice, and in the environment. All budgets are growing slower than inflation, and that is not happening elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The health budget, the people's No. 1 priority, is now growing in England two or three times faster than it is in Scotland. Scotland is not passing on the income tax cut. We might ask: why is this? Why are these choices being made? It is because, in Scotland, the welfare budget is being increased by 50%. That is why.

**Alison Thewliss:** The Chancellor knows fine well that the Scottish Parliament, along with the other devolved Administrations, operates on a fixed budget. We do not have the levers that he has to increase budgets, yet we operate on that incredibly well. *[Interruption.]* We have a balanced budget in Scotland every year, which says a lot about the Scottish Government than his Government.

Inflation is a global problem, but individual Governments can make it easier for people to make ends meet. Ireland, for example, has cut public transport fares to allow people to save money on ticket and petrol prices, while those have soared under this Chancellor's Administration. That is an independent country using

its powers to ease the burden on commuters. The Scottish Government have already made bus travel free for under-22s, but we are at the limits of what we can do, because of that fixed budget and because of those real-term cuts to the block grant. If the Chancellor will not provide more money to the Scottish Government, will he give us the full powers so that we can do that?

**Rishi Sunak:** We all have to operate with fixed budgets—that is news to the hon. Lady—but there have been record Barnett settlements for Scotland of £4.5 billion a year. Beneath that, however, are the choices that Governments make. On the Conservative side of the House, we choose to support the NHS and public services; in Scotland, they are choosing to impose austerity on public services. That is the difference between us and the SNP.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Following the welcome launch of Help to Build yesterday, fulfilling a commitment that the Chancellor made to me when he was still Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the early part of 2020, does he agree that making it easier for more people to commission their own houses will result in more, better, greener and cheaper houses that cost less to run, thus making a significant contribution to battling inflation?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is without doubt the House's expert on that matter. I am pleased that the Government have listened to him. I still have the brochure he first gave me with the marvellous pictures of the custom self-build—in Switzerland, I think. There is a £1.8 billion fund, I believe, within the home building programme, and a good chunk of that will go to support exactly what he said: more homes, quicker homes and cheaper homes for all our citizens.

### Economic Inequality

7. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What recent fiscal steps he has taken to help reduce economic inequality. [900763]

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** The Government understand that millions of households across the UK are struggling to make their income stretch to cover the rising cost of living. As part of the £15 billion support package being provided by the Government, almost all the 8 million most vulnerable households across the UK will receive support of at least £1,200 this year, including a new, one-off £650 cost of living payment.

**Dan Carden:** The Economic Secretary will know that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs payroll data shows that the pay of the top 1% rose three-and-a-half times faster than the pay of those in the bottom 10%, whose meagre pay increases have already been wiped out by inflation and price rises. When we look at wealth, during one year of the pandemic each UK billionaire saw their wealth grow by £630 million on average. While the rich get richer, the working-class communities I represent get poorer. When will the Treasury look at raising taxes on the highest incomes and taxing the wealth of billionaires in order to invest in communities and UK infrastructure?

**John Glen:** Most mainstream understanding of how the economy works recognises that we need wealth creators, but we also need a Government who recognise the strains that the country is facing. That is why three quarters of the support will go to vulnerable households, including specific additional top-ups such as the £12 million going to Liverpool for the household support fund. This Government will stand by wealth creators and innovators, however, because we need growth in the economy and a more productive economy.

**Gareth Davies** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): One way to tackle regional economic inequality is to ensure that our regional businesses are able to attract investment. Will my hon. Friend outline what more we can do to ensure that we unlock more private investment into Britain's firms of the future?

**John Glen:** The Government are constantly looking at new ideas. The regional angels programme and our reforms to financial services to make FinTech and banks more accessible to regional businesses are at the core of this Government's agenda, and I will bring further measures to the House in the next few weeks.

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) highlights, the handouts from the Government to support families are already being wiped out by the rise in inflation and cost of living. One in two children in my constituency live in poverty. From what the Minister just said, he believes in trickle-down from those billionaires to help those people, but they are on low wages and, for many of those who are working, universal credit has been cut. That is not doing enough to support them. What further steps will the Treasury take?

**John Glen:** What I believe in is a Government who make targeted support available to the most vulnerable. The Chancellor and this Government have on a number of occasions used fiscal events and bespoke interventions to support those vulnerable people. We have always been clear that we will not be able to ameliorate the full extent of the challenges facing the country, but we will continue to strive for greater growth and productivity that will bring us back to where we need to be.

### Levelling Up

8. **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to encourage levelling up across the UK. [900764]

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke):** The levelling-up White Paper set out a clear plan to level up every corner of the United Kingdom by 2030. At the spending review last autumn, the Government showed how we would deliver our ambitious plan by delivering over £600 billion in gross public sector investment over this Parliament. That includes £4.8 billion in increased investment in local communities through the levelling-up fund, £1.6 billion for the next generation of the British Business Bank's regional investment fund, and £2.6 billion for the shared prosperity fund.

**Sarah Atherton:** Wrexham's levelling-up gateway bid has been supported by a 16,000-signature petition to create the first international sporting stadium in north Wales. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people are at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda, and that the amount of people who have signed that petition demonstrates the need for such a scheme in places like Wrexham, which has been ignored by the Welsh Labour Government for 20 years?

**Mr Clarke:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Wrexham. I remember her coming to see me to talk about the merits of this particular bid, which obviously has enormous popular support; the number of people who have signed her petition testifies to precisely that.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Real levelling up requires money, and that means everybody paying all the tax they owe. So why did the spring Budget allocate three times more additional funding to the Department for Work and Pensions than to HMRC to deal with fraud, when we know that every £1 spent on fraud in the DWP recovers £6, but every £1 spent on fraud in HMRC recovers £18? Why are the resources not prioritised to bring the greatest reward?

**Mr Clarke:** This is undoubtedly an important issue, and the hon. Lady is right to raise it. Clearly, we are at a very important moment in the fight against fraud. Only next month, the new Public Sector Fraud Authority reporting to this Department and the Cabinet Office will go live, backed up by an additional £25 million over the spending review period. This represents increased resources for further support in terms of active measures on data, intelligence, risk and enforcement—all the things we need to do to crack down on fraud and to pursue the perpetrators.

### UK Infrastructure

9. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What fiscal steps he has taken to support investment in UK infrastructure. [900765]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):** We are driving economic growth through investment in infrastructure, innovation and skills. The Budget and spending review confirmed £100 billion of public investment in economic infrastructure to benefit every part of the UK. We are launching a UK infrastructure bank with a financial capacity of £22 billion to crowd in private finance to support more than £40 billion of investment in infrastructure over the next five years.

**Chris Green:** It is clear that when done right, the Government's levelling-up programme can make a real difference to people's lives. Does my hon. Friend share my enthusiasm for the proposed Atherton, Leigh and Tyldesley cycling upgrades that will connect local people to job opportunities right across the area, especially because there is such local support for it and it is not an anti-car programme?

**Helen Whately:** Yes, I do share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for helping his constituents to access jobs and for cycling as a way of getting to and from work. At the spending review we announced £710 million of new

funding for schemes like the one he described, but Bolton is also receiving £30 million through the towns fund and the shared prosperity fund, and work on the electrification of the Wigan-Bolton line has begun, supporting economic growth for his constituency and the wide area.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): In the integrated rail plan announced just six months ago, the Government promised to invest in the east coast main line—a vital route connecting London, Newcastle and Scotland and bringing high-skill, high-wage jobs to our area. However, Ministers are already backtracking on some of these investment promises in other parts of the country, so will the Government make a firm commitment today to fund the delivery of east coast upgrades to provide much-needed confidence and resilience in our line?

**Helen Whately:** As the hon. Lady points out, with our investment in infrastructure—particularly rail, in the £96 billion integrated rail plan for the midlands and the north—we are showing how the Government are supporting the growth of the economy, including through providing the transport infrastructure that we need for that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call shadow Minister James Murray.

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Labour welcomes the principle of a UK infrastructure bank moving to a statutory footing, but it is crucial to make sure that public money supports decent jobs that people can raise a family on. Will the Minister therefore support our proposals for all projects funded by the infrastructure bank to come with a good jobs plan and for working people to be given a voice on its board?

**Helen Whately:** We have many measures in place to support people's jobs. We know about the figures for record levels of payroll employment and also the increase in the national living wage earlier this year. I am glad to hear the hon. Gentleman's support for the UK infrastructure bank that we are currently legislating for, which is a really important part of our determination to drive regional and local growth across the UK.

### Credit Unions

10. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support the credit union sector. [900766]

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** The Government support the credit union sector and recognise the contribution that they make to our financial services sector more broadly and to the communities that they serve. The Government have released £100 million of dormant assets funding to Fair4All Finance to support the financial wellbeing of people in vulnerable circumstances.

**Simon Fell:** I should declare an interest as a former chair of a credit union. Credit unions are some of the largest providers of low-cost credit and are more important than ever given the cost of living issues at the moment, but there are significant barriers hindering their growth,

not least legal restrictions on the size of their common bond area. I know that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary is amending the Credit Union Act 1979 soon, so what plans does he have to look at issues such as this to support credit union growth and to give as many people as possible an opportunity to stay away from doorstep lenders and loan sharks?

**John Glen:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is an expert in this area, given his role in Barrow. We will be amending the Credit Union Act 1979 shortly, which will allow credit unions to offer more services such as hire purchase, conditional sale agreements and so on. With respect to the common bond—that being the link for all credit union members—we will need to see evidence that it supports the needs of the sector, but I have been working closely with the Association of British Credit Unions Limited, the trade body for 70% of credit unions, on its “Vision 2025” document. I visited its conference recently, and we will bring measures forward shortly in the financial services and markets Bill.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the excellent question from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), I say gently to the Minister that Ministers have always had warm words for credit unions, which I welcome, but have been somewhat slow to give them or other mutuals, such as friendly societies, the Whitehall and parliamentary support for the legal reforms to drive significant expansion. Will the Minister now back the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) and require all public bodies to promote credit unions going forward?

**John Glen:** Over the years, we have had considerable dialogue on many of these measures. As I said, the legislation that the sector is looking for will be introduced in the next few weeks. I am aware of the Bill of the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), and I am seeking to have a meeting with him imminently—in the next few days or next week—to discuss it and to see what we can support.

### Cost of Living

11. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the impact of inflation on households' cost of living. [900767]

13. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of his Department's fiscal policies on the cost of living. [900769]

17. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the impact of inflation on households' cost of living. [900774]

19. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the impact of inflation on households' cost of living. [900776]

22. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the impact of inflation on households' cost of living. [900780]



**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** The Government understand that many families are struggling with rising prices. That is why we have announced £37 billion-worth of support, with the bulk of that targeted on the most vulnerable in our society, and those families receiving around £1,200 of help this year.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Government's failure to increase social security benefits in line with the current rate of inflation has resulted in a real-terms cut. Many of my constituents who are in receipt of social security now face a shortfall of around 6%, based on today's inflation rates. The Chancellor could take action now, for example by reviewing the rate of social security every six months, rather than annually in September, while we are in this cost of living emergency. Will he commit to an emergency in-year uprating in line with the rates of inflation?

**Rishi Sunak:** I gently point out to the hon. Lady that just a few weeks ago we announced £15 billion-worth of additional help, particularly for those on means-tested benefits, who are receiving a one-off payment of £650. The aggregate amount spent on that proposal is in fact more generous than simply uprating with inflation as she suggested, so those families will get more help under our plan than with her proposal, and that money will arrive first in July, with the second payment later in the autumn.

**Joanna Cherry:** The cost of living is affecting individuals and business, particularly small business, across our society. Many small cafe owners, who are important for the service sector in Edinburgh South West, are struggling. One small cafe owner wrote to me recently to say that over the past few months, every single one of her suppliers has put their prices up—from bread, to cakes, to bacon, to coffee, to waste collection and energy. My question for the Chancellor is this: is it not time that he looked at his options for further cuts to VAT to help small businesses, especially small cafes in Edinburgh South West?

**Rishi Sunak:** We have provided significant support to the hospitality sector over the past two years, and I am glad that the sector at least emerges from the crisis in a much stronger shape—in terms of employment, cash balances and insolvencies—than anyone had anticipated, which is something to celebrate. With regard to support at the moment, we have of course put in place a £1.7-billion business rates holiday—the 50% discount—for cafés and restaurants in England, and that money is being Barnett-ed to Scotland to provide similar support to restaurants there.

**Mary Glendon:** Public sector workers and care workers in North Tyneside say that the Chancellor's package on the cost of living crisis does not address their daily financial struggles, because under his Government, their pay has not kept pace with inflation. What practical steps will he take to address that overriding problem for my constituents?

**Rishi Sunak:** As I said, we are providing an enormous amount of support—around £1,200—which is targeted at those who most need help. Of course, no Government can make the challenges go away completely, given the

scale of the problem that we are facing, but I am confident that the support we have put in place is significant and will make a meaningful difference to those who most need it. The hon. Lady talks of the practical steps that we can all take to help with the cost of living. Perhaps her party could start by opposing the crippling rail strikes of the past week or two, which are doing nothing to ease the burdens of the cost of living on public sector workers.

**Christian Wakeford:** My constituents in Bury South have had inflicted on them tax and national insurance rises—the inadequate 5p cut to fuel duty barely touched the sides—by a Chancellor who has clearly run out of ideas, as we have just heard. With energy costs at record highs, and an expected further rise of up to 50% in the autumn that will mean the cap has almost trebled in under a year, what further assistance can be given to my constituents to ensure that nobody is cut off?

**Rishi Sunak:** I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that £37 billion of support is being targeted at the most vulnerable and will come over the next few months, from the summer through the autumn and winter, to help with the price cap. As we said, we do expect the cap to increase significantly in the autumn, which is why we have put the support in place. He talked about taxes, so he will be pleased to tell his constituents that in just a couple of weeks' time, they will have their taxes cut when the national insurance threshold rises to £12,500, which will deliver a £330 tax cut to around 30 million people in work. That will start to put more money in people's pay packets in July.

**Mr Virendra Sharma:** The tax rises that the Chancellor has introduced are making the cost of living worse for everyone. How can he defend raising taxes on working people and urging against pay rises for most people, while his colleagues recommend scrapping the cap on pay rises for FTSE 100 bosses who earn millions?

**Rishi Sunak:** Again, 70% of workers in this country will have a net tax cut. That is what the Government are delivering. In just a couple of weeks' time, the first £12,500 that anyone in work earns will be free of any tax or national insurance. That will deliver a £6 billion tax cut for 30 million people. As I said, for 70% of all workers, excluding the most wealthy, it represents a net tax cut, because we are on the side of hard-working people.

**Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con):** The Chancellor knows that a significant part of inflation is not within this Government's control, and indeed not within the country's control; it is a result of international energy costs, particularly oil and gas. That is happening globally because there is an imbalance between supply and demand across the world. What is the Treasury's approach, working with other countries and major energy companies, to try to bring down those prices overall in the coming years? Unless we do that, increasing energy costs will be inimical to the economic growth that everybody in this House wants to see.

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend makes a thoughtful point, and he is right. As the Bank of England recently pointed out, the bulk of the excess inflation that we are

seeing is being driven by global inflationary forces. He is also right that in the long term, the best way to combat that is to increase the supply of energy. In particular, the Prime Minister's energy security strategy sets out a plan to do exactly that, which will have an impact on bills next year and beyond. Between now and then, we have the support in place to help people.

**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): We all know that energy prices, such as oil and gas prices, are being driven by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I welcome the extra £37 billion of support for households and the cut in fuel duty. One thing that affects my constituents, particularly district nurses, is the differential between the terms and conditions for NHS workers and the normal mileage allowance, which means that an NHS district nurse in my patch doing 12,000 miles a year gets about £1,400 less than if they were on a normal mileage allowance. Will the Chancellor make representations to the Health and Social Care Secretary to try to improve that position for my district nurses?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend, as always, is right on the point, and he makes a good observation. He knows from his discussions with me that the mileage allowance rates are advisory, and organisers and employers can provide whatever support they think is appropriate and justified under the circumstances. I would be happy to talk to the Health Secretary. As my hon. Friend knows, the NHS has received a record funding settlement. Where we can find efficiencies to support people, we should do so.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), may I urge the Chancellor to think again about the cut in fuel duty? Although the one he introduced was welcome, it has not really been noticed by many people, so will he consider a much more substantial temporary cut in fuel duty, as has been done in Germany?

**Rishi Sunak:** I am glad that my hon. Friend is supporting my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). I will take all his recommendations under advisement. As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary pointed out, a cut of £5 billion, together with the freezing of fuel duty, is significant, but we appreciate that that is not being felt at the pumps because of the rise in wholesale prices. I assure him that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is in dialogue with the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure that the fuel duty cut is being passed on.

### Topical Questions

T1. [900747] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** In common with countries around the world, the UK is experiencing global inflationary forces. We are taking action to support the country through that, with £37 billion of support targeted at the most vulnerable, but also focused on the long term in combating inflation and reducing prices through supply-side reforms, responsible fiscal policy, and a strong and forceful independent monetary policy.

**Philip Davies:** Many people are grateful to the Chancellor for all the support he has given to help people with their energy bills, but many businesses are also struggling with very high energy bills. Will he consider giving further support to businesses to help them through that, preferably through cutting their taxes? It would be a tragedy if the Chancellor kept all those businesses going, at huge cost, through the pandemic, only to see them come a cropper after the pandemic because of the inflationary cost pressures caused by those lockdowns.

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is a champion of all the small businesses in his constituency, and rightly so. They have endured the pandemic and are bouncing back strongly on the other side, and we want to support that. On tax cuts, I hope he can reassure his small businesses that this year they are benefiting from two specific tax cuts—a cut of about £5,000 in business rates for a typical pub; and with the increase in the employment allowance, a cut of £1,000 on national insurance contributions—and we will of course support them in the years to come.

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

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): Consumer confidence is at its lowest level since records began because working people have less money to spend, but we are not all in this together. Pay for the top 1% of earners is increasing at 20 times the rate for the bottom 10%, and all the while the Prime Minister eyes up luxury tree houses instead of fixing the broken economy. Does the Chancellor realise that, to avoid a cost of living calamity, he must address the stagnant wage crisis created by Tory policies?

**Rishi Sunak:** On wage policy, this is the Government who introduced the national living wage and, this year, increased the national living wage by about £1,000 a year. Combined with the cut to the universal credit taper rate and the increase in the national insurance threshold, that is significant support to those on the lowest earnings. It is right that we increase people's wages, but the hon. Lady should start in her own office, where, I heard, she is perhaps not quite paying her own staff properly.

**Rachel Reeves:** Some 4.8 million people in Britain are paid less than a real living wage. That includes cleaners, caterers and security guards employed by the Government. They work hard, they pay their taxes—in Britain, Chancellor—and they have been taken for granted for far too long. Will the Chancellor guarantee that all those who work for Government, whether directly or through a contractor, will be paid a real living wage from now on so that they can afford their bills, put food on the table and support their families?

**Rishi Sunak:** We want everyone to be paid the national living wage. That is the law in this country. I am proud that we have increased it by £1,000 this year, which, combined with our tax cuts, is putting more money in the pockets of the lowest paid. I say again that there are lots of people being paid less than the national living wage but they should not include people in the hon. Lady's own office.

T2. [900748] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Chancellor is familiar with the opportunities in northern Lincolnshire and the wider Humber region to

advance economic growth; what plans does he have to develop the infrastructure and support local authorities to achieve that?

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke):** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his region and his support for a freeport on the Humber has been noted across Government. We are of course investing in our levelling-up programme, which has a direct bearing on areas such as the Humber. Crucially, we want to advance devolution within England to allow areas such as his to reap the full rewards and take full control of this exciting opportunity.

T4. [900750] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Recently, it was revealed that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is failing to use the third-party data information that we get through international agreements to investigate how much tax is being evaded through offshore assets. Given that £850 billion is held offshore, with two thirds of it stashed in known tax havens, either Ministers are content for the super-rich to evade paying their fair share in the knowledge that their offshore wealth is not being systematically checked, or they will direct HMRC to use this reporting data, as is done in the US and Denmark, to uncover tax evaders. Which is it?

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):** I am proud that HMRC is a leader in tax transparency, has a number of double tax treaties and co-operates with a large number of countries and international organisations to share tax information to ensure that people pay their fair share.

T3. [900749] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): The global cost of living crisis is affecting many of our constituents, so it is welcome that those on means-tested benefits—one in three households—will receive £1,200 in support from the Government this year. When will that vital support be hitting bank accounts?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need to target support on those who most need it. I am pleased to tell him that the payments will be made for those on means-tested benefits in July, with the second of those payments following a few months later, in the autumn, for those on tax credits, so that deduplication can be done.

T5. [900751] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): In his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the Chancellor seemed actually to be boasting that unlike the Scottish Government he is not willing to invest in tackling child poverty or in supporting carers. May I therefore suggest that instead of boasting about his poverty-inducing social insecurity system he tries looking at and replicating the Scottish child payment and the carer's allowance supplement?

**Mr Simon Clarke:** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out very clearly the choices the Scottish Government made at their most recent spending review, on which they can be judged. Let us be very clear: it is the Scottish Government and the Scottish Government alone who are wasting millions of pounds of this country's and indeed their country's citizens by pursuing a

referendum. That is the last thing that Scotland or the UK needs, soaking up resources that should be spent on people who need them.

T7. [900753] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): The east of England is the only region in the country without a dedicated children's hospital which is why I am delighted that the Government have committed £100 million to building Cambridge children's hospital. It has recently got planning permission and its exciting designs were shown last week to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, William and Kate. Will my right hon. Friend the Chancellor or the Chief Secretary to the Treasury commit to working with me to make sure the hospital is built on schedule?

**Mr Clarke:** This Government are determined to deliver for the people of Cambridgeshire. My colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care will have heard my hon. Friend's comments about the importance of this facility, and that is why we are investing £4.2 billion in new hospitals over the course of this Parliament.

T10. [900756] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The recent announcement by the Chancellor on support with energy bills was welcome as far as it goes; however, I remain deeply concerned about my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran who live in park homes, many of whom are elderly and vulnerable, who have no clarity as to whether they will receive the same support for energy bills as every other household in the UK. Will the Chancellor put an end to this uncertainty and confirm today that he will make a firm commitment to ensure that park home residents do not miss out on this vital support?

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):** The hon. Member makes an important point about people living in park homes—I also have constituents who live in park homes—and we are determined to ensure that people receive the help that they need with the increase in energy costs. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been consulting on how we deliver support to people living in places such as park homes that do not have the same electricity or energy supply as others.

T8. [900754] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Yesterday morning, I had the pleasure of hosting a roundtable discussion with farmers from my constituency in collaboration with the National Farmers Union. My constituent Andy Cornthwaite informed me that he was struggling to employ extra staff to grow his business due to the current £85,000 VAT threshold. I am aware that my right hon. and learned Friend recently responded to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on the subject, but will she consider an early review of the VAT threshold due to the increase in labour and/or materials costs for small and medium-sized enterprises?

**Lucy Frazer:** The Government recognise that accounting for VAT can be a burden on small businesses. That is why we maintain the highest VAT registration threshold in the OECD and as compared with EU member states. At spring Budget 2021, to give businesses certainty, it



was announced that the VAT threshold would be maintained at its current level until March 2024. Although there are no plans to change the VAT threshold at this time, we keep all taxes under constant review.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Last year, at the spending review, the Government announced that after years of austerity there would be a small real-terms increase in local authorities' spending power—but that was when inflation was around 2% to 3%. Has the Chancellor seen the recent assessment from the Local Government Association showing that, with inflation at a somewhat higher level now, it will cost local councils £2.4 billion extra this year? What steps will he and the Levelling Up Secretary take to have talks with the Local Government Association about extra help for local authorities so that we do not get another round of austerity imposed on our constituents?

**Mr Simon Clarke:** Of course, we invested £1.6 billion in local authorities in each year of the spending review precisely to help them with all the responsibilities that they must discharge. I would say to all Departments and devolved Administrations that, if we are to live within the spending review, it is vital that they make responsible choices about how to deliver services at best value to the taxpayer. We cannot be in a situation where we chase after inflationary pressures as that will only worsen and prolong the crisis that we face.

T9. [900755] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): My constituents want to see a low-tax, high-growth economy where work and productivity are prioritised and incentivised. Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that the next move in taxes will be downwards and that that will happen at the first available opportunity?

**Lucy Frazer:** The Chancellor set out at the spring statement that he would be cutting taxes. We have seen that already in the universal credit taper rate and in the increase in the national insurance contributions threshold to £12,570, which will come in just a few weeks. We have also seen the announcement that income taxes will be cut in 2024.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Small businesses in Ceredigion have told me how increasing electricity and fuel costs are having a direct impact on their operating costs in addition to an indirect impact on their demand for their goods and services. They are concerned that those costs are being disproportionately felt in rural areas. Does the Treasury share that assessment? Will it consider bringing forward bespoke measures to support the rural economy?

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Member and I met recently to speak about the cost of fuel in rural areas. As I also represent a rural constituency, I appreciate his point. As he knows, the cut that we made to fuel duty is benefiting people in rural areas as well as those across the whole country. That, combined with the duty freeze, is £5 billion-worth of help for people. As we have discussed today, we are also providing targeted support to people: in particular, there is the £1,200 for 8 million households on benefits to help with the rising cost of living.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

**Mel Stride** (Central Devon) (Con): Our country is facing its highest tax burden since the 1950s, although it should be acknowledged that, more recently, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been bringing taxes down rather than putting them up. Does he agree that, with the elevated level of inflation, now is not the time for dramatic cuts, but that once inflation starts to recede—hopefully at the end of the year or into next year—that will be the opportunity to come forward with serious tax cuts to get growth and jobs going and to support our constituents?

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for his constructive and thoughtful dialogue with me on these issues. He makes an excellent point, and I direct him to the tax plan that we published at the spring statement to indicate the direction of travel on tax. There will be tax cuts in, I think, a day's time to help people with the cost of living, tax cuts in the autumn to drive growth in business investment and innovation, and further cuts to personal taxation thereafter, once the situation stabilises.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Unpaid carers have seen their bills soar during this cost of living crisis. Many carers find it impossible to reduce their energy use, because the person for whom they are caring relies on electricity to power a wheelchair, a hoist or other vital equipment, yet last month the Government decided to exclude hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers of state pension age who are not in receipt of a means-tested benefit from the £650 cost of living support package by leaving carer's allowance out of the qualifying benefits. Will the Chancellor reconsider this unfair decision, which risks putting even more carers into financial hardship?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Lady is right to pay tribute, as we Conservative Members do, to those who care for others. She should be reassured that of the 1 million people in receipt of carer's allowance, 60% or more will be in a household that receives the £650 or, indeed, the disability payment. Carer's allowance itself is not a means-tested benefit.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Investment in clean, low-carbon energy infrastructure will be crucial to creating long-term, rewarding jobs in coastal constituencies such as Waveney. Has my right hon. Friend carefully considered the impact that changes to tax policy on electricity generators would have on investment in the UK?

**Lucy Frazer:** The Chancellor is looking very carefully at this industry, and he engages with industry stakeholders. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) will know that there are a number of ways in which the tax system supports low-carbon energy infrastructure, including through the super deduction, research and development tax relief, our consultation on broadening the emissions trading scheme, and the £1 billion investment in the carbon capture and storage fund.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The rural fuel rebate was introduced 10 years ago at 5p a litre and remains unchanged. With inflation and



the cost of living crisis, what thought has the Treasury given to increasing the rural fuel rebate to at least 10p a litre?

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman is probably talking about the rural fuel relief scheme, which is specifically targeted at a small number of locations where fuel prices are much higher than the national average, perhaps because they are a long distance from the refinery. In proposing an extension to the scheme, he should consider the potential unintended consequences. For example, people might drive out of their way to go to a petrol station in these rural areas.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Thanks to this Government, we have record low unemployment and more job vacancies than jobseekers, but almost 9 million people are economically inactive, including many who can work and many who have worked in the recent past. Does my right hon. Friend agree that getting more of this group back into work is key to filling the labour shortages that many Members have spoken about today, and to strengthening our economy for the longer term?

**Mr Simon Clarke:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he knows about this from his time as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. There is no doubt in my mind that the work we are doing, through the spending review, to provide more than £1.1 billion of measures to support disability employment and the effective management of health in the workplace will be important. The Government's Way to Work programme is yielding fantastic results, and is a sign of our intention in this space.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Some £11.8 billion was lost to fraud during the pandemic, according to a plethora of organisations such as the National Investigation Service and the Insolvency Service. I know the Chancellor is keeping tabs on public money, but will he publish a real-time dashboard on the recovery of public money?

**Mr Clarke:** We provide regular updates on the amount of money lost to fraud because all Members on both

sides of the House want action to pursue perpetrators. We have shown our intention in this space with a series of targeted interventions against fraud, the most recent of which is putting in place the new Public Sector Fraud Authority, which goes live in July.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The laws around IR35 are loosely defined, and it looks as though Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is using the tribunals and courts to pin down the case law on it. The effect is that I now know of a number of people whose legal bills are many times what their original tax bill might have been. This is impoverishing them, and in some cases bankrupting them, and obviously it is terrifying them. Will the Chancellor institute a review of this procedure? Although it is important that HMRC raises all the money necessary, it should not do so by destroying lives.

**Lucy Frazer:** As my right hon. Friend will know, IR35 was brought in to ensure that people doing the same job paid the same tax. I understand that he would like to discuss some issues with me, and I look forward to doing that this afternoon.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): TaxWatch UK has just published research showing that on a like-for-like basis, the tax gap—or the money lost every year through unpaid tax—has gone up for two years in a row. That is before we include in the figures the estimated amount lost to error and fraud through the HMRC-administered covid-19 support schemes. The tax gap resulting from fraud is now 45% and stands at £14.4 billion. When will the Government do something about that? They could perhaps create a fraud Minister with the remit of tackling this growing problem, which takes money from other parts of the economy.

**Lucy Frazer:** The Government are taking a number of steps to tackle fraud, including coronavirus fraud, which the hon. Member mentions. The taxpayer protection taskforce was set up to do specifically that. I will have a cross-governmental meeting this afternoon to understand how we can work across Departments to tackle fraud.

## Rape: Criminal Prosecutions

12.36 pm

**Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, if she will make a statement to the House on the incidence of rape cases not taken forward for criminal prosecution.

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins)**: I thank my right hon. Friend for posing this important question. Last year, in the end-to-end rape review, the Government committed to more than doubling the number of adult rape cases reaching court by the end of this Parliament. We are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge, but we are starting to see early signs of progress. More victims are reporting cases to the police. The police are referring more cases to the Crown Prosecution Service, and the CPS is charging more cases. Rape convictions are increasing: there has been a 67% increase since 2020. Timeliness is improving; the time between a charge being brought and cases being completed continues to fall—it is down five weeks since the peak in June last year.

That is encouraging, but it is just the start. That is why we have identified eight levers that are driving the change. First, we are increasing victim support. We have quadrupled the funding for victim support since Labour was in power—it will rise to £192 million by 2024-25—and we are increasing the number of independent sexual and domestic violence advisers to more than 1,000 by 2024-25.

Secondly, we are rolling out pre-recorded cross-examination for rape victims to all Crown courts nationally. That will help to prevent more victims from being retraumatised by the experience of giving evidence in a live trial. Thirdly, suspect-focused investigations—this is known as Operation Soteria—are being rolled out nationally. That will be completed in the first half of next year, and it will mean that the police focus on the suspect's behaviour, rather than on the victim's credibility. Fourthly, we have reformed and clarified disclosure rules, and are working with the police to make sure that victims' mobile phones are examined only where strictly necessary.

Fifthly, we are reducing the stress of intrusive requests for third-party information—for example, medical or social services records—and are working with the police and the CPS on ensuring that they are gathered only when relevant. Sixthly, we are boosting capacity and capability by increasing the ranks of our police and the number of specialist rape and sexual offences roles in the CPS. Seventhly, our efforts to expand Crown court capacity will continue with a £477 million investment over the next three years to reduce victims' waiting time for trials. Eighthly, our criminal justice system delivery data dashboard is increasing transparency and giving Government and local leaders the information that they need in order to do better for victims.

We are going even further than the commitments that we made in the rape review, because we have listened to victims and those who work with them. We recently announced a pilot of enhanced specialist sexual violence support in three Crown court centres. This Government are on the side of victims. We want no rape victim to feel as though they are the one on trial. We want every

rape victim to feel that they can come forward and seek support. We want to lock up the rapists who commit these abhorrent crimes. We want to protect the public. We will make our streets safer.

**Dame Maria Miller**: I thank my hon. Friend for her reply, for coming to the House to set out the additional measures that the Government are putting in place, and for allowing hon. Members to probe the effectiveness of those measures and what is being done to address the unacceptable decline in rape prosecutions in recent years.

The figures show that more than 67,000 rapes have been reported—the highest figure on record, but probably still only the tip of the iceberg. Despite the measures that my hon. Friend has announced, victims still face the trauma of knowing, when they report, that in the past, police, court staff and many others have not been properly trained to support victims—hence the high drop-out rate among victims taking cases forward. The measures that my hon. Friend has introduced will start to help, but rebuilding trust with victims cannot be done overnight. That is why it is so important that Ministers talk about the measures that they are introducing and come to this House to enable us to inquire about their effectiveness.

The Government's independent adviser on the rape review said recently that

“no one involved thinks where we are is good enough—because it is not even remotely good enough”.

She said that a year on, we are

“doing better, but still pushing further.”

By coming to the House today, the Minister is enabling hon. Members to hear more fully what she and other Ministers are doing to rebuild trust among victims and, importantly, to deliver the Government's ambition to double the number of rape cases that reach the courts by the end of this Parliament—an ambitious plan on which we need to hold the Government's feet to the fire.

**Victoria Atkins**: I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend for asking this urgent question. She is absolutely right to identify the need to rebuild trust in the system among victims. The golden thread that runs through all our work is non-defensive transparency. That is why, in our forensic examination of each stage of the criminal justice system, we are working with the police, the CPS, the judiciary, as constitutionally appropriate, and all the agencies, as well as the vital victim support charities and agencies. We are working together so that at each and every stage we can measure the impact of our efforts and try to communicate it to victims.

I understand that people want us to do more and go faster, and that they want to see improvements. However, I ask colleagues across the House to please bear in mind that what we say in this place has a resonance with victims. We must ensure that we are being accurate about progress when it is happening, so that we encourage victims to come forward, and so that they know that change is happening in the system.

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

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): This feels like groundhog day. Yet again, we are debating this Government's appalling record on tackling rape. As the latest scorecard shows, court delays are still at near-record highs, rape convictions are still at near-record lows, and

countless prosecutions are not being taken forward. The Government promised to restore 2016 charging levels, but they are still way off target. When does the Minister think that they will meet that pledge?

The Conservatives first commissioned the end-to-end review of record low rape prosecutions back in 2019. Two years after that, we got a report that recommended only piecemeal changes. One year later, little has changed and only a fraction of what was promised has been implemented. When does the Minister expect this to be delivered in full?

The typical delay in the completion of cases in court has reached three years. The number of rape trials postponed with a day's notice has risen fourfold, and 41% of rape survivors withdraw their cases before they even get to court. Labour pledged to roll out specialist rape courts across the country, but the Government have produced just three pilots. When will they extend this to every Crown court?

Section 28 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 has finally been rolled out, but to just 26 courts. Why has it taken so long, and why only 26 courts, when 77 Crown courts already have the equipment and facilities to support this? Furthermore, the joint inspectorates' report found that section 28 has not been used consistently by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service. Why is the necessary awareness and training not already in place?

Labour has a plan to tackle rape because we are serious about ending violence against women and girls. That is why we published, more than a year ago, a survivors' support package containing detailed measures to drive up prosecutions, secure more convictions, and put rapists where they belong: behind bars. This is a Government who are still tinkering around the edges, three years after recognising the shocking scale of their own failure. This is a Government with no serious plan to bring justice for victims of rape, and no serious plan to tackle violence against women and girls.

**Victoria Atkins:** One of the disappointments of the hon. Lady's responses, and indeed her advocacy last week, is that in the past we have been able to find cross-party consensus on matters that are of great interest to Members on both sides of the House, particularly in relation to the Bill that became the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. It is disappointing, to put it mildly, when Labour Members either insist on using figures that are not correct—not up to date, for instance—or seek to criticise the Government, perhaps not realising that in doing so they are also criticising the police, who are operationally independent—

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): Nonsense.

**Victoria Atkins:** They are criticising the Crown Prosecution Service, which is operationally independent, and the courts, which are constitutionally and operationally independent. All three of those agencies in the criminal justice system are working together to make the difference.

On the national roll-out of section 28, the hon. Lady is wrong. We now have 47 Crown courts operating section 28, and we are rolling out section 28 recordings across the country, nationally, far faster than we anticipated in the rape review. On enhanced specialist support in courts for victims of sexual violence, again, we have worked closely with the judiciary. We are piloting it, as

we are obliged to do, and I am sure that others in the House will understand why we have to tread carefully, but we hope and expect that the result will justify further rolling out. As for Operation Soteria and suspect investigations, we will have rolled that out in a further 14 police forces by September, and we will have rolled it out nationally, across all forces, in the first half of next year.

When the hon. Lady criticises this Government, she is, I am afraid, implicitly criticising those who are working on the frontline, making these changes happen.

**Alex Cunningham:** Absolute nonsense. Rubbish.

**Victoria Atkins:** Day in, day out, this Government are focused on trying to improve results for victims.

**Alex Cunningham:** Where are the results?

**Victoria Atkins:** A male Member of the House is shouting at me across the Dispatch Box while I am trying to explain. This is a deeply serious subject, and it must be—I would hope—a matter on which we can find measured and constructive ways of working together in order to improve justice for victims, because that, surely, is what we should all be focusing on.

**Jackie Doyle-Price** (Thurrock) (Con): Support for victims of rape is essential to ensuring that more of these crimes are brought to prosecution, but rape victims often say that, having gone through the trauma of the assault, they are then dehumanised by being treated, effectively, as a piece of evidence when they report it, and then have to prepare themselves to be traumatised yet again when they appear in court. What discussions is my hon. Friend having with the Department of Health and Social Care to make good the NHS's commitment to giving all victims of rape a lifetime care pathway, so that they can be confident enough to appear in court?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my hon. Friend for identifying not just the immediate impacts of sexually violent attacks but the lifelong impacts that they can have. The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England are involved in all the discussions that the Deputy Prime Minister and I have on this. NHS England is particularly keen to roll out support to victims longer term as well as short term, and also to roll out the further provision of more independent sexual violence advisers, which we have committed to do by 2024-25, bringing the total to more than 1,000 ISVAs nationally. They will be critical as part of the recovery process. Having met many of them recently, I understand how valuable they can be for victims both in their recovery and in giving them the support they need to take these important criminal cases forward.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will realise that the whole House welcomes any new measures, but could she say what is being done about some of the older cases that have been stopped in their tracks? Will she ensure that adequate resources are there for those legacy cases where justice has not been done?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the right hon. Lady for raising those historical cases. They are in the system and the injection of investment—£477 million in the overall Crown court system—will help with those particular



[Victoria Atkins]

cases. One of the reasons we selected the three pilots as we did—I should say that the Lord Chief Justice very much worked on this—is that we looked at the backlog of sexual violence cases within courts. For those courts with a lot of sexual violence cases—through no fault of anyone; we are not alleging that there is any fault within the system—and with these backlogs, we hope that this enhanced specialist support will give us some evidence as to whether these measures work, with a view to going further if need be.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): I have absolutely no doubt of my hon. Friend's commitment and dedication to this cause, and I am grateful to her for that. A lot of the figures she quotes are encouraging, but the fact is—she says it herself—that we have a long way to go. As she said, key to this is confidence in the system. Victims need confidence to come forward in the first place and then confidence to stay the course through the process, which can be fairly punitive, as she would be the first to admit. What more can she do to drive that confidence among victims?

**Victoria Atkins:** There are many ways in which we can support victims. One is through specialist support such as ISVAs and the victims charities that do such a vital job of working with women and victims of sexual violence. Another thing that we are in the process of setting up is a 24/7 support line for victims of sexual violence, and I am extremely grateful to Rape Crisis for its help on this. We are testing it carefully over the next couple of months to ensure that we understand when peaks and flows will necessitate proper staffing, but we are absolutely committed to providing those services so that victims can get the help they need when they need it.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): On the basis of what the Minister said earlier, will the number of rape prosecutions be doubled by the end of this Parliament?

**Victoria Atkins:** We have measured it very carefully and we have committed to doubling the number of cases received in the Crown court by the end of this Parliament. This is a work in progress.

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): When we talk about this distressing subject, there is the potential to go into abstraction and talk about statistics when, in fact, behind every one of those figures is a shattered life. What is being done to ensure that people dealing with victims of rape and sexual assault understand fully the trauma that the individual going through the process is experiencing, so that they can help them to stay in the process?

**Victoria Atkins:** The focus of Operation Soteria, the police technique of focusing on the suspect rather than on the witness's credibility, is critical to the increased understanding that my hon. Friend talks about. He is right to say that when we talk about percentage increases and so on, it can take away from the individual person or people who have been so hurt and traumatised. If I can just translate this into English, from October to December last year, 467 people were convicted of a rape

offence. That represents a 15% increase on the previous quarter. Those 467 people were convicted and sentenced by the courts, thereby protecting the public from their violent behaviour.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for bringing forward this vital urgent question today, and to thank the Minister for her comments from the Dispatch Box and her update on what is happening. But given everything that is facing the Secretary of State—record court backlogs, appallingly low conviction rates for rape and women losing faith in the criminal justice system—is it not a bit odd that his main priority seems to be going on the media to defend the indefensible Prime Minister and overhauling human rights laws? What does that say about the priorities of this Government?

**Victoria Atkins:** I worked with the hon. Lady on the Domestic Abuse Bill and I know how committed she is to ensuring that victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence secure the justice they deserve. The whole of this Government are committed to this piece of work, from the very top. From the Prime Minister down, this is an absolute priority for the Government. I welcome scrutiny—I welcome hon. Members asking me questions at the Dispatch Box—but I also ask please that we acknowledge it when there are early signs of progress, precisely because I want to encourage victims to come forward and get the support they need.

**Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Yesterday, I met the Chief Crown Prosecutor for Wales, who singled out my police force, Dyfed-Powys police, for its early engagement with the Crown Prosecution Service as it seeks to secure charging decisions. The CPS is urging police forces to be proactive and to seek advice as early as possible so as to improve the number of cases that can progress. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Dyfed-Powys police on this and urge other police forces across the country to adopt this practice?

**Victoria Atkins:** Very much so. My hon. Friend has enjoyed the success of ensuring that cyber-flashing will become a criminal offence when the Online Safety Bill is passed. In relation to her police force, this is precisely why we are publishing local data dashboards. I genuinely want Members across the House to scrutinise what is happening in their local area so that they can help us to hold the police, the CPS and others to account for decisions such as taking a police referral to the CPS. We will be trying to disaggregate that data even further, so that where there is a request for advice as opposed to a charge, for example, we are making that clear. This is a whole-system effort to improve at every single stage of the criminal justice system, and I would like to thank the police, the CPS and the courts for all their efforts.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am pleased to see both the Home Office and the Department of Justice represented on the Treasury Bench for this urgent question. The Home Affairs Committee produced a report in April on the investigation and prosecution of rape, with several recommendations that I hope the Government will find helpful. Unfortunately we are outside the eight-week deadline for that report to be responded to by the Government, so could I raise



two of the recommendations that I think will help the Government in their aim to sort this out? The first is to have specialist rape investigation teams in all police forces. The second is for the Government to ensure the publication of all specialist trained officers so that we know that there are sufficient officers in our police forces to do this important work.

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee most sincerely for her Committee's report. We will be responding, of course. I hope that she will bear with us. I am assured by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is sitting just behind me, that we want to ensure that our response is as thorough and positive as possible, so please watch this space. In terms of specialist police officers, I completely understand why this is a suggestion that people raise. My only caveat is that I want every single police officer in every single force to be trauma-informed and aware of how to investigate these cases, for the simple reason that when an officer first comes to the scene of a crime—on a busy Saturday night, let's say—I want that officer to be an expert in how to treat victims in the aftermath of an attack. I want to be more ambitious than simply having a specialist in the force; I want every single officer to be aware of this, which is what we are trying to achieve through the roll-out of Op Soteria.

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): Our tackling violence against women and girls strategy has set out our objective to make the streets safer for women and girls, but the need for confidence in the justice system has been mentioned time and again. Can my hon. Friend make it clear that this is a priority for the Government and also tell us how we can use technology to deliver the justice that is needed?

**Victoria Atkins:** I reiterate that this is a priority for this Government, from the Prime Minister downwards. It is also a priority for colleagues on the Back Benches from across the House, who have raised it. I am very grateful to Conservative colleagues who have raised issues such as cyber-flashing and the use of intimate imagery on the internet, which we will no doubt be discussing as the Online Safety Bill makes its way through this place. There is huge support on the Back Benches for ensuring that victims of domestic abuse get the justice and support they need, and I am extremely grateful to every Member of this House who can join us in our efforts to improve justice for victims of these horrendous crimes.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have had too many cases where survivors of rape have not reached the evidence thresholds demanded by the CPS and, as a result, their cases have collapsed or not even been able to be taken forward. That clearly has an impact on confidence in the system, particularly on the issue of consent and with one word being played off against another even if there is forensic evidence. What measures is the Minister taking to improve a victim's opportunity to take their case forward in that context?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady hits on a sensitive point, in that the "Code for Crown Prosecutors" sets out the tests that prosecutors must apply, not simply in

cases of sexual violence but across all criminal cases, and the threshold of 51% or thereabouts for the evidential stage. This means that, as we know from speaking to victims, there are occasions when the CPS does not believe that test has been met, which is why the roll-out of Operation Soteria, both across police forces and across CPS regions, is so important. In this effort for non-defensive transparency, the CPS is looking at its own actions and ensuring that the right standards are being met, for example in the application of the test and in disclosure. All of this is being lined up to ensure that the law is applied properly and appropriately. We have also reformed disclosure guidelines recently, in order to help the police and the CPS make important decisions about whether material needs to be gathered at all and, if it does, whether it meets the very specific circumstances in which it falls to be disclosed.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): I welcome the increase in the conviction rates. Having worked closely with my hon. Friend, I have witnessed her determination to address the underlying issues and find solutions for victims of serious sexual offending throughout the country. The issue we have missed out of this debate is that the vast majority of cases are not even referred to the CPS by the police. My concern is that unless there is a slam dunk, an overwhelming case, victims are being penalised, so that those who have addiction or mental health problems are being viewed as unreliable witnesses by the police and their cases are not even being referred. How does she feel about that? What steps are being taken to address the issue?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my hon. Friend, who brings his professional expertise into this Chamber. He is right to say that the focus on a victim's credibility has in the past meant that too many cases are dropped when they should not be. We have therefore had the roll-out of this suspect-focused investigation technique, Operation Soteria, across the first five forces, and that learning is being shared nationally ahead of the national roll-out next year. This is what will make the real difference, both to the police and to the CPS.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that Warwickshire has the lowest conviction rate in the country and was one of the first forces to close its rape and serious sexual offences unit, doing so back in 2014. I have a case where an individual has been charged with two counts of rape. Originally, the plea hearing was back in December 2021. The court date was set for this August, but that has now been put back to May 2023, causing great distress to the victims, as the Minister can imagine. Beyond the dashboard she mentions, what is she doing specifically to address the issues in Warwickshire?

**Victoria Atkins:** I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot comment on an individual case. On local policing, the local CPS and the application of all the measures we have talked about in this urgent question so far, the point of the dashboards is precisely to give him, me and others that data, which otherwise has not been collated, so that we can start asking those questions about individual areas. For example, we know that West Yorkshire is doing better than the national average on the police referring cases to the CPS. My question is: why can we not replicate that nationally?

[Victoria Atkins]

We are having those sorts of conversations, with non-defensive transparency, which, I hope, will really begin to see results for victims.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for her emphasis on local facts. This morning, I was talking to Suzanne Llewellyn, the chief Crown prosecutor for Wessex, who told me that currently 12 people are being prosecuted for rape in Dorset, which is twice as many as in the same period of 2016, and that in three of the past four quarters the rape conviction rate in Dorset has been 100%, which obviously compares very favourably with the national average of 68%. So there is good news at the local level, and we need to do more to bring that to the public's attention.

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that. I genuinely encourage every Member to look at the figures and have those conversations with their local police and CPS to understand what is happening in their local areas. I welcome this scrutiny; it is absolutely the right way to drive change. I thank him for his particular focus on his local area.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Secretary of State for her answers and her clear intention to address the rape criminal prosecution backlog—that is well done. What additional support can be offered to victims and their families, who can be intimidated by the perpetrator and their family connections? Does she agree that a case will often rely on a victim's ability to testify well, and that that pressure can deliver opposite results and victims who feel that they are unable to cope or to challenge?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for my temporary promotion.

The best way this can be dealt with is through the section 28 roll-out. For those who are unfamiliar with it, let me say that this is the provision whereby victims of serious sexual violence and modern slavery offences can pre-record their evidence—for examination in chief, cross-examination and re-examination—perhaps months ahead of when the case will be tried in the Crown court in front of a jury. That means, first, that the victim is not giving evidence in a live trial, which can bring its own pressures, and also that they give their evidence much sooner in the process, thus helping with our victim attrition rates. We are examining this very carefully and rolling it out as quickly as we can, but I very much hope that by the end of this Parliament we will really begin to see some dividends from it.

## Women's Rights to Reproductive Healthcare: United States

1.7 pm

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make representations to the Government of the United States of America about ensuring that women's rights to access reproductive healthcare are protected as part of her Department's work on promoting human rights internationally.

**The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling):** Access to abortion services in the United States is a matter for the US Supreme Court and for authorities in individual states. The US Supreme Court opinion of 24 June in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation* does not make abortion illegal across America. Rather, it removes federal protection for abortions, hence allowing individual states to determine their own laws. Thirteen states have so-called "trigger laws" that will automatically outlaw abortion, seven of which are already active. We understand that in total 26 states are likely to ban or restrict abortion, or have bans that predate *Roe* still technically on the books. As the Prime Minister has said, this is not our court, it is another jurisdiction, but this is a big step backwards—I share his view. The UK's position is that women and girls in the UK should have the right to access essential health services, including those relating to sexual and reproductive health, which includes safe abortion care. More broadly, the UK's approach is to support sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion for women and girls around the world.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I thank the Minister for her reply. It is because of our special relationship with America and the domestic and international importance of the Supreme Court decision that I made the application for an urgent question. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing it.

The United States of America leads the world in promoting human rights. Hillary Clinton famously said:

"Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights."

America's leadership around the world means that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* sends a stark message that women's reproductive rights, which are fundamental to their physical, psychological and social wellbeing, are not worth protecting. In effect, the state has taken control of women's bodies and denied them bodily autonomy. As we all know, restricting access to abortion does not remove the need to end a pregnancy. One in four women in the United States will need an abortion in their lifetime. The decision will result in more dangerous abortions, a rise in maternal deaths and the criminalisation of women and clinicians. Those from marginalised communities will be most affected, as many will not be able to travel to states that will continue to provide that essential reproductive healthcare.

It is also clear that there is growing concern that the decision may lead to the overturning of rights in other areas, including access to contraception and same-sex relationships. Does the Minister believe that the decision is consistent with the declaration on the elimination of

violence against women, of which the US is a signatory? Can the Minister confirm that the Government will continue to support and fund reproductive healthcare programmes, including access to terminations, around the world in light of the decision? With far-right American groups already organising on rolling back the Abortion Act 1967 in this country, the decision will give their work renewed impetus. Will the Government look again at protecting women attending abortion clinics through the introduction of buffer zones, as proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq)? Finally, will the Government confirm their commitment to women's rights to access reproductive healthcare, including abortion? If the Government plan to change human rights legislation in the UK, will they completely safeguard the rights of women to bodily autonomy?

**Amanda Milling:** I reiterate the point that I made in my reply: the decision was made not by our court but by one in another jurisdiction. As the Prime Minister said at the weekend—and I share his view—it is a big step backwards. The UK is proud to defend and promote universal and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion, which are fundamental to unlock the potential agency and freedom of women and girls. We will continue to press for strong and supportive language in the UN and other international forums.

**Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** Experts have denounced the US Supreme Court's decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade* as a dangerous roll-back of human rights and a monumental setback for the rule of law and gender equality. As we are co-signatories to the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, which includes sexual and reproductive health, can my right hon. Friend outline what she plans to do to hold the US Government to account at the UN, and can she confirm that the UK Government would view any change as a breach of its inalienable international obligations?

**Amanda Milling:** The judgment will be distressing for women in the US. As the Prime Minister set out, and as I have said, we also see this as a big step backwards. We are proud to promote and defend universal comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, and we will continue to push for supportive language in international forums.

**Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab):** I am sure the whole House is grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for asking the urgent question and to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the application.

The great story of the 20th century is how different groups, who were historically denied their rights, won those rights for the first time through protest, organisation and democracy. Those groups included working people, and our party is partly a consequence of that; ethnic minorities, which brings me to the Chamber today; LGBTQ people, in the week in which we celebrate Pride; and women. Heroic leaders of the feminist movement, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, secured women's right to vote after two major concessions, in 1918 and 1928. For decades, women could choose which political party to support, but did not have the freedom to choose what to

do with their own bodies. It was a story of women criminalised, back alleys and a black market, illegal abortions, dirty implements, disease, prison and death. It is a plight that affected women across the globe, certainly in our own country, and it affected poor women particularly, including my late mother.

It was not until 1967 that women in Britain won the right to a safe and legal abortion. In 1973, the United States followed. It is an abomination that, almost 50 years later, 36 million women in 26 American states were stripped of their right when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. In America, an organised hard-right and global political movement is seeking to overturn rights hard won in the 20th century. That is happening in our country too. In 2019, 99 Westminster MPs voted to keep abortion illegal in Northern Ireland, and the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) says he is "completely opposed" to abortion.

Will the Minister confirm that the UK will make representations at the United Nations? The UK is a signatory to the universal declaration on human rights, so why has the Foreign Secretary said nothing about this issue? Will the Minister confirm that as the United States Agency for International Development surely departs—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Lammy** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I allowed the UQ, because I thought it was important, but the right hon. Member should not take advantage of the rules. Two minutes means two minutes. I keep telling both sides, but Front Benchers get carried away. I have all these Back Benchers, who matter to me, that I need to get in. I remind the shadow Secretary of State that I expect him to stick to two minutes, and just ignoring me does not help.

**Amanda Milling:** The Prime Minister was clear about his view at the weekend, including in an interview on CNN. It is clear where we stand on this. In terms of Northern Ireland legislation, the issue is a matter of conscience, and colleagues have an opportunity to vote based on that. The Prime Minister's view is clear, and it is one that I share.

**Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con):** It is a failure of politics in the United States that, after all these years, it still relied on *Roe v. Wade* to guarantee abortion rights. The failure is to continue to allow the debate to be seen as an ideological pro-choice or pro-life position. We are not in a strong position to lecture the United States on that point, because we have done much the same ourselves. Is it not time that we led by example and reviewed our abortion laws, which are now more than 50 years old, and based them on a safe framework for terminating pregnancy in the interests of women, rather than their being characterised by absurd moral extremes?

**Amanda Milling:** In terms of our domestic policy on abortion, legislation in this House is a matter of conscience. Our policy is to ensure that women can access health services in a safe and secure way. That remains a key priority. We will work closely with abortion providers and other stakeholders on the provision of those services.

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



**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I despair at the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, because the undermining of women's reproductive rights anywhere is a threat to women everywhere. The truth is that we cannot ban abortions—only safe abortions. I welcome the abortion care summit held by the First Minister earlier this week, and I pay tribute to Back Off Scotland, to Green MSP Gillian Mackay and to COSLA for their work in securing buffer zones to protect everyone accessing healthcare and staff from the hostile anti-abortion activists who have been causing such distress outside healthcare facilities, such as the Sandyford and the Royal Infirmary in my constituency.

What is the Minister specifically doing to prevent the creeping influence on these islands of US-based extremist groups, such as the Alliance Defending Freedom, which has been described by the Southern Policy Law Centre as a hate group, but which was shockingly given a platform by BBC Scotland on several occasions this week?

**Amanda Milling:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As we have said, it is important that legislation is in place enabling women to have an abortion. Women should have control over their own bodies. That is why we have the legislation we have in this country.

**Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): I recognise the degree of distress and concern felt by many Members in the House over the Supreme Court's decision. The fact is, though, that I probably disagree with most Members who have spoken so far on this matter. They think that women have an absolute right to bodily autonomy in this matter. However, I think that, in the case of abortion, that right is qualified by the fact that another body is involved. *[Interruption.]* We can disagree on that question. *[Interruption.]* We can disagree on that question, but I offer to Members who are trying to talk me down that this is a proper topic for political debate. My point to the Minister on the Front Bench is that I do not understand why we are lecturing the United States on a judgment to return the power of decision over this political question to the states—to democratic decision-makers—rather than leaving it in the hands of the courts.

**Amanda Milling:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I say, this is a matter for the US. It is not within our jurisdiction, but the point is that we can rightly have a debate in this House and vote according to our own conscience.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) asks why we are discussing this decision, as it is a political debate. Fundamentally, for many of us, this is a human rights issue. *Roe v. Wade* gave American women a constitutional right to have an abortion. Currently, here in the UK, only women in Northern Ireland have their constitutional right to an abortion protected as a human right. But we can change that, and that is what this place and this urgent question can do today. I ask the Minister a direct and simple question. If an amendment is tabled to the forthcoming Bill of Rights to protect a woman's right to choose for every single woman in the United Kingdom—by those of us who recognise that it will be a conscience issue, and therefore a free vote—will she join me in voting for it?

**Amanda Milling:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Actually, I wish to pay tribute to her for everything that she does to promote women's rights, and for the work that she has done in relation to abortion services and the right to have an abortion. I will not pre-empt what will be in future legislation, but I will say that, as she well knows and as we have discussed, these are matters for our conscience.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): For me, the former First Lady, Michelle Obama summed this up in her open letter when she said that, when we do not understand our history, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes. As ever, it will be the young, the poor and the vulnerable who will be the biggest victims of this terrible, terrible decision. Our Prime Minister has said that it is a backward step, but to me it is a case of actions speaking louder than words. Surely there is more that we can do to use our so-called special relationship with the United States to push back against this decision, which is against reproductive rights, against women's rights and against human rights.

**Amanda Milling:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. As I have said on numerous occasions and, indeed, as the Prime Minister has said, and as she rightly pointed out, this is a backward step. Over the weekend, the Prime Minister also said that it was a matter for the US courts and for individual states. None the less, at the same time, our personal views on this matter will have been heard loudly and clearly.

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): I politely say to my right hon. Friend that this decision will not stop abortions. All it will do is make it very unsafe for women to go through that process, and we will end up with more deaths. Will she please tell the House what conversations she has had with international colleagues on this matter and on women's rights to reproductive healthcare in general?

**Amanda Milling:** My hon. Friend raises an important point around safety and the importance of safe abortions. I can reassure her that we push for strong supportive language in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights at the UN and in other international forums.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I know the Minister will be aware that abortion is not and has not ever been deemed a human right in any binding international law. In fact, almost the opposite is the case. Some internationally binding treaties reference a right to life, such as article 6 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which states:

"Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law."

Part 5 of the same article specifically excludes pregnant women from the death penalty. Does the Minister not agree that giving legal protection to the unborn is, arguably, a clear recognition of the unborn life? America has done just that, and I welcome the bold and courageous decision.

**Amanda Milling:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, but I am afraid that I do not agree with the decision that the US courts have made, and I share the Prime Minister's view that it is a step backwards.



However, importantly, in this place, we have a debate on these matters and we are able to vote according to our conscience.

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): We are all agreed, as we have just heard, that actions speak louder than words. Can the Minister explain how Britain can continue to stand up practically for the rights of women and girls globally in light of the £1.9 billion cut to women's aid programmes, or will she commit to reversing that cut today?

**Amanda Milling:** We have had many debates about our official development assistance spend. I can reassure the hon. Lady that, as she will be aware, the issue of women and girls is a key priority for the Foreign Secretary, as set out in the international development strategy last month, and sexual and reproductive health and rights are a key priority within that.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): The decision over *Roe v. Wade* is deeply distressing to women in America and throughout the world. The health consequences are absolutely appalling. It is an attack on human rights and an attack on women's reproductive rights. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to speak with our friends in America to put forward our very strong views as a Government that this decision is not acceptable, and what more can we do to support women's rights across the world?

**Amanda Milling:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Prime Minister was pretty clear over the weekend about our views on the matter. He recognises that this is a matter for the US courts, which is not our jurisdiction, but is very clear about his view, which I share, that the move is a step backwards. I reassure the House that the UK has a long-standing commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights across the globe. We also have a proud record in terms of defending and promoting universal and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): The House will know that 50 new clinics have been targeted by protesters in England and Wales since 2018. Will the Minister commit to speaking to her counterparts in the Home Office to legislate for the protection of those visiting an abortion clinic?

**Amanda Milling:** As I said earlier, here in the UK we as women have the choice over our own bodies, should we want or need to have an abortion—often in very difficult circumstances. It is important that women are able to access those clinics.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In the past seven years that I have been in Parliament, I have joined with many across the House to ensure that a woman's right to choose is not just protected but stands alone as a right rather than a defence to a criminal conviction. I agree with the Minister that this House stopped scrutinising the United States of America back in 1776, and to those who are trying to give oxygen to this debate, I would say that my daughters have asked me whether it could happen in this Parliament; whether there is a danger that we will reopen the debate. That gives the message that somehow we are going down the same path as the United States. We are not going to do

that. Can the Minister remind this House that we have had majorities in the hundreds not only to protect a woman's right to choose but to liberalise it further, and that we will not give up on that matter?

**Amanda Milling:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. We have had many debates and many votes in this House on this matter. This is about a woman's right to choose, and that is something that this House has supported on numerous occasions with large majorities, as he says. This place has been clear that women should have the right to choose in this country.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Many women on the Labour Benches have worked with our sister parties across the world for many years to advance women's reproductive rights, because they are fundamental to our economic rights. May I press the Minister on her response to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield)? The £1.9 billion-worth of cuts do indicate the Government's approach to those rights and to women's programmes, so will the Minister seriously urge her colleagues to look again at those cuts? This is a globally financed attack on women's rights, and we need to respond in kind.

**Amanda Milling:** We have had many debates in this House about ODA. It was the impact of the pandemic that forced us to make tough but necessary decisions. I remind the hon. Lady and the House that in the international development strategy, women and girls are a key priority for the Foreign Secretary and sexual and reproductive health and rights are an important area.

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): The decision by the Supreme Court is utterly woeful. It is a disgracefully retrograde ruling. Unfortunately, we do live in a world where we can no longer legislate for other parts of the world—we have not done that for several hundred years—but we can use our influence. As my right hon. Friend the Minister pointed out, the position in this country is that women and girls should have full access to sexual and reproductive health. What are we going to do to ensure that the rest of the world knows that our position is the one that should be available to the majority of women and that the one taken by the United States is an outlier of the worst kind?

**Amanda Milling:** As my hon. Friend rightly says, we do not have the ability to legislate for other countries or jurisdictions, but I can reassure the House that this is an incredibly important matter and SRHR is something that we continue to promote and defend, particularly at the United Nations and in other international forums.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Dirprwy Lefarydd. Yesterday, the UK Government confirmed that they would undermine both devolution and Welsh workers' rights by scrapping the Trade Union (Wales) Act 2017. We in Wales have taken steps to protect women's access to healthcare by making permanent the covid measures that allowed women to take early medical abortion tablets at home. In England, women's access to such services has been reduced by allowing such provisions to expire. Will the Minister guarantee that this Government will never interfere with women's reproductive rights in Wales?

**Amanda Milling:** I think the right hon. Lady will find that Parliament voted in favour of the amendment to the Health and Care Bill to make the temporary approval of home use of those pills for early medical abortions permanent across England and Wales.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for allowing this urgent debate and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for securing it. I want to follow up on the question about buffer zones, which the Minister failed to answer; given that they are about to be introduced in Scotland, could she say what the Government's position is on that?

**Amanda Milling:** This is a matter for the Home Office but, as I understand it, they keep it under review.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Like many, I feel personally targeted by this attack on women's bodily autonomy and deeply distressed by the impact it will have on women's health in the United States. It is in part the consequence of a right-wing Government politicising women's bodies in the pursuit of so-called culture wars, and I hope the Minister will take note. The ruling also means that whether a woman is pregnant becomes a matter of criminal liability. Therefore, insight into that, through health data, location data, what a woman buys, where she shops and who she visits, may become evidence for the prosecution. Yet that data is freely trafficked by multinational companies. Will the Minister set out how she will address that and the conversations she will have with her American counterparts to prevent that from happening? She looks confused, but this is a real issue for women, who will now be criminalised if they are pregnant and miscarry.

**Amanda Milling:** Let me be clear: I understand the distress about this decision, but it is a matter for the US courts and individual US states. We have no jurisdiction over them. However, we see this as a backwards step and both the Prime Minister and I have been clear about that.

**Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): My absolute solidarity is with women across America as their rights are stripped from them, but this is a wake-up call to women across the world that our rights are under attack—including the rights of victims of rape and sexual assault. As many more millions of women feel oppressed and marginalised, can the Minister confirm that she will prevent moves to replicate that decision here and instead seek to protect and enhance access to abortions across the UK and elsewhere, so that all women can make their own free choice?

**Amanda Milling:** As I have set out, here in the UK we are able to make choices around our own bodies, but let me be clear: the UK is proud to defend and promote universal and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights. We promote that and push for strong language at the UN and in other international forums. I am proud of our record in this area.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that our special relationship with the United States of America does not give us special interference rights to tell American people when they can or cannot terminate life in the womb of American women? Does

she agree that the extreme abortion laws in the United States of America have seen the end of 62 million lives, and that they are now subject to state democratic controls and not to one single group of judges?

**Amanda Milling:** The key point is that this is a matter for the US court and for individual US states. I have been clear on my own position in seeing this as a backward move, but it is a matter for the US.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I hear the comments that it is not for us to interfere in US affairs, but thank God the US interfered in our situation with Ireland. This decision is relevant because it sends an important message to women and girls across the world. Women's rights and human rights are under attack. I understand the Minister saying that she thinks it is a backward step, but will she be absolutely clear? Does she condemn the decision?

**Amanda Milling:** As I have said on several occasions—I am not sure how many different ways I can make the point—this is not a matter for us and we have no jurisdiction. However, I have been clear that it is not a decision that I agree with. I see it as a backward step. The Prime Minister was clear on that at the weekend as well.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I agree with the Minister that this is a backward—a retrograde—step. Perhaps it is an opportunity for us to take a forward step and show leadership by looking at our own laws. At the moment, abortion is legislated for under a law that was brought in 50 years before women even had the vote—the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. What conversations is she having with her colleagues in Government about decriminalising abortions in this country?

**Amanda Milling:** We have a proud record in this country of being able to stand up for women's rights and of having debates on all matters relating to abortion. As we have heard, we have debated, and voted, on a number of occasions in relation to abortion legislation in this country.

**Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for co-ordinating this urgent question and echo the solidarity with women in the US, particularly those with trigger laws who are worried about the consequences for their own lives and where the ideology of the Supreme Court goes next. It is not often that I commend this Government, but I want to acknowledge the positive action to address the lack of access to abortion services in Northern Ireland after MLAs—I was one of them—failed to address this issue in meeting the needs of women and failed to address consistent legal rulings. Will the Minister commit the Government to continuing to end the postcode lottery that exists for services in Northern Ireland?

**Amanda Milling:** As the hon. Lady will be aware, in July last year the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland directed Northern Ireland's Department of Health to ensure the full provision of abortion services by no later than March this year.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for securing this UQ and the Speaker for granting it. Constituents have written to me to deplore the treatment of women in the United States who need an abortion and with concerns about the fact that laws banning abortion also impact the safe obstetric and gynaecological care needed by pregnant women with some complications. In the UK, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists guidelines on miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy are based only on medical need. That will not be the case in the US states that ban abortions. My constituents ask that FCDO travel advice be updated to include advice regarding abortion and women's health for pregnant women from the UK who might be affected if they travel to the States when their healthcare might now be compromised by the change in law on abortion.

**Amanda Milling:** Our consular team is looking at this matter in terms of providing updated advice.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The striking down of *Roe v. Wade* is a tragedy with a global impact for women and girls seeking abortions and reproductive healthcare. It cannot be sane or sensible that in the US women's reproductive organs are more heavily governed than guns. The creep of the religious right, its funding and its misinformation is seeping into other areas across the world in terms of equalities, same-sex relationships and trans healthcare. Instead of a Prime Minister who panders to their rhetoric, will the Minister and her Government do as our First Minister has done and be outspoken by joining groups such as Back Off Scotland to challenge this right-wing creep and put in buffer zones?

**Amanda Milling:** As I mentioned in a previous answer, this is a matter for the Home Office and it keeps it under review.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am heartbroken and furious at the backward decision in overturning *Roe v. Wade* in the US. As the Minister says, it is a decision for the United States of America, but it is an attack on women's rights, an attack on human rights, and an attack on all our rights. I stand in solidarity with the women and girls in the US, in Northern Ireland and across the globe who are fighting for access to reproductive and sexual healthcare. With that in mind, what impact assessment has she made of what global funding streams will be impacted as regards accessing healthcare for women all over the world?

**Amanda Milling:** There are a couple of points in the international development strategy that specifically focus on women and girls—that is one of the four key priorities—but also on global health, and SRHR is a key part of that.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I would defend the rights of the woman but especially the rights of the unborn child. Some in this House tend to disregard that. Will the Minister outline whether she has any discussions regarding the provision of healthcare in terms of funded IVF, funded endometriosis treatment and funded access to birth control, or does she consider these to be outside the scope of the FCDO Minister dealing with one of our closest allies? Will she join me in condemning the acts of violence and death threats that have been made in the United States of America?

**Amanda Milling:** The FCDO's remit in this regard is international, and we have a very proud record in terms of universal and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we pay a lot of attention to this and raise it in international forums.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Rape victims, women facing a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy and children who are victims of sexual abuse are all among the women who will now be forced to carry a child to full term. This Government are never slow to condemn religious fundamentalism when it is among those countries that we consider to be hostile to us. Would it not be all the more powerful if the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and indeed the Minister at the Dispatch Box were to condemn in far stronger language to one of our allies the rise in religious fundamentalism and the impact it will have on people many, many miles away who desperately want to know that they have someone on their side?

**Amanda Milling:** I have been pretty clear on my own personal opinion on this court judgment, but it is a court judgment in the US, which is not within our jurisdiction. The Prime Minister was very clear at the weekend on his view in seeing it as a backward step. One of the interviews that he gave was on CNN, so I think he has been pretty clear on our views.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): One consequence of the US Supreme Court decision is that more women will have to travel from one state to another to access an abortion. Here in the UK, due to the absence of fully commissioned services in Northern Ireland, we still have women having to travel from Northern Ireland to England and Wales to access their reproductive rights. This has a particularly serious effect on people who are in poverty or in coercive relationships. In that respect, will the Minister work with the Northern Ireland Secretary to ensure that these services are properly commissioned by no later than the end of July?

**Amanda Milling:** As I said in answer to an earlier question, in July last year the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland directed the Health Department in Northern Ireland to ensure full provision of abortion services there.



## **Elected Representatives (Prohibition of Deception)**

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

1.49 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create offences in relation to the publication of false or misleading statements by elected representatives; and for connected purposes.

This Bill represents an invitation to every parliamentarian to work together in the name of the betterment of democracy. When I ran for Parliament in 2015, I was under no illusions. I knew there would be challenges to my party, opposition to our views and hostility to our success. I knew that I would have to walk the line between exciting, rambunctious, attention-seeking rhetoric, and telling the truth. I would have to not let the story get in the way of the facts and to know the difference between facts and opinions, but at no point did I expect that I would one day be standing here before Parliament to defend a principle that I believe should be beyond question—that politicians should strive to be honest.

No doubt some Members will scoff or scorn in response to my saying that, and they will plead ignorance or innocence, and they will avert or divert, but they cannot outrun reality. Outside this Chamber, people are fast becoming disillusioned by the lies that have been told by some of those who sometimes sit within it. They are a public who stepped up to the challenge of defeating covid, while some of their leaders plumbed new depths of deception; a public who have grown weary of empty promises and false dawns; and a public who expect change. According to a survey by the think-tank Compassion in Politics, the No. 1 value that voters believe is absent in our politics is honesty.

Our choice now is either to fiddle while faith in democracy crumbles, or to act in the name of those we are meant to serve. Why do we need legislation? Why are our 19th century codes of gentlemanly honour not sufficient? Because we are no longer in the world of chivalry and words as bonds, if we ever were, and because doing so would finally bring our legislature into line with other 21st century standards.

No business can sell products or services through deception. There are two self-regulatory codes and in many cases three separate laws to guard against that. The Advertising Standards Authority and Ofcom exist to protect us. Doctors may not lie to their patients. Teachers may not lie to their students. Like them, politicians engage in the art of education and persuasion. Like them, we engage here in matters that impact on health, wellbeing, safety and, more than that, national security. Think of the responsibilities that we bear on our shoulders. We always have a vision, strategy, policy or idea to sell, but unlike others, we face no sanctions for doing so dishonestly. Previous Parliaments have recognised that truth and honesty matter and have legislated to ensure that in sectors beyond our own, such values are enshrined and codified. Now, our own profession must follow suit.

In terms of election communications, that point was recognised by the Electoral Commission in its review of the misinformation bandied around during the 2019 general election. In the 2020 report “Digital Technology

and the Resurrection of Trust”, the Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies, chaired by Lord Puttnam, recognised the risk posed by misleading electoral advertising. The Government responded by throwing up a cordon of shields emblazoned “freedom of speech”. I refer the Government to the New Zealand model. The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 succeeded in incorporating freedom of speech, while latterly legislating against the freedom to lie. Why should parliamentarians act as if they are above these basic norms? How can we as elected representatives expect the public to follow, when our own standards lag so far behind?

We are elected to represent our constituents’ voices in this place. We should therefore be focusing on finding solutions to the cost of living crisis that is plunging thousands of people into historic levels of poverty. Thanks to this Government, we are held back by another crisis—a cost of lying crisis that undermines every aspect of Westminster political credibility. While I am here today to uphold the interests of the public, I am also here to uphold the good name of this Parliament, its Members—ourselves—and our staff, and the staff of Parliament, too. The lies of a few have tarred the reputations of us all. The legislation that our Parliaments enact, and the policies that we seek to carry out, are all the weaker for a lack of credibility. When people do not believe their leaders, those leaders’ words will carry less weight than a feather in an emergency. That matters, and therefore we must all act. If we do that, we will build a better democracy, and a better politics.

Honesty is not only the best policy, but is essential to the creation of policy. It is an honour to attend Parliament and engage in discussions and decisions that affect all our countries, to decide on policies that avert the climate breakdown and to legislate against hunger, homelessness and want, but we cannot do that from a position of bad faith, distrust or uncertainty. We cannot make good policies off the back of lies and misinformation, and we cannot expect the public to mobilise in support of the kind of transformative change needed to build a sustainable and just future if they cannot trust those who would lead them to do so.

And so to my Bill—my invitation. It is, as all good things are, extremely simple. I propose that we seek to put our house in order and that we borrow from the good practice that already exists. The Bill would make it an offence for an elected representative to wilfully and, when provided with evidence of their action, repeatedly lie to the public. After all, we are all mortal and we make mistakes, but at present politicians are effectively rewarded when the lies that they peddle garner political rewards. There is presently scant sanction for mistruths and the admittance of errors is seen as a weakness. We must create a culture here where we are rewarded for correcting our mistakes and chastised when we seek to profit from a lie. Arbitration should be carried out under the same procedures already used to determine whether a business or corporation has intentionally mis-sold or misled. Repeated offences should be sanctioned with a fine or ultimately with disbarment from public office temporarily.

For those who unwittingly repeat or invoke a falsehood, ample opportunity should be given to publicly correct the record and, in doing so, to reinforce the importance of honesty, humility and responsibility. False accusations

would themselves be sanctioned in this Bill to prevent its misuse for political or other reasons. It also proposes effective checks and balances in its proposal to employ the judiciary as guardians of the good name of politics. There would be a rational defence when acting in the interests of national security.

This is a necessary Bill whose time has come, because its precedents in House procedure alone are no longer adequate. It is not only necessary, but it has public approval. A survey by Compassion in Politics found cross-party support for the Bill, with 71% of Conservative voters and 79% of Labour supporters backing the proposal. An ITV Wales poll this week asked whether it was ever acceptable for a politician to lie, and 85% responded saying no. At a time when unity and agreement are hard to come by, we ought to grasp this opportunity to change politics in a way that has consent and the approval of the majority.

In closing, I remind my friends what is at stake. No institution is indelible and no power irrevocable. Systems and structures that were once seen as being immortal have perished and been forgotten. I refuse to be passive when our parliamentary democracy is eroded and sullied. I choose instead to be an active and proud defender of the system, and the values it is based upon: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Those are not empty words—they are there for a reason. I know that in this Chamber, there are Members who like me are worried about the state of our politics. Many have spoken out, and others may well have been silent until now, but it does not matter—what matters is what we do next.

In closing, I will quote Jonathan Swift, who I believe was protecting the Tory party at the time:

“Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it”.

Surely now, several hundred years later, it is our job to give wings and power to truth, so that lies are overtaken and brought down before they can do their ugly work. Please support this Bill, and together let us work to defend democracy, serve the public and protect the basic standards by which we should all live.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Liz Saville Roberts, Richard Thomson, Caroline Lucas, Claire Hanna, Wendy Chamberlain, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Stephen Farry, Hywel Williams and Ben Lake present the Bill.

Liz Saville Roberts accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 120).*

## Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

### Community Payback

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We now come to the first Opposition day motion, on community payback. Before we start the debate, I inform the House that there is a small error on the Order Paper. The first part of the motion should read: “That this House notes that the number of community sentences handed down fell by one quarter in the last three years”. The motion has been corrected online; I would be grateful if Members corrected it on their Order Papers.

2.1 pm

**Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House notes that the number of community sentences handed down fell by one quarter in the last three years; further notes that completed hours of unpaid work carried out by offenders has fallen by three quarters in the last three years; notes with concern that despite the end of lockdown restrictions in 2021, the number of offenders permitted to complete unpaid work from home has continued to rise; and calls on the Government to create community and victim payback boards to place communities and victims in control of the type of community projects that offenders complete to restore public faith in community payback.

Today’s debate will show the public which party is serious about stopping crime and antisocial behaviour, and the reoffending that they breed. After 12 years of Conservative Governments, it is clear to the public that the Conservatives have no answers when it comes to tackling the kind of crime and antisocial behaviour that make voters’ lives a daily misery. The public now know that the Conservatives are soft on crime and cannot fix the problems that fuel it. By contrast, the Labour party still believes passionately in being tough on crime, while being tough on tackling its causes.

That principle is still as important as it was when the last Labour Government took office, because the problems that the then incoming Labour Government had to contend with are the same problems that we see now. This dying Conservative Government have lost control of crime, just as they did in the 1990s. Despite the Prime Minister’s delusions, crime is up a fifth and rising, and police numbers are still thousands short of what they were before the Conservatives reduced the number, leaving the police less able to stop the antisocial behaviour that is blighting our communities. That might be news to Conservative Members, but the public do not need telling. They see it in their communities day in, day out—and they are sick of it. The graffiti, the vandalism and the drug dealing corrode communities and lead to more serious crime, which hurts those communities and victims even more, later down the line. Community payback has huge potential to stop that at source.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** Does my hon. Friend agree that community payback schemes should provide fitting punishment as well as rehabilitation, so that they are meaningful for the offender and the community?

**Ellie Reeves:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I visited a community payback scheme in my constituency a few weeks ago where offenders were

[*Ellie Reeves*]

carrying out maintenance on a children's adventure playground. They all said that they felt that they were giving something back and being rehabilitated. The reality is that there are not enough of those schemes because the Government do not resource them properly.

Done properly, community payback offers both just punishment and firm rehabilitation. Offenders understand that the unpaid work they do not only is visible retribution for what they have done to their communities and their victims, but offers them a chance to repay their debt to society. At the same time, if unpaid work is done well, it starts to fold offenders back into their community and gives them a sense of pride in putting back what they took away, which makes them less likely to offend again. What is more, communities see that the justice system is using its power to repair what has been broken, and victims see that, in the crimes committed against them, justice is starting to be done.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Of course, the beauty of community payback is that the communities that experienced the crime are the ones who see the crime redressed through the scheme. I am worried, though, that there is a trend in this country for the hours ordered by the courts not to be completed. For example, in my city region of Greater Manchester, there has been an 84% drop in the number of hours completed. That is not acceptable either for the perpetrator of the crime, who has a duty to pay back, or, more importantly, for my constituents and the communities who were affected by the crime.

**Ellie Reeves:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about hours not being completed and communities not seeing justice done. He talks about Greater Manchester, but that is a problem up and down the country. I will say more on that later.

Community payback should act as an alternative to short prison sentences, which, under this Government, create only more hardened criminals. That is because our prisons have become colleges of crime: drug abuse in prisons has gone up by 500% in a decade, while the take-up of drug rehabilitation programmes is down by 12%; last year, assaults on prison staff went up by a fifth, but the recruitment of officers was still down on 2010; and inmates' discipline is low, which means that taxpayer-funded compensation for prisoner-on-prisoner violence is high—it was £4 million in the last two years alone.

Instead of properly punishing and rehabilitating offenders, getting them ready to re-enter society, and preparing them for the world of work, short sentences spit offenders out from prison more immersed in crime than when they went in. That is exactly where tough, effective community sentences and tough, effective unpaid work schemes that are accountable to communities and victims could make a difference—but they are not making a difference, because they have been set up to fail.

The Lord Chancellor knows that community payback does not work because of the mistake that his party made in 2014 in rushing through a privatisation that the probation service did not need. Probation officers work incredibly hard and do an extremely important job, but they are being let down by this Government. The fragmentation that followed privatisation in 2014

dangerously reduced staffing, increased workloads and meant less supervision for offenders. The results have been dire: 4 million fewer hours of community payback were completed in 2021 than in 2017.

**The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):** It was a pandemic!

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge):** It was a pandemic!

**Ellie Reeves:** The huge fall started years before the pandemic in 2017, and it has continued since. No one had heard of covid in 2017, so it is disingenuous to suggest that it is all because of covid.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): The Government Front Benchers are laughing and using the pandemic as an excuse, but does my hon. Friend not agree that during the pandemic, they should have been focusing on catching criminals, rather than giving them money?

**Ellie Reeves:** I thank my hon. Friend for that point. It is right that this fall started years before the pandemic.

Some 25% fewer offenders finished community sentences in 2021 than did in 2017. Many community sentences were terminated because offenders went on to commit further offences, but others ended because the lack of supervision meant that they could choose not to turn up with impunity. By the end of November last year, more than 13,000 criminals had not completed their allotted hours of unpaid work within 12 months of being sentenced by a court, but the Government do not even know how many unpaid work hours have been written off because the resources were not in place for them to be completed within 12 months.

The most embarrassing statistic is that there has been a threefold rise in "independent" unpaid work since the end of lockdown. In case Conservative Members are unclear about what that means, I will spell it out for them. While Ministers have been hounding civil servants back into the office, they have been letting thousands of offenders work from home. The Prime Minister wanted to see streets full of hi-vis chain gangs, but instead his Lord Chancellor decided to let criminals finish their sentences on Zoom. What next—flexitime for burglars? Season ticket loans for bank robbers? Yet again, the Conservatives are letting criminals off and letting victims down.

Working from home defeats the whole object of community payback, which is supposed to be visible to communities and victims. That is part of the reason why trust in our criminal justice system is at rock bottom. The public cannot see police on the streets because the station has been shut and officers have been sacked.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I am glad the hon. Member has raised the issue of closing police stations. Does she agree with me on the subject, and will she join my calls for the Labour police and crime commissioner for South Yorkshire to reopen the police stations on Maltby and Dinnington high streets, which were closed despite the police and crime commissioner underspending his budget by £2 million last year? Perhaps she should speak to her own party, and get the police stations reopened in Rother Valley.



**Ellie Reeves:** Since the Conservatives took office in 2010, there have been cuts to police, stations have been closed, there are fewer police on the streets and there is less confidence among the public that the party has the ideas to tackle crime in our communities.

Victims cannot see judgments being handed down because their local courts have been sold off and cases are taking years to complete, and communities cannot see justice being done in their area because criminals are instead finishing their sentences on Microsoft Teams. What is more, these failings are killing judicial faith in the effectiveness of community sentences. Judges do not believe that sentences are being completed, so they are not handing them down. Instead, they are giving out more short custodial sentences in the Tories' colleges of crime, and so the cycle of reoffending worsens.

**Kit Malthouse** *rose—*

**Ellie Reeves:** Community payback can be fixed if the Government follow Labour's plan. First, Ministers must end the chaos that they have created in the probation service by ruling out any further reductions in staffing.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Member mentions cuts to probation, which have led to a workload and staffing crisis in the probation service. It is no surprise that there is a direct relationship between that and the huge drop in community sentences in Wales; in 2019, there were nearly half as many community sentences as there were in 2010. Does she agree with me and Napo Cymru that devolving probation will be key to restoring restorative justice for perpetrators of crime and their victims in Wales?

**Ellie Reeves:** I thank the right hon. Member for the points she makes. She illustrates the fall in community sentences because of the issues with them, and the point that she raises about people being able to see justice being done in their community is so important. The role the probation service plays in that is incredibly important, but it cannot do its job properly if its resources have been cut to the bone. There will potentially be cuts of 20% to the civil service; we ask the Minister whether probation officers and prison officers will be affected by that as well, because we have not been able to get a straight answer on that. We want the Government to rule out further reductions in staffing, and we urge them to deliver Labour's proposal to let communities and victims decide on the unpaid work that criminals do to repay their debts to society. Offenders picking up litter is not enough. They could be taking part in more transformative schemes locally, if there was more community and victim involvement in deciding what unpaid work they do. The Government have a national portal that allows communities to suggest schemes for offenders to work on, but it is little known and used even less.

Labour has suggested adding community groups and victims' representatives to community safety partnerships and safer neighbourhood teams to create community and victim payback boards. These boards would decide what unpaid work offenders completed, and would publish local data that assures communities that the work is getting done.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am really interested in the concept of community and victim payback boards, because the important thing is that the voice of both the community and the victims be heard. Too often they are locked out of decisions made about community payback and community sentences. How does my hon. Friend envisage the voice of the victim, in particular, being part of the proposal that she is setting out?

**Ellie Reeves:** Victims would be at the heart of everything a Labour Government do, whereas the Government have time and again promised a victims Bill that still has not made it on to the statute book. Our party is on the side of victims; theirs lets victims down.

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Is the hon. Member aware that the draft Victims Bill is currently undergoing prelegislative scrutiny by the Justice Committee at this very moment in a Committee Room upstairs?

**Ellie Reeves:** I am well aware of that. I am also aware that it was six years ago that the Government first proposed a victims Bill and we have been waiting for it ever since. Where is it?

**Hon. Members:** Upstairs! [*Interruption.*]

**Ellie Reeves:** Six years—I think that speaks volumes, does it not, about the priority the Conservatives place on victims.

Being tough on crime and on the causes of crime remains as much a guiding mission of the Labour party in 2022 as it was in 1997. Our plans for tackling crime and antisocial behaviour today show that our party is still committed to those principles nearly a quarter of a century on. This Government have the chance to show voters that they care about crime in their communities by adopting Labour's plans and making community and victim payback boards a reality. I urge them to take it.

2.17 pm

**The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):** I rise both perplexed and pleased to respond. First, I am perplexed because, in seven years in this House, I do not think I have heard quite such a series of distortions of events, or indeed such a naked use of a global pandemic to derive political advantage. I know that when the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) goes to tweet or Facebook the clips of her being outraged in this debate, she will point out—to her, no doubt, small number of viewers in Lewisham West and Penge—that the pandemic had an impact on the whole of the country, not least the criminal justice system.

I am also perplexed at the sudden reversal in the Labour party's view of community payback. It was only a year ago that the former shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), said that community payback "has nothing to do with tackling crime".

She accused us, in promoting community payback, of "stigmatising" certain sections of the community. She called our desire to have more community payback teams out in the community, doing exactly the kind of work that the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge now seems to celebrate, a "distasteful gimmick", as did, at the same time, the now shadow Foreign

[Kit Malthouse]

Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). So while I welcome the hon. Lady's conversion, it is the cause of some confusion. Perhaps we are in happier, more Blairite times in the Labour party now, under new leadership, although how long that will last I do not know.

Having said that, I am pleased to celebrate the work that has been done on community payback, particularly over the last year as it has roared back into life, and to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the outstanding work of our operational staff across England and Wales, who, in spite of a huge number of challenges, have continued to deliver projects day in and day out.

The community payback requirement is of course delivered in groups, sometimes indoors—painting and decorating schools for example—and covid-19 had a severe impact on our ability to deliver. I am afraid that resulted in a backlog of cases where hours have not been met 12 months after sentencing, which is a stipulation of the requirement. However, we are committed to ensuring that all eligible offenders who did not complete their community payback because of covid-19 will be required to meet their hours.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge, on whom I wanted to intervene, seemed to indicate that hours had been written off from community sentences. She may not be aware of this, but we are not able to write off community sentence hours as that is entirely a judicial decision. We have undertaken to present every single case where somebody goes over their 12-month requirement period back in front of a judge for them to take a decision—to extend the time limit, we hope, but at the very least for those people to complete their hours.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I sat as a magistrate in a breach court in Merseyside last week, hearing from the probation service on cases that it had not been possible to complete in a certain period of time, and the periods for delivery of that community payback were being extended. A point was made from the Opposition Benches that in Greater Manchester some payback cases were not being completed; of course where that is happening, the probation service can and does bring breach cases to court for magistrates to resentence or revoke the order.

**Kit Malthouse:** I salute my hon. Friend for doing his civic duty as a magistrate and he is right that these decisions are effectively for the independent judiciary and we are very limited in what we can do in terms of flexibility. My hon. Friend also rightly highlights that we regularly take those who fail to complete their community service requirement in front of judges for alternative sentencing or for reaffirmation of the sentence. I hope my hon. Friend made the right decision when sitting as a magistrate; I am sure he will have done.

In stark contrast, our brethren in Scotland decided, other than in certain cases, to write off 35% of the hours accumulated because of the covid-19 backlog. We in this part of the United Kingdom took a completely different decision, recognising the importance of sentencing both to victims and for rehabilitation and punitive purposes, so we are persisting. That does however mean

that we have a backlog, but also that we had to develop some necessary solutions to make sure sentences were delivered despite social distancing regulations.

The independent working projects, which the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge mentioned, were introduced as a temporary delivery method in response to covid-19 restrictions and have enabled us to maximise delivery during the pandemic and as the probation service recovers from the impact of the pandemic. All the products created by offenders during these projects were for the benefit of the community or for local charities. They have included a range of robust and practical tasks such as producing hats and scarves for Ukrainian refugees and making face masks and personal protective equipment during the pandemic. I am sure the hon. Lady would not see those jobs as any less valuable than cleaning up a churchyard. Those projects are still being deployed in a limited and targeted way to support our recovery and will be phased out by the autumn.

We cannot shy away from the fact that the probation service and community payback were, like the rest of the country, deeply impacted by the pandemic. As a result we have built up a backlog of cases and we need to make sure those and future cases are all delivered within 12 months. We are boosting our delivery capacity and maximising our efficiency, and to do that we are investing an additional £93 million in community payback over the next three years.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): On probation, I attended the justice unions parliamentary group yesterday and subsequently had discussions with members of Napo, the probation officers' union. They were at pains to point out the huge caseload many of their members are carrying and the difficulties that presents in terms of assessing cases and identifying those suitable for community service and community payback.

**Kit Malthouse:** The hon. Gentleman is right that the probation service has a heavy caseload, and that is why we are in the process of recruiting significant numbers of new probation officers; there were 1,500, I think, last year with more to come in the year ahead. We have been given significant investment by the Government to expand that capability and I am very aware of the caseload pressures across the country. It is therefore even more important that we should be given the flexibility to enable people to complete their sentences within the 12 months so as not to add to the burden by having to represent those cases in front of magistrates if the deadline is not met.

This significant investment will enable us to increase the delivery of community payback from the pre-covid benchmark of around 5 million hours a year to an unprecedented 8 million hours a year. These hours will be put to good use, with a particular focus on more outdoor projects that improve local areas, allow the public to see justice being done and build confidence in community sentences. We will be delivering more placements that restore pride in communities and add value to the work of local charities, building on the success of projects like one in south Yorkshire which saw offenders undertake 2,500 hours of work to transform a derelict building into a community centre for disadvantaged young people. The ramp-up will be facilitated by the recruitment of about 500 additional community payback

staff who will bolster resources in every probation region. In January, we launched a national recruitment campaign and successful candidates are now commencing in post.

**Alexander Stafford:** I thank my right hon. Friend for mentioning south Yorkshire. He will know that, in March, a group of offenders came to Rother Valley under this scheme to help clear up Maltby. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need more of these schemes across Rother Valley and Yorkshire so that people can see the value of community payback, and that it is often better to have people out working in communities rather than serving shorter sentences in prison?

**Kit Malthouse:** I completely agree and am pleased to hear about the projects in my hon. Friend's constituency. As he will know, I have urged all Members across the House to nominate schemes in their constituencies to be fulfilled and I need everybody's help to get us to the target of 8 million hours. If we all pull together I hope we will make sure that not just my hon. Friend's constituency but every part of the country is looking spick and span.

This investment is also enabling us to establish new national partnerships with major organisations and charities, which are also joining this coalition to get to 8 million hours, bringing forward high-quality local projects and initiatives to be replicated in communities across England and Wales. This includes our groundbreaking partnership with the Canal & River Trust, which sees offenders clearing litter, tidying towpaths and maintaining beauty spots along 2,000 miles of waterways. The work of offenders on community payback has delivered at Perry Barr in Birmingham, clearing a towpath near the site of this summer's Commonwealth games, which is testament to the impact such projects can have on local places and people.

**Stephanie Peacock:** The Minister talked about the number of hours completed and has spoken a lot about the impact of the covid pandemic but the fall in the number of hours completed began in 2017; what is his answer to that?

**Kit Malthouse:** There was a decline between '17-18 and '18-19, but the hon. Lady will remember that the last three years of decline were covered by a lockdown; the lockdown began in the first quarter. And while there was a decline it is worth pointing out that there was also a very significant decline in the previous year because this is an activity which, as I have said, takes place in groups and we were not allowed to meet in groups. I know it is not often the case that the word fairness is used in our antagonistic form of democratic debate, but it would be unfair of Opposition parties to decry the work of the probation service and community payback supervisors and say that they should have been doing that group work during the pandemic.

**Stephanie Peacock:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kit Malthouse:** No, I want to make some progress. *[Interruption.]* I will give way in a moment, but I have just given way to the hon. Lady.

**Stephanie Peacock** *rose—*

**Kit Malthouse:** All right, go ahead.

**Stephanie Peacock:** It is disingenuous of the Minister to call me unfair. He clearly misheard my intervention; I was talking about 2017 but he is talking about 2020. Will he answer the question about 2017?

**Kit Malthouse:** As I have said, the baseline was at or around 5 million hours a year for quite a period. It fluctuated from year to year because of a number of factors, not just the delivery but also whether magistrates were giving community sentences in volume, which is not something we can influence. But I am more than happy to write to the hon. Lady with the hours as we see them. *[Interruption.]* I do not have them to hand, but I am more than happy to write to her about those hours. Look, the number fluctuated at about 5 million-odd, and we want to get it to 8 million. We have been given £93 million and 500 more supervisors have been recruited to get us there. I hope that Opposition Members will acknowledge that community payback was impacted, and had to be, by the pandemic. I know that the Labour party would not seek to make political advantage out of the impact of that awful disease when we had to bear in mind the safety of Ministry of Justice staff.

The Opposition have submitted their own proposals on improving local engagement and participation, which the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge referred to. However, I am afraid that her quango-tastic response to the issue is both unnecessary and, I am afraid, overcomplicated. In reality, community payback is already delivering for local communities, and the Government are only strengthening our engagement with key stakeholders. We recognise that local engagement is an integral part of the community payback offer, and the probation service already works closely with local authorities, police and crime commissioners and voluntary organisations to identify demanding placements that benefit communities. We also encourage members of the public to take part and nominate community payback projects in their areas via an easy-to-use form on the gov.uk website. I urge you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make some nominations in your own constituency.

Furthermore, we have just introduced a new statutory duty via the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 that requires the probation service to consult with key community stakeholders on the delivery of community payback in local areas. The duty will encourage greater collaboration with key partners such as PCCs and ensure that projects benefit communities and are responsive to local needs. The new statutory duty will cement and formalise existing relationships and create a consistent consultation process across England and Wales. That in turn will guarantee that local people have a say in the types of projects delivered in their areas, ensuring that our placements are responsive to the community's needs.

The impact of such collaboration was evident during the community payback spring clean week, which was delivered in support of Keep Britain Tidy's campaign in March. Between 25 March and 1 April, community payback teams were mobilised across England and Wales to deliver clean-up projects that visibly improved local areas and green spaces. More than 1,500 offenders collected 2,200 bags of litter, removed eyesore graffiti and cleared vegetation from public spaces. They delivered 10,000 hours of hard and productive work at about



[Kit Malthouse]

300 projects. The initiative was widely supported by many hon. Members and PCCs who visited projects. The spring clean week is a superb example of the impact that meaningful and robust community payback can have on local areas.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I want to take the Minister back to the 8 million hours of community payback that he set out. We all support more hours of community payback, particularly on meaningful projects such as some of those that he has just listed. He skirted over the fundamental problem, though, which is that in June 2011, 185,265 community sentences were handed down—13% of all sentences—but by June 2021 that had fallen to 72,021, which was just 7% of all sentences. He said that there is little that he can do to make the courts award community sentences, but, if he is to make those 8 million hours a reality, he will have to do something to encourage them. What is he doing to ensure that more community sentences, where appropriate, are given out to perpetrators of crime?

**Kit Malthouse:** The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the decision on a sentence is a matter for the magistrate or for the judge at the time. It is for them to decide what is a fitting punishment and, indeed, what is likely to deter the offender from reoffending. The fall that he pointed to will be entirely down to judicial discretion.

We can do a certain amount of marketing to judges and sentencers. In promoting my own pet project of alcohol abstinence and monitoring orders—the new sobriety tags that have been brought in—I have been attending judicial training courses to explain to sentencers how the sentence works and its effectiveness. In the end, a judge or magistrate wants to know that a sentence is effective, and if we can demonstrate through our work that it is effective, punitive and satisfies the public interest, and the local community sees value in that sentence, I am sure that magistrates and judges will step forward with much greater enthusiasm and help us to fulfil that 8 million hours target. The hon. Gentleman identifies the interesting point—no doubt it will be embarked on with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge)—of explaining to those who give out sentences the growing importance of this work across the whole of the country.

I hope that all hon. Members in the Chamber will become my Twitter followers. One of the great pleasures of my day is to tweet my “payback of the day”. Pretty much every day, I put out “before” and “after” pictures of a project taking place somewhere across the country showing the fantastic work that offenders have done. We seem to specialise in cemeteries—a lot of work is going into cleaning them and smartening them up. Some of the transformations have been extraordinary. I visited a project in Eastleigh, near my constituency, and what struck me was the value that the offenders themselves saw in the work. Local residents had been over to congratulate them, thank them and understand what they were doing—the offenders all wear high-vis that has “community payback” written the back—and the offenders felt a sense of pride. They had been working in a churchyard, making it look very smart and tidy, and in fact a couple of them said that they were interested in a career in landscape gardening as a result.

Across the House, we agree on the value of community payback. I hope it is agreed that the service suffered during the pandemic because of the nature of this group-based work, but that the staff at the probation service and the community payback supervisors were innovative in inventing solutions to help us deal with the backlog. Nevertheless, we all need to put our shoulder to the wheel to get us from 5 million hours to that target of 8 million hours, by which time I hope there will not be an area of the country that is not clean, scrubbed and free of graffiti and litter.

While I realise that the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge is trying to use the debate to confer some kind of political advantage, I know that she recognises—she is generally a fair-minded individual—that the staff were struggling during the pandemic, as were so many services. Now that her party has happily reversed its position, we share the view that the community payback is an incredibly valuable part of our criminal justice system, and I hope that we will all work together to promote it. I look forward to receiving a nomination from her for a scheme that she would like to see done in her constituency. Perhaps she and I could visit it together and congratulate the offenders on their work.

As for the hon. Lady's overall claim that somehow the Conservatives have gone soft on crime and are no longer the party of crime and order, I gently remind her that she voted against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act and its measures to put rapists and other serious offenders behind bars and to deal with a variety of other criminals. Until the Labour party becomes more action and less talk, I am afraid that it will not be able to aspire to the crown, which we currently proudly hold, of being the primary defender of law and order in this country.

2.37 pm

**Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** This debate is about how we provide security for our communities and justice for victims. It is also about getting real about why so many crimes are happening, why so many victims are being harmed and why the wounds are not being helped to heal. We know about how the Tory austerity cuts to our courts helped to create a massive backlog even before the pandemic. We know how victims are waiting years for justice and how so many are dropping out of the system because they cannot have cases hanging over their heads any longer. We also know how suspects waiting month after month in custody or on bail just creates the conditions for further crime.

We are talking about community sentences and the role that they can play in providing justice, in repairing the damage that crime causes to our communities and in stopping reoffending by dealing with some of its causes. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) laid out the facts: the number and percentage of community sentences in our justice system have declined in the past 10 years—even before the pandemic. The Ministry of Justice's own research shows that community sentences are associated with lower reoffending than short prison sentences, which are often the alternative, and that community sentences cost 10 times less than a prison place. When our prisons are as underfunded, dangerous, overcrowded and devoid of rehabilitation as so many are today, that is no bad thing. Community sentences are a win-win, as they have lower reoffending rates and they are cheaper.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. There is another bonus because, when community sentences are done correctly, they provide payback—the clue is in the name—to communities affected by crime and they provide a form of restorative justice to victims of crime. A price cannot be put on that. It is justice in action, is it not?

**Ms Brown:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Community sentences work because they include punishment while maintaining a link to the community and enabling progress on the problems that drive crime in the first place. The link to the community is perhaps the most important thing, because it helps people to maintain the hope that is necessary to change their life. Community payback orders can give people experience of work that helps their neighbourhood to thrive. The work can and should be hard, but it should also be rewarding, which can, in and of itself, create a motivation for further change.

What are the barriers to making this kind of sentence work well? A lack of investment in the probation service is part of the problem. When I was a shadow probation Minister, I frequently heard of probation staff taking on huge, extraordinary numbers of cases. Good, valued probation staff are not just an early warning system for when an individual is going off the rails; they are agents of hope, healing and personal change. That can only happen if professionals are given the time and resources to develop the real relationships that are essential if we are to turn lives around. It is about understanding the needs, vulnerabilities and risks of the people they are supervising. We need probation staff who organise unpaid work to have good links with employers, councils, colleges and local charities. They need a range of opportunities to be available so they can tailor the service to a person's skills and needs. Most of all, they need the necessary time and trust to inform the courts of the most effective, most appropriate and fairest type of sentence.

**Grahame Morris:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. The Minister suggested that Opposition Members do not appreciate the work of probation officers, so will my hon. Friend please set the record straight? We really do appreciate the work of probation officers, and we acknowledge the hiatus caused by the privatisation of the probation service. I hope the Government will recognise the value of probation officers in the current pay talks.

**Ms Brown:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are to turn around people's lives, and if we are to make a dent in the crime on our streets, we have to resource those who are working with people who often have immensely disorganised lives, who may have a history of trauma and who might need a proper intervention by social services or the probation service to enable them to put their life straight. All too often, the only contact we have with the probation service is to criticise it for not recognising that somebody is about to go off the rails or has already gone off the rails and for not having a close enough eye.

The reality is that our probation service needs the resources to work properly with the people in its care, as well as resources for healthcare, drug rehabilitation, alcohol dependency and so on to use as tools in its work.

**Andy Carter:** The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. There are, of course, two elements to unpaid work—the punitive element and rehabilitation—so two levels of sentencing are imposed: rehabilitation activity requirements and unpaid work. It is important not to confuse the two, because unpaid work is usually the punitive element. She talks a lot about needs, which sit in the rehabilitation activity requirement.

**Ms Brown:** I genuinely think it is about seeing it in the whole. If I am doing unpaid work to clean up a graveyard, I can look back and see a graveyard that is in better nick because of my work and somebody could commend me for that work, which begins to build confidence and self-worth. Although there is the punitive element of taking hours away from my life and making me do a job that I do not particularly want to do because it is a bit nasty and a bit scuzzy, there will be appreciation from others and from me for a job well done. The two cannot be separated, so we should acknowledge and accept both bits with open arms and say that this is what we want to do, because it changes lives.

Good, valued probation staff are not just an early warning system; they are agents of hope and healing. I worry that unpaid work can be seen as a box-ticking exercise, and it is no surprise that courts and victims sometimes do not have confidence that it is a genuine form of justice. I am worried that the probation system, with its regional structures, is too remote from our local communities. There is not necessarily the transparency and accountability to create genuine confidence in what is happening.

I worked in local government for years before I came to this House, and I saw time and again how money and power can be sucked away from the local when there is a regional structure. Sometimes our regional structures are a bit too far away from the delivery on the ground. There are fabulous local and public organisations working in Newham that I would trust to do the job of putting people to work in a way that pays back the community and creates opportunities for offenders, but those organisations are too often shut out of these contracts because they are a bit too small, a bit too local and a bit too distant from the decision makers, whether in Westminster or Islington. It sometimes means the best are not employed to do the work that we all know could happen.

To illustrate what I have been trying to say, I will finish by talking about the group that is failed most by the criminal justice system. Women overwhelmingly end up before the courts for non-violent and non-sexual offences. In 2020, 72% of women sentenced to prison had committed a non-violent offence. These offences are usually driven by the legacy of abuse, trauma and exploitation, and we know from the Government's own research that 60% of women entering prison have suffered domestic abuse, almost half have an alcohol problem and almost a third have a drug problem.

Let me be clear. Women do commit crimes and we have to respond by creating a justice system that supports them to escape the abuses, traumas and addictions that have put them where they are. Community sentences can be an important tool for women offenders. They can help women to face up to and deal with their addictions. They include unpaid work that builds a woman's skills, confidence and ambition. We have to

[Ms Lyn Brown]

face reality: if we do not give a community sentence, the alternative is a short prison sentence, which can make the problems that drive women's offending so much worse.

Let me give an example. Many women who commit crimes are in a desperate situation due to homelessness. They then go into prison and, if they had a tenancy, they lose it. When they are out of prison, as many as two thirds do not have a safe home to go to. Most prison sentences for women are very short—70% are for less than a year. In the system in which we are working, that, frankly, does not give professionals enough time to respond to individual needs and provide the necessary treatments that will enable a woman to make a success of her life once she is released. For instance, it is not possible in that time, in the big structures in which we are working, to get a woman on to drug rehabilitation and alcohol dependency courses and provide the facilities and resources that she needs to turn her life around.

**Alexander Stafford:** I am trying to follow the hon. Lady's logic. Is she saying that every woman—I know this is about women, rather than men—who commits relatively minor crimes such as shoplifting, mugging or assault, which still have victims, should not be sent to jail? I do not think we should screen people out because they are male or female. If someone commits a crime, they should go to jail, if that is appropriate. If the argument is that sentences are too short, let us make them longer so that there is chance to be rehabilitated in jail where the criminals belong.

**Ms Brown:** Let me help the hon. Gentleman. The Government have a female offender strategy, and what I am speaking about is not outwith the philosophy and principles in his Government's strategy. It is massively understood that there are many and complex reasons why women find themselves in a situation where they can be imprisoned for between three and six months. Many such women will have responsibility for children. Their incarceration destroys the home for that child. It destroys their having a stable place to be. It often means that the child, although there may be no such predisposition previously, has that trauma to carry with them, which can have lifelong consequences.

If the hon. Gentleman believes that payback is a reasonable way of dealing with this, let us think about non-violent offenders and how we can use payback and community orders to reduce crime. The thing about payback orders is that they work. I want to see fewer

victims. Therefore, I want to see less crime, so how do I get less crime? We are saying that payback orders can get us to a situation where there is less crime because reoffending rates are not as high as they otherwise would be.

There is a constant churn in prisons, with staff desperately trying to establish relationships but then losing them again. Let us imagine that a staff member meets somebody they could finally support in changing their life. Let us imagine that staff member making promises to that person when they know that those promises cannot be kept because the person will be moving on again in a few weeks. It is simply impossible.

Justice that happens within women's communities can avoid that terrible, wrenching disruption and provide long-term support, enabling women to stay closer to their support networks. Almost 60% of the women in prison have children. Research shows that they have a greater risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system if their parent is placed into prison. It is no wonder that the rates of self-harm in women's prisons have gone up over the past decade. Many offenders, but particularly women offenders, are trapped in terrible cycles of harm, abuse, crime and punishment. It is a revolving door of reoffending, and that reoffending, effectively, creates more victims.

I believe that community payback is the kind of innovation that we need. Local partnership working between victims, courts, charities, businesses, probation and other public services is exactly the kind of joined-up local working that, sadly, Conservative Governments have eroded over the years through austerity and the decline in community sentencing. It can be absolutely no surprise that we are all paying the price of increased reoffending, increased crime and more victims, and our communities are being denied justice on a catastrophic scale.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

## ROYAL ASSENT

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. Just before I call the next hon. Member in the debate, I have to notify the House—hon. Members can sit down; this is a very exciting announcement—in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Social Security (Additional Payments) Act 2022.



## Community Payback

*Debate resumed.*

2.56 pm

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): At the outset, I declare my interests, having served as a magistrate for 12 years, as a member of the Sentencing Council and as a non-executive director of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, all prior to my election.

In my role on the bench, I sentenced many people to community payback. It is a superb way to achieve the purposes of sentencing. It acts as a punishment by depriving offenders of their free time; it makes reparation to the public by improving local community facilities; and it often also helps to rehabilitate offenders by providing them with new skills or, at times, giving them their first ever experience of work. I have heard many accounts of people who have gone on to use those skills and experiences in later employment—employment that reduces their likelihood of committing further offences and so reduces the number of victims of crime.

Over the past two years, however, we have had the covid pandemic. When I first saw this motion on the Order Paper, I thought that the Labour party had perhaps forgotten about that. I realised then, of course, that it had not because its leader constantly wanted to keep us in lockdown. The pandemic had a massive impact on work across the entire country, so it is hardly surprising that community payback fell considerably during that time or, indeed, that the type of work that offenders were asked to do was adapted to the circumstances of the covid restrictions that were in place. It seems to make sense to me that when it was necessary, offenders were given tasks that they could complete at home, which included making personal protective equipment and face coverings, which became such a vital part of everybody's life during those grim covid days.

I do not claim for a second that that was perfect, but it was surely better to have people carrying out their sentence in some form, producing something useful and contributing to their local community. What would Labour have preferred? Would it have preferred that they all sat watching "Bargain Hunt" while waiting for life to return to normal? What about offenders whose health meant they needed to shield for longer than others? Does Labour think that they should have been let off? We certainly do not. Does it not make sense, in fact, that community payback can adapt to circumstances, so if a person is unable to work in a certain location, perhaps because of a physical disability, other provision can be made for them to repay their debt to society? In my time at HMPPS, I constantly called for greater innovation. It strikes me that that is exactly what was demonstrated during the pandemic. Indeed, we can learn from that for the future.

This is an appropriate time to pay tribute to all the staff of HMPPS for everything that they did during the pandemic—I absolutely share the view of Opposition Members on that. I have often described those staff as the unsung heroes of our public services and they certainly proved that over the past two years. I particularly congratulate the winners of the Prison Officer Of The Year and Probation Champion Of The Year awards, which were held last week, recognising the outstanding contributions made across both services. As the chief executive of HMPPS said:

"The incredible work on show reflects the resilience & professionalism I see across the service every day from our fantastic staff".

I am therefore absolutely delighted with the investment that the Government are making to recruit 500 additional community payback staff over the next three years, meaning that a record-breaking, staggering 8 million community payback hours will be completed each year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who is still a serving magistrate, pointed out, community payback is just one of a wide range of non-custodial sentencing options open to magistrates and judges. I very much hope that the recent unification of community rehabilitation companies and the National Probation Service will lead to a wider use of community orders where doing so protects the public and has the confidence of the judiciary.

I am very pleased that we have already seen the introduction of tougher community sentences under this Government. One aspect of that is doubling from 12 to 24 months the time for which an offender can be subject to curfew restrictions. Personally, I hope that over time the Ministry of Justice will look at creating new forms of community sentences. A couple of years ago, I worked with the Centre for Social Justice on just such a proposal: the intensive control and rehabilitation order, under which offenders would wear GPS tags tracking their movements. They would be confined to their homes under a highly restrictive curfew that allowed them out only for specified reasons such as a job, a meeting with their probation officer, specific reparation work for victims or a course to address their offending behaviour. To some extent, it would be a midpoint between the current community orders and a spell in prison. I would very much welcome the chance to discuss that proposal further with Ministers.

For now, however, I return to my puzzlement at today's Labour motion. The Government are committed to community payback, and they can prove it with the work done so far, the work still to come, the money being spent and the staff being recruited. Indeed, they are committed to tackling crime and reducing the number of victims in a plethora of ways, including by increasing the number of police officers, giving the police more powers and toughening sentences for the most serious crimes—measures that the Opposition have opposed time after time. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who is shaking her head at me from the Opposition Front Bench, was right about one thing: this debate will show which party is serious about tackling crime. It is the Conservative party. It always has been, and it always will be. I am proud to be on our side of the House, in the party that takes action and makes investments to put victims first.

3.2 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I declare some interests: I work with the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group, as I mentioned in my intervention on the Minister for Crime and Policing, and I recently spoke at the POA conference in Eastbourne. In recent weeks, I have spoken in debates about the need for a national policing strategy for anti-social behaviour and for off-road bikes, and about repeat offenders and sentencing.

[Grahame Morris]

I did not intervene on the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), but he said that the Conservative party is leading the way. I have served in this House for several years now, and I well remember that in 2011, the then Justice Secretary—who had held many high offices of state, including Chancellor of the Exchequer and Health Secretary, and now serves in the other place as Baron Clarke of Nottingham—proposed a similar solution, although in those days it was called a non-custodial sentence rather than community payback. The prison population was 85,000 then, but because of criticism from his own side, the then Justice Secretary had to back down. I well recall his statement, when the then Speaker remonstrated with him about the length of his answers; I said in his defence that I thought that that was a terribly unfair criticism because the Justice Secretary had already indicated that he was against shorter sentences. [Laughter.] Thank you.

I highlighted the difficulties experienced in our prison system and the lack of rehabilitation in a recent debate, to which the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), responded. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who is no longer in his place, spoke very well in that debate and was very constructive.

There are concerns among people who work in the system. I agree with the Minister for Crime and Policing that for community payback to be effective, it must be a team effort, but there are issues in our prison system with lack of rehabilitation and with the unsafe working environment for those in the Prison Service—not just prison officers, but prison educators and others. There is a serious threat to life and threat of injury for prison officers, whose service and commitment to public safety often go unnoticed behind the prison walls.

It is my intention to continue to raise the frustrations of police officers about pensions, particularly for new recruits. They have seen the number of their colleagues cut over the past year; there are fewer experienced police officers, and they are struggling to contain rising crime and antisocial behaviour. I know Ministers will say that we are recruiting extra officers, but we lost 20,000. We are running to catch up with where we were in 2010. I have the utmost admiration for the police officers who seek to ensure that our streets are safe, but many are new recruits. We have lost experience, as we have in probation and many other areas, and it will take many years to get that experience back.

Yesterday, we saw criminal barristers on strike, walking out of courts. Let me say for the record that as a Labour MP and as a lifelong trade unionist, I will always stand up for working people in their fight to protect their pay, pensions and terms and conditions, whether they are barristers, rail workers or postmen and women.

After 12 years of Conservative Government, there are frequent and systemic failures across our whole criminal justice system. Only yesterday, I had to raise a complaint about a constituent who has twice been unable to report crimes via the 101 service, owing to extended delays in answering calls. Today we are looking at community payback, but we will never even get to that point if the public cannot report crime. The hon. Member for South Suffolk may recall that I highlighted a particular case in last week's Westminster Hall debate

and subsequently wrote to him about it; he asked me not to raise it individually at the time because it was still ongoing.

On the surface, crime figures may appear to be declining in particular areas, but in the case that I pointed out, many in the community, including the victims, considered the sentence overly lenient. They have lost confidence in the system and are less likely to report crimes; in fact, the individual affected has said that under no circumstances will he ever go through it all again, because he does not feel that justice has been served. There are not enough police officers to attend incidents in a timely manner, and criminals are not being convicted because of court delays and backlogs. Sadly, the Government are refusing to take responsibility, but the decision to close 164 out of 320 magistrates courts since 2010 is clearly not helping the backlog.

The Government are undermining the quality and quantity of community sentences. In 2019, the chief inspector of probation found that because of the Government's "Transforming Rehabilitation" reforms, which split probation provision into the public sector National Probation Service and privately owned community rehabilitation companies, probation services are "failing to meet all performance targets... In too many cases, there is not enough purposeful activity... The probation profession has been diminished... There is now a national shortage of probation professionals".

The chief inspector noted that there is too much reliance on unqualified or agency staff, and that

"in the day-to-day work of probation professionals, there has been a notable drift away from the evidence base".

I think the Government acknowledge that privatising probation was an error, because they renationalised it, but these issues prevail. The courts are less inclined to give community sentences. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) mentioned the reduction in the number of such sentences. Indeed, there has been a 46% decrease in England and Wales over the past 10 years, and a 25% fall in the four years between 2017 and 2020 alone in my region, the north-east. A decline in community sentences may indicate a more hard-line approach, given the increase in the use of custodial sentences. However, the prison population is lower today than it was in 2010. I do understand that during the pandemic there was less crime, and I think that the prison population fell by about 6% during that period, but what we have now are fewer police officers, fewer courts, and fewer community and custodial sentences.

The Conservative party often tries to portray itself as the party of law and order, but the statistics and the experience on the streets suggest that it is more the party of crime and disorder. Recently—and quite regularly—the Government have said, "Well, what would you do?" It is easy to throw stones and criticise.

**Kit Malthouse:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that while different types of crime can fall in different ways, some serious volume crimes are, according to the Office for National Statistics, well down on where they were three years ago. Burglary is down, robbery is down, theft is down, and admissions to hospital with a knifepoint injury are well down. There are areas of concentration, to which we have given significant priority and resources, which are now significantly down across the country. That is British crime survey data, not data for reported crime.

**Grahame Morris:** I acknowledge the Minister's intervention. My concern, which I raised earlier in my speech and also last week, is the number of people who, because of a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system, are simply not reporting crimes—not necessarily the very serious crimes involving physical assault but crimes that we might classify as minor, including antisocial behaviour.

**Kit Malthouse:** As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, we use two methods to measure crime. There is recorded crime, as he says, which is sometimes affected by sentiment, but the more accurate measure—the one that is generally used—is the British crime survey, which contains data that is not impacted by the kind of sentiment to which he is alluding, and that data shows that these important crime types are significantly down.

**Grahame Morris:** I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention. However, let me return to the frequent criticism of Labour for not being definitive enough in proposing alternatives. Let us be no doubt about this: Labour is not soft on crime. Through new community and victim payback orders, we would make offenders pay back to the communities they have harmed. I think that that is an excellent idea, and I hope there is a basis for us to move forward together, given that Labour has a solid policy that commands support in the community.

Labour would set up police hubs—indeed, we have an embryonic police hub in Horden, in my constituency—in our towns and larger villages, and would put more police back on the streets. That would give residents direct access to a way of sharing their concerns about their community. We all know that the most effective policing is intelligence-led, and features close co-operation with a community who can often identify those who are involved in crime. Finally, Labour would create new neighbourhood prevention teams, which would bring together police, community support officers, youth workers—that is very important—and council staff to tackle the causes of the antisocial behaviour that is blighting so many communities.

The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary know that the cuts of the past 12 years were wrong, and I welcome the U-turn at the 2019 election, when it was proposed that 20,000 police officers be rehired, but the public should remember that they were, in the main, present for, and voted for, each and every cut to our criminal justice system over the past 12 years. When it comes to community payback and rehabilitation—although I believe in the concept—the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary are repeat offenders. It will take many generations for the criminal justice system to recover from the wanton attacks and mismanagement of this Government.

While we can restore numbers relatively easily, the decades of experience that we have lost among skilled professionals—in the police and the probation service, and among prison officers—are not so easily recovered. Even following the recruitment drive to which the Minister referred, there are still nearly 24,000 fewer police staff today than there were in 2010, and over 6,000 fewer special constables. That is 30,000 fewer people seeking to prevent crime and catch offenders. Moreover, the closure of so many magistrates courts means that we have halved the court capacity to process offenders who are caught and charged.

The probation service recently launched a recruitment drive—the Minister mentioned this—to attract 500 extra community payback staff. The question I want to ask is this: how does the Minister expect to attract people to these important roles, given that retention, let alone recruitment, is struggling? The probation union Napo tells me of issues involving staff feeling unsafe at work—that may be partly due to concerns about covid—frustrations over stagnant pay and a lack of progression in jobs, and, overwhelmingly, covid-induced backlogs that are still clogging up the system.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that he will soon bring his remarks to a conclusion. He has not done anything wrong—he is behaving perfectly properly—but although I did not impose a time limit originally because I thought that that would allow freer debate, I will have to ask Members who speak after the hon. Gentleman to take about six or seven minutes, because we want to finish the debate at about 4 pm.

**Grahame Morris:** I shall heed your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me end by saying this. In the opinion of many—myself included—our criminal justice system is falling apart, and the Government should be finding a way to fix it rather than just using it as a means of silencing their critics. I must say how disappointed I am that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 is being used to silence Steve Bray just yards away from here. I know that many of us have had brushes with Mr Bray, but his voice is being silenced today, and by tomorrow, many of us who have never demonstrated before could be subject to prosecution under that law.

3.18 pm

**Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con):** It is absolutely ridiculous that the Labour party has brought this Opposition day debate, and then sent along four of its Back-Bench MPs. It is an absolute scandal. It is worth pointing out that, since I have been in this place, Labour has voted against every single measure to increase sentences for criminals such as murderers and rapists.

Labour Members really do have a cheek to talk about community payback, especially after my experience of Labour MPs and supporters calling for my head, and calling me some sort of right-wing fascist, when I had the temerity to suggest that criminals should go to work for a living, pay taxes and work hard. That was just before the election in 2019. I was working with residents on the Carsic council estate in Sutton-in-Ashfield, and they had had enough. They were having problems with antisocial behaviour, and with criminals who were making their life a complete misery. This was a handful of no-good villains who the council thought it was a good idea to put into flats and bungalows meant for pensioners, in order to try to integrate them with old-age pensioners, but it did not work. I did not think it was fair, so my suggestion was pretty simple: make these criminals go to work. There is a shortage of workers on our farms and in our agricultural industry in this country, so the answer is quite simple: do some graft, earn a wage and pay some taxes. That just might stop these people causing trouble by going out thieving and robbing people.



**Sarah Owen:** The hon. Member talks about hard graft. Does he think that making birthday cards and greeting cards is a suitable punishment for criminals?

**Lee Anderson:** No, I do not think that is a good way for criminals to do community payback. Of course it is not, but during the pandemic and in lockdown when people had to stop inside the house, we had to find something for them to do, so for that period of time I would say yes, get them to do some work, like making personal protective equipment. That was a great thing for them to do. We have not been living in normal times.

Imagine the outrage from Labour Members when I said all that stuff about people going to work. Going to work! The outrage! It was incredible. They said I wanted to open up gulags and forced labour camps, just because I was asking for people to go and pick vegetables. They said it was cruel to make people work on farms, yet they said it was not cruel for immigrant labour to come in and pick fruit and vegetables on farms. Do they just not like immigrants? Is that what it is? Because that is how it looks. It is not cruel for people to work hard, pay taxes and contribute to society. It is the right and decent thing to do in any civilised society.

We all know that the Labour party is trying to rebrand itself as the patriotic, low-tax party of law and order that is tough on illegal immigration. What a load of nonsense that is! Even Labour Members are laughing right now. It is ridiculous, isn't it? They need to make their mind up, because the same MPs were saying, a while back, that we should not deport foreign criminals at Christmas time because it was cruel. I think it is a great Christmas present, deporting criminals. The people in Ashfield think it is brilliant. *[Interruption.]* I was in here when Labour Members said it, and it was absolute nonsense. They were absolutely out of touch with the decent, hard-working, tax-paying people in places such as Ashfield—*[Interruption.]* They can shake their heads all they want, but they are completely out of touch.

Labour Members have voted against every single measure to lock people up for longer. They should be ashamed of themselves. I know they think I am on a rant, and that I like picking on them, but I do not. I like to be sensible, calm and measured, and to put a proper argument across—*[Interruption.]* But there they are, chuntering away. This is great.

I hope that the Government will listen to some of my suggestions and take on board what I am saying, because criminals up and down the country are living rent-free in social housing, and every day they are making people's lives a misery. It is true. I say again—I stick to my words—that these people do not deserve to be given free housing while we have decent people on the waiting list. They should work for a living.

Community payback is a great idea, and the Government are doing great things and investing millions of pounds in it—it is absolutely fantastic—but I hope they will look at doing something a bit more long term to sort this problem out. I will stick to my guns: as I have said before, we have a massive shortage of labour on farms in this country, but the good news is that we have a massive pool of habitual, bone idle, self-entitled criminals who are a drain on this great society of ours, so when the payback is finished, how about the Government—if they are listening to me—ensuring that these people are sentenced to 40 hours' paid work a week for the rest of

their life until they retire? Imagine that! It would send them into meltdown. That's me done, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much.

3.23 pm

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** To return to the subject of community payback, most of us across the House know the impact of crime and antisocial behaviour on our communities. We see the impact on our towns and villages. We see how it worries people, makes them anxious, brings down their sense of pride in an area and makes them angry. We know that the link to antisocial and criminal behaviour, even at a low level, exists and really matters to our communities, so it is right that, where it is appropriate and in line with sentencing guidance, the option of community payback work should be given. A lot of communities see a link between wrongdoing and payback to the community. They see that those who have offended are doing work to make a difference in their local community. I think, for example, of work done a few years ago in my local cemetery—that is seemingly a very popular option for payback schemes. The work was very much needed. It helped the local community, and helped the offenders to learn skills and move forward after their payback service was completed.

The well-respected consultancy Crest Advisory has said that

“the notion that community sentences can be a more effective, cheaper alternative to prison is supported by a strong body of evidence.”

Community payback can stop more serious reoffending by addressing the root causes of offending behaviour, yet there has been a reduction in its use by the courts because of concerns that the schemes just will not be carried out; there is a concern to ensure that offenders do actually pay back for their crimes. That reduction means that community sentences are now being used less than at any point over the past 15 years.

Let us look at the number of offenders who completed a community sentence in each year between 2016 and 2020 in every region in England and Wales. In my region of the north-east, there was a 25% decrease over that period, and a fall of 69% in the number of community payback hours completed. If we look at the causes of some of those reductions, we see that ironically, even after sentences are given, local organisations cannot access schemes because of the pressure on probation services and the cost involved for the organisations. As we have heard, the probation services have been through a really difficult time as a result of the Government's failed privatisation of them. Such services are vital and respected. Voluntary organisations are willing to lead payback schemes, but they need funding and support from probation to run them. Again, that affects the number of people who can be on these schemes. It reduces the benefit to communities and the need for that work when such schemes cannot be carried out.

I wish to speak briefly about another aspect of giving back to our communities. Operation Payback is a scheme operated by our excellent Northumbria police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, using money from the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. She is determined to ensure that communities use the money recovered from crime to address local problems. Northumbria is a huge area for a PCC to cover, and many of its town and villages have successfully submitted bids to Operation

Payback. Let me highlight one example in my community. Our PCC has worked with local community groups, which are doing great things to support young people in avoiding offending or antisocial behaviour, and are providing positive alternatives. The scheme has funded a forest school, which brings older young people together to engage in positive activities. It tackles the issues of potential antisocial behaviour and food poverty.

Community payback is really important and needs to be strengthened greatly, so I welcome Labour proposals to make it effective, and to link it closely with the priorities of the local communities who suffer from crime. Our community payback boards would put local representatives at the heart of the payback scheme, which is important if we are to make that community link. We would set up new police hubs to put police on our streets and increase their visibility; we all know that people across our constituencies are calling for that. We would also create new neighbourhood prevention teams.

This is an important debate on community payback and how we can strengthen it, and on the issues arising from the reduction in hours of community payback. I would like a much stronger and more effective scheme, linked to our local communities and the issues that they face.

3.29 pm

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am already an avid follower of the Twitter feed of the Minister for Crime and Policing, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), so I have already seen his regular payback of the day posts, which I highly recommend, showing the tree planting, the painting and decorating, the restoring of parks and the other schemes that are happening. Anyone can nominate a local project, and I am encouraging my constituents to make sure that they do so.

Like others who have spoken in this debate, I was surprised when I saw the motion on the Order Paper, as there are already plans to deliver 8 million hours of payback—2 million more than happen now. Perhaps Labour Members were also surprised, given the poor attendance for their own debate. Where are the Liberal Democrats? Do they have nothing to say on crime? There is no one here from that party.

Increasing the hours is important, because community payback does what it says on the tin. It is about offenders making amends in the area where they committed their crimes, doing something positive for communities that they can see. To deliver that increase, and other efforts to reduce offending, the probation service has launched a campaign to recruit trainee probation officers in Norfolk, which I hope will be successful. As others have said, it is a rewarding career to help people turn their lives around.

Another element of the Government's community sentence scheme that I support is electronic monitoring or tagging. Last week, the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, looked at that programme. Across the country today, 15,000 people are tagged, including those subject to community orders and offenders released under licence from prison. In due course, the Committee will report on the programme and some problems with the IT system, but I was struck by the impact of tagging on alcohol monitoring. Among community-based offenders and offenders on licence

with an alcohol abstinence requirement, there was an overall sobriety rate of 97.2% and 95.6% respectively. There is a big prize here, given that alcohol-related crime costs society £21 billion a year and plays a part in nearly 40% of violent crime. Reducing it must be a priority and tagging has an important role to play. Based on the success of the programme to date, it is being expanded, with up to 12,000 offenders due to be tagged over the next three years.

Part of the extra £183 million to be invested in tagging by 2025 will go into a technology innovation fund. I welcome the fact that that will include focusing on what my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing has referred to as the holy grail—an effective tag to monitor for drug use. Tags are also used in domestic abuse-related cases to better protect victims and their families. By adopting new technology, there is the potential to protect the public and deliver better value for money.

Payback and tagging are part of the Government's focus on standing up for victims; recruiting more police, with over 200 additional officers already recruited in Norfolk; and ensuring offenders face tough penalties while getting support to reduce reoffending. In contrast, the Labour Party voted against tougher sentences for the worst crimes, voted against increased police funding, and voted against giving the police powers they need to protect the public. The first job of any Government is to keep people safe, and this Conservative Government are committed to cutting crime and reforming the justice system so that it serves the law-abiding, decent majority.

3.33 pm

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): When people talk about crime, all too often the focus is on the crime itself and not the impact on victims and communities. Drug dealing leaves people scared to go out of their homes, knives are taking away young people's lives, and rapes are going unconvicted, leaving victims feeling they have nowhere left to turn and completely powerless. Under this Conservative Government, rape is effectively legalised, and when they had the chance to toughen up the laws and actually get on with the job of governing, their perverse priorities meant that a statue was better protected than me or any of my constituents. Any of the meaningless figures reeled off by Ministers do nothing to redress the years of cuts to policing in our communities.

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Lady just said that rape has been legalised under this Government. That is a shameful thing to say. Whatever differences we have about the detail of waiting times and so on, the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) made it clear earlier that we are all working hard on this matter. I ask the hon. Lady to retract what she has just said.

**Sarah Owen:** I will not be retracting that. I said "effectively" legalised. When only 1.6% of reported rape cases are prosecuted, the crime is effectively legalised. It is a shameful statistic for a Minister.

**Lee Anderson:** On that point—

**Sarah Owen:** I have not finished.

[Sarah Owen]

It is a shameful statistic and it is shameful that rape victims are left without any justice. Although there is much political difference here, that is one statistic that we should all agree needs to be improved.

**Lee Anderson:** The hon. Lady is being very generous with her time. Does she realise that language such as that in this place strikes fear into the hearts of women in this country and encourages men who are thinking about doing these horrible crimes to go out and commit them? It is absolutely shocking. She should retract what she said.

**Sarah Owen:** When it comes to using moderate language, I think the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) might have to take some of his own advice. And when it comes to protecting women and giving them faith in our Crown Prosecution Service, in our Criminal Justice System and in our policing, that responsibility is on this Government, and for 12 years they have let victims down, so I will not be apologising for their mistakes.

This Government, as I have said, have the wrong priorities and seek only to divide our communities when our communities should be offered the hope that, as a society, we can be brought together to live safely and to see those who do not want to live by those laws adequately punished and rehabilitated.

After 12 years of Conservative Government—it may come as a shock to Conservative Members, but they have been in power for 12 years—we have seen record criminal case delays, police officers disappearing from our streets, courts sold off and a court backlog that cannot just be blamed on covid. Communities have no faith that the Criminal Justice System, for which the Government are responsible, is keeping their communities safe from crime. But it does not have to be this way.

We have all heard, from both sides of the House, many examples of how community payback can stop more serious reoffending, but judges have stopped handing it out because this soft-on-crime Conservative Government cannot be trusted to ensure that offenders pay back for their crimes. To be honest, when they look at the state of the Prime Minister, is it any wonder why this Government do not care if criminals get off scot-free?

To give Members an idea of the sheer scale of how let down victims feel, I can tell them that, last year, 1.3 million cases were dropped because victims just gave up. They did not have hope that the system would deliver for them, and that includes only the people who made a report. We can only guess at the number of unreported crimes where the victims did not have the faith that they would see justice. When will this Government stop treating victims as an after-thought?

I have spoken to people in Luton North who have been conned and defrauded of their money by bogus cowboy builders. Not only have their homes been wrecked in the process, but they have lost hard-earned savings. In one heartbreaking case, a pensioner lost pretty much everything, but they were told that it was a civil matter and that they would never get their money back. That may have been true, but the people who are conning our residents are criminals and they should pay for that, yet under this Government they do not.

We have seen reports from across the country of police being so understaffed that they no longer investigate burglaries, leaving victims to take matters into their own hands. Is that what the Government mean by community payback? One woman tracked down her stolen car only to be threatened with a crowbar. The BBC reported three other serious incidents where the community were left to fend for themselves under this Government.

A mother reported that her 12-year-old son had been sexually assaulted by a man in a pub toilet. She said that it took a week for the police to investigate, and officers then accidentally wiped the CCTV footage. A victim of domestic abuse was assaulted by an ex-partner in front of her children, aged two and four. She was told that no one could visit her until the following morning. The man returned later that evening. A stalking victim said that officers failed to attend her home despite repeated visits by her stalker, which included death threats.

These serious failings are not one-offs. Sadly, they are becoming the dangerous norm—if the Minister wants to listen. I am perfectly clear that this dangerous new norm is the fault of the Tory Government, and not the fault of the hard-working, dedicated police officers working with fewer resources and fewer colleagues to keep people safe. I recently visited Luton police station with my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) whose constituency it is in. That followed a visit to the Bedfordshire Police headquarters in Kempston. We met Detective Superintendent Zara Brown and spent time listening to officers and police support workers tackling some of the toughest cases. Those teams covered rape and serious sexual assault, protecting vulnerable people and domestic abuse.

What struck me as I listened to the officers was not only how dedicated they were to each individual victim, but how frustrated they were on the victims' behalf with the backlogs and the delays in getting them justice. Many in those teams have not seen significant pay rises and were regularly called in on their days off to attend in uniform to police extraordinary events in the region.

Most strikingly, that visit showed me, clear as day, without anyone saying a thing, the half-empty desks—not a covid measure, but because there were not enough police officers to fill them, and certainly not enough detectives. The failure for victims does not fall on hardworking and dedicated police officers and staff, but squarely on this Conservative Government, and that failure is being brutally felt in communities such as mine. The Conservatives' version of community payback is one where the community pays repeatedly for this Government's failure. That is not justice.

Labour knows that our communities need and deserve better than this. We will create neighbourhood prevention teams that will give our communities the tools and support to tackle the root causes of antisocial behaviour. We will put communities and victims at the heart of how offenders repay society and make sure justice is seen to be delivered locally and for good. Labour will put security at the heart of its contract with the British people.

The hon. Member for Ashfield talked about criminals living rent free, so I have one final question for Conservative Members: when will they get rid of the one living in No. 10?



3.41 pm

**Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): Today we have heard from many hon. Members who know that the blight of crime and antisocial behaviour has grown out of control in their constituencies over the past decade, and who know its impact on victims and the failure of this Government to deal with it. We have heard powerful contributions from many hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) made a very powerful speech about the impact of the lack of investment in the probation service over many years, with staff undervalued and neglected. She made a strong argument for improving the system to reduce reoffending. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who also emphasised that the probation service has been stripped bare, so that courts are less inclined to give those important community sentences. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) made a powerful speech, giving strong examples from within her own constituency of where victims are being let down.

Hon. Members have reiterated that the public want to see solutions rooted in their constituencies and communities. That is why the collapse of community payback has dealt such a heavy blow to the trust in our criminal justice system among both the public and the victims of crime. Not only do victims have to deal with the aftermath of crime, but they must battle incessantly for justice, and many drop out of the system after years and years of waiting.

I speak to victims every day, and the thing I am most commonly told is how horrific going through our justice system is and how rarely it results in justice. Two victims recently shared their experiences with me. One said that, “the system actively worked against us”,

and the other said that,

“this was the worst and most dreadful experience of my life.”

For 12 years, this Government have let victims down. It is clear that this justice system is not fit for purpose. Only Labour is serious about tackling the criminality that is wrecking our cities, towns and villages.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) said in opening the debate, “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” might sound like a slogan from another era of Labour history, but it remains as true and as vital now as it was in 1997, when the last Labour Government replaced a tired Conservative Government who were mired in sleaze and had no new ideas to fix the problems they created. Sound familiar? As is often the case, we are now seeing history repeating itself. Crime is up and prosecutions are down. This week we have seen an epidemic of fraud that hit newspaper front pages. Conservative Members may not think that fraud matters to anyone, but it does, and it matters to Labour too—and after a decade of cuts the police are ill-equipped to tackle it. We see that in the low number of prosecutions and convictions for offences such as theft. Retailers are reporting that the police will not come and investigate shoplifters brazenly walking a trolley’s-worth of alcohol out of their stores because they simply do not have the time or resource. Despite any protestations, our constituents are seeing and experiencing antisocial behaviour day in, day out.

In my own constituency we have seen a local conservation area, Forest Farm, and a climbing frame at Heath Park fall victim, on numerous occasions, to arson attacks, resulting in millions of pounds-worth of damage, not to mention the huge loss to our community. Community payback could and should be a powerful way to address why someone commits such crimes before they go on to commit any more, or worse. It means that those who committed the crime provide visible community benefit that victims and the wider community can see. It allows offenders to be held accountable by the communities they have impacted and it reduces the likelihood of further offences.

But community payback is failing. The service is still reeling from the catastrophe of the 2014 privatisation of the probation service. Even Conservative Members now accept that that was a crucial error. I pay tribute to the incredibly hard-working probation staff who struggle to supervise offenders properly. That is very clear from the statistics that we have seen over the past five years, with 4 million fewer hours of community payback, a quarter fewer offenders finishing community sentences, and a trebling of offenders finishing their unpaid work schemes from home. Community sentences are not paying back. Judges know it and victims know it—we all know it.

Labour has a different vision for community payback. We want schemes that begin to rebuild communities and victims’ trust in the justice system. We want a system where communities and victims come together, set out the tasks that must be completed through community payback and report back on results—one where offenders are properly reintegrated into communities by doing unpaid work that gives them a sense of value.

This can be fixed, but only if the Government put communities and victims right at the heart of the system. That is what our community and victim payback boards offer. Our plan would form part of the community safety partnerships and safer neighbourhood teams, meaning minimal cost to the taxpayer. Instead of emailing an anonymous Government inbox, this would give local communities, as well as victims, an opportunity to create ambitious schemes of real value. We could then publish local data on progress so that communities can really see the difference that these schemes are making. These schemes—community safety partnerships and safer neighbourhood teams—are already taking this approach, including in Labour-run Wales and Labour-run London. This is achievable, and it will bring results.

A constituent told me about the violent threats his neighbour was making to his disabled wife, while another has reported to me that she suffered a miscarriage due to the stress of antisocial behaviour from her upstairs neighbours. We know the distress that antisocial behaviour and crime are causing in our communities. Crime and antisocial behaviour are tearing through the country and destroying our communities while this Government just sit back and let it happen, letting victims down and criminals off the hook. We need a solution, and Labour has one. I hope that the whole House will come together today and back Labour’s plan.

3.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge):** Let me start by saying how grateful I am to all those who have contributed to this important debate today. In particular, I join the hon. Member for

[James Cartlidge]

Cardiff North (Anna McMorris), who has just spoken, and all my colleagues who have paid tribute to the brilliant work of those in the probation service. They have put in a hell of a shift through the pandemic. They have delivered exemplary service since then, and we all know the value they add in our communities and the key role they play in the criminal justice system. In particular, I thank them for the role they have played in helping us to achieve a situation whereby the proportion of offenders released from custody who reoffended within 12 months of release fell from 51.5% in 2010 to 42.2% in 2020. That is a significant improvement through reducing the reoffending rate.

The key point is that we have heard from the Opposition that they are now the party that is tough on crime, but as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing said at the beginning of the debate, we have to judge politicians by what they do, rather than what they say. Opposition Members cannot run away from the fact that they voted against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which recently received Royal Assent.

Let us just remind ourselves of the measures in that Act that the Opposition voted against, which include doubling the maximum penalty for assaulting an emergency worker; mandatory life sentences for unlawful act manslaughter of an emergency worker in the line of duty; a starting point of a whole-life tariff for premeditated child murder; increasing from 14 years to life the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving; increasing from 14 years to life the maximum sentence for causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink or drugs; and, among many other measures, abolishing automatic halfway release for serious, violent and sexual offenders. That is what is being tough on crime. Voting against that measure is being weak on crime.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**James Cartlidge:** I will give way to the hon. Member for Easington.

**Grahame Morris:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He is absolutely right about the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, which comes into force today, but the problem we had was that it was take it or leave it. We had to take the whole thing or reject the whole thing. Can I ask the Minister whether it is a good use of taxpayers' money and police resources when more than a dozen of the Metropolitan police and several vehicles were involved in the arrest of Steven Bray under the terms of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act for using a loudhailer outside Parliament? I think it is outrageous.

**James Cartlidge:** These are operational matters for the police, who are independent of Government. The point I am making is that the Opposition could have chosen to support those many measures. If we look at those measures as a whole, they send a signal that this party is tough on crime. The Opposition voting against them sends a wholly different message.

Sarah Owen *rose*—

Ms Lyn Brown *rose*—

**James Cartlidge:** I will take one more intervention, from the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown).

**Ms Brown:** Can the Minister explain to me, if he is so tough on crime, why he did not accept our amendment on minimum sentences for rape?

**James Cartlidge:** I am pleased to confirm to the hon. Lady, because it comes back to the speech of the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who said that we were somehow legalising rape, that the average sentence for adult rape in this country was around 10 years in 2021. I can confirm that that amount has increased by 15% since 2010—not decreased; increased. Those are very tough sentences for what is a very serious crime. I think that when we speak in this House, we should send a message that deters people from carrying out these horrific crimes, instead of sending messages that somehow people are going to get away with it. That does not help anyone. It does not help my daughter and it does not help anyone in this House or any one of our constituents.

Turning to the contributions in this important debate, the hon. Member for West Ham made a very good point about the impact of community payback on women. She talked particularly about the effects of alcohol and drugs. When we talk about community sentencing, the rehabilitative part is important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) mentioned. As the hon. Lady knows, we are piloting residential women's centres, and we announced in May that the first one will open in Swansea. I hope that she will support that.

**Ms Brown:** Indeed.

**James Cartlidge:** I am glad to hear that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) speaks with great expertise. He made the important point that the motion criticises us for what happened to unpaid work, but it ignores the reality of the pandemic. He also made the crucial point that the Opposition would have kept us in lockdown for longer. Last December, they wanted us to have a lockdown because of omicron, but we resisted, which was the right thing to do for the country. If they had done that, it would have taken even longer for us to deal with the backlog in the courts, the backlog of unpaid work and everything else.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for being persistent on the subject of persistent offenders. He had a Westminster Hall debate on it last week, to which I enjoyed responding. As a constituency MP, he continually raises the case that he has written to me about—I promise that I will respond to him—and he is a champion of his constituents. We obviously disagree on some of the matters that he raised, but he is right to pay tribute to prison officers. We certainly cherish the huge role they play and appreciate all their efforts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) was typically robust and forthright in telling it like it is. He said that prisoners should go to work, and in the spirit of that point, I say that it is crucial to ensure that there is every chance for people to get a job when they leave prison. That is why I am proud to confirm that the number of persons released from custody who were employed six months after release is up by 66%. That is testament to the strength of the economy and to the Government's commitment to reducing reoffending.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is no longer in her place, made a very good speech. She made an important point that the evidence shows that, in many ways, if someone has a short prison sentence, it has less of an impact on reducing reoffending than community sentences can have. Hon. Members on both sides of the House agree with that, and it is certainly what the evidence suggests.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) made some good points. He encouraged his constituents to get involved in schemes and nominate where work can happen. If there is a problem with fly-tipping in a constituency, people should go to their parish councils, which should in turn go to the police and crime commissioner and say, "What about getting some of that unpaid work resource into our constituency?" He also made an excellent point about alcohol and the increasing use of sobriety tags; all hon. Members on both sides of the House surely know the impact of alcohol on crime. The Minister for Crime and Policing is committed to making more of that.

The Government have a clear plan to increase the number of community payback hours delivered via robust outdoor placements. We have made significant investments to bolster staffing levels and we continue to strengthen our engagement and collaboration with key local stakeholders to ensure that placements visibly improve the communities in which they are served. In that way, as the most timeless common law principle says, justice can be seen to be done.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes that the number of community sentences handed down fell by one quarter in the last three years; further notes that completed hours of unpaid work carried out by offenders has fallen by three quarters in the last three years; notes with concern that despite the end of lockdown restrictions in 2021, the number of offenders permitted to complete unpaid work from home has continued to rise; and calls on the Government to create community and victim payback boards to place communities and victims in control of the type of community projects that offenders complete to restore public faith in community payback.

**Sarah Owen:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I ask the Minister to correct the record. He inadvertently misled the House by saying that I had said that rape is legal. That is clearly not the case. I find it particularly distasteful that the Minister is seeking to put responsibility for prosecuting rapists on a woman Opposition MP. I offer him the chance to correct that at the Dispatch Box, if not in *Hansard*.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Obviously, it is not for the Chair to interpret what Ministers or other Members may say. She has put her concern on the record and the Minister will have heard it, so I suggest that we move on, unless the Minister wishes to say something.

**James Cartlidge** indicated dissent.

## Delivery of Public Services

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

3.59 pm

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that UK economic growth is forecast to grind to a halt next year, with only Russia worse in the OECD; further notes that GDP has fallen in recent months while inflation has risen to 9.1 per cent and that food prices, petrol costs and bills in general are soaring for millions across the country; believes that the Government is leaving Britain with backlogs such as long waits for passports, driving licences, GP and hospital appointments, court dates, and at airports; and calls on the Government to set out a new approach to the economy that will end 12 years of slow growth and high taxation under successive Conservative governments.

It is my pleasure to speak to the motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, and those of me and my right hon. and hon. Friends. The Prime Minister told us at the weekend, speaking from the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda, that he was "actively considering" his third term in office. The shadow Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), replied that she was actively considering marrying Ryan Reynolds.

While the Prime Minister considers his future, here at home concerns are more prosaic and more real. In area after area of life, standards of service that used to be taken for granted have crumbled, leaving people facing delays and backlogs for basic services, and all this is coming on top of the cost of living crisis, which is biting deeper with each passing week. As each new backlog and delay builds up, the Government look more and more powerless to address them. Even the Government's supporters do not seem to believe that the announcements made by No. 10 will be followed through with any proper delivery. The Government were supposed to take us forward to the future, but as we read the news each day, it feels more and more like a step back in time towards the 1970s.

In another, more candid remark, also on Saturday, the Prime Minister admitted that since the Conservatives took office the UK economy had

"not grown as it should".

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Does the right hon. Member agree with me that if you wish to improve service you do not go on strike and if you wish to pay for higher wages you do not go on strike? Will he give that advice to the rail unions?

**Mr McFadden:** I had anticipated one or two interventions on strikes, so let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that whoever's responsibility the strikes are, it is certainly not that of a party that has been in opposition for 12 years. He and the Ministers he supports will have to take responsibility for the industrial strife they are presiding over. I say that to him in the anticipation of other interventions in the same vein.

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr McFadden:** That is my answer to all interventions on the issue, so let me proceed.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?



**Mr McFadden:** Not at the moment.

I am grateful for the Prime Minister's candour on economic growth. That is a very important admission, because without good economic growth the country is less prosperous, the fiscal position is weaker—in fact, it is weaker to the tune of some £40 billion a year compared with the pattern of economic growth we had in the first decade of this century—and people's wages are lower by thousands of pounds a year. We know that people are paying higher taxes due to the Government breaking their manifesto pledges, but let us see what they are getting for their money.

It is often said in this place that the first duty of Government is to protect their citizens and that justice delayed is justice denied. Both those statements are true, so let us look at what is happening with access to justice. Victims of crime have a right to expect a trial in a reasonable amount of time after that crime has been committed. In the year before the pandemic—I repeat, before the pandemic—the number of cases awaiting trial at Crown courts grew by 23% to more than 40,000.

**Rob Butler:** Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the backlog in the courts will be lengthened or shortened by barristers going on strike?

**Mr McFadden:** I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

As I have said, the number of cases grew by 23% to over 40,000 before the pandemic, and that number now stands at 57,000. For magistrates courts, the number is 364,000. The typical wait for a case of robbery to come to court is two years, and for rape it is often three years. No wonder that in a recent sexual offences case that had been delayed for more than three years the presiding judge, Patrick Thompson, branded the delays “absolutely farcical” and said:

“How this is justice is beyond me.”

He is not alone in his judgment. These delays leave victims without redress and without justice and with the crime that they have suffered hanging over them. They are not just a symptom of the pandemic: we must remember that in the year before the pandemic the number of cases awaiting trial had grown by 23%.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making excellent points. Does he agree that the excessive delays in the justice system, in particular for rape, have a huge mental health impact on the victims yet our mental health system is also failing to respond quickly to those needs?

**Mr McFadden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As she outlines, these backlogs have real and important human effects; they are not just numbers on a page.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr McFadden:** I will make some progress.

This is happening not just in the field of justice. Record numbers of patients are waiting for NHS treatment, and they are waiting longer than ever: the waiting list for NHS treatment is now 6.5 million, with more than 300,000 patients having been on the list for over a year.

Given that the system had to focus on dealing with covid, some might point to pandemic effects. There would be some justification for that argument if we had not gone into the pandemic with waiting lists that had already rocketed, but we went into the pandemic with waiting lists of 4.4 million patients, almost double the number on the lists when this Government came to power. Long waits and more people waiting are not just features of the pandemic. The number waiting more than 18 weeks is now 2.5 million, but even before the pandemic that number was nearly three quarters of a million. Some 840,000 patients were told in April that they will have to wait more than a month for a GP appointment—if they can even get through to the surgery in the first place. Millions of people are struggling to get any access to NHS dental treatment. Last year 2,000 dentists left the NHS, almost one in 10 across the whole country. There are 4,500 fewer GPs than in 2013, and Conservative manifesto promises to increase the number of GPs have been broken repeatedly. These delays are not the fault of NHS staff or the patients; they are the result of 12 long years of the Conservatives presiding over the system we have and it is time they took responsibility for the backlogs and the delays that have resulted from their long period in office.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The situation in our dental services is so dire that people are having to carry out do-it-yourself operations at home without anaesthetic or any other medical facilities. Does he agree that it is disgraceful that people are having to resort to such measures as a result of the Conservatives' backlog given that we are the world's fifth largest economy?

**Mr McFadden:** My hon. Friend is right. In a debate on the subject last week, the shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting), outlined a horrific case.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Is the situation not more nuanced? Healthcare is devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, with four different parties running it, but all have suffered and seen waiting times go up not only during the pandemic but in the preceding 10 years. Does that not show that there is a fundamental problem across the western world, because the likes of Germany, the Netherlands and France are all struggling and suffering the same fate?

**Mr McFadden:** To govern is to take responsibility, and the problem with saying that it is all about the post-pandemic situation is that waiting lists had almost doubled before the pandemic. I could give the hon. Member the figures again, but I do not want to read them out twice.

It is not just about the NHS. There are also delays at our ports. We have seen long queues of lorries—the delays are well known—and increased costs and bureaucracy for exporters.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when the last Labour Government left office in 2010, satisfaction in the national health service was among the highest in the world and that through reform programmes, disruption and cuts in funding the Government have created problems in the NHS? They need to get a grip.

We also have chaos in the courts. I see that in my constituency, where the family courts are really struggling with long waiting lists because of shortages of judges and lawyers. We also have passport queues and disruption across the country. The Government have lost control and need to get a grip.

**Mr McFadden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I remember seeing the driving down of waiting times and waiting lists in government, and never at any point did anyone say, “We can take our foot off the gas” because there might have been problems in Germany or somewhere else. We took responsibility for the system that we were running.

As I said, there have been large queues at the ports. The Government do not need to rerun the Brexit argument—Ministers should have realised that we can leave only once—but there are things that they could do. They could at least seek a veterinary agreement with the EU—even New Zealand has one—which would be a better deal for our farmers and our food industry and may cut the bureaucracy and delays at our ports.

Let us take the asylum system, which is of significant concern to our constituents. The number of cases taking more than six months to decide has been up every quarter since the Home Secretary took office, and the backlog has tripled in the last three years. That matters because delays cost money and leave everyone in limbo.

**Hywel Williams:** On ports, another aspect of the problem is the decline in business through ports in Wales and western UK ports involved in trade with Ireland. In fact, trade through Holyhead is down 34% as a permanent feature. It seems to me—perhaps to the right hon. Gentleman as well—that the Government are doing absolutely nothing about that.

**Mr McFadden:** Well, the Government have chosen the route that we discussed in the Chamber last night. I do not want to repeat that, but other routes are available to them to reduce the bureaucracy experienced by our farmers and exporters.

The delays in asylum matter because they cost money. Seventy-five per cent of asylum claims are eventually endorsed, but, until they are decided, legitimate claimants cannot make a positive contribution to the country by taking up a job, and claimants who are denied cannot be removed from the country. It is neither in the interests of those who seek refuge nor in the national interest to have a system so beset by delays and backlogs. It is certainly not value for money for the taxpayer, either.

On passports and driving licences, people are being asked to wait up to 10 weeks for a passport—a standard that was itself breached more than 35,000 times in the first quarter of the year according to the Home Office. That is where backlogs beget backlogs. There are reports of travellers being asked to seek emergency travel documents because passports have not been issued, but now—this is the least surprising news ever—there is a queue for those documents, too.

Three quarters of a million drivers are waiting for their licences to be processed because of the backlog at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. A large proportion of those drivers have medical conditions and need specific permission to keep driving. That is where the backlog begets workforce issues, because, until those

people get their new licences, they often cannot return to work. I appreciate that none of that may be as exciting as the latest wedge issue thought up in No. 10, but delivering on basic governance is the Government’s job, and it is time to do that job. The duty of service delivery does not go away. At the heart of this are two issues: getting the workforce right and making the most of new technology.

**James Daly:** The right hon. Gentleman touched on criminal justice earlier. Will he join me in asking Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, to take responsibility for the appalling situation that the criminal justice system is in, in Greater Manchester? It is not protecting vulnerable people or investigating crime, as a result of which my local residents are suffering. Will he join me in asking Andy Burnham to take responsibility and do something about it, which is his job?

**Mr McFadden:** I detect a pattern with these interventions. They seem to be saying that the problem is everyone’s responsibility except the Government’s. There is no escaping 12 years in office.

There are two issues at the heart of this: workforce and technology. Staff shortages are common in many areas. The unemployment figures have fallen, but so too has the overall number of people in employment. More than half a million people have left the labour market since the pandemic. They are from all age groups, but the biggest group is the over-50s, and their biggest reasons for leaving the labour market are ongoing health issues and caring responsibilities.

This is where the delays and backlogs become a vicious circle. I have already mentioned that when people with medical conditions cannot get a new driving licence approved, it can prevent their return to work. The Access to Work programme is there to help people with disabilities into work, but people face delays of up to 12 weeks in their application being processed, and the waiting list for decisions has quadrupled over the past year. That holds people back from taking up jobs and makes the staff shortages worse.

The NHS employs some 1.2 million people, but it went into the pandemic with 100,000 unfilled vacancies. We have argued for a forward plan for NHS staffing, and for training so that the vacancies can be filled. That was supported by the cross-party Health and Social Care Committee, but fiercely resisted by the Government. I have to say to the Minister that looking the other way will not make the workforce issues go away. Why are the Government so resistant to the forward planning needed by the NHS?

The question is how we make the most of our potential workforce, and help those who could go back to work to do so. Many people in this country are suffering from long covid. There are people with mental health issues, and people for whom childcare costs are a barrier. We support an expansion in mental healthcare, so that we get support to those who need it within a month, and we support mental health hubs in our local communities. More breakfast clubs and after-school activities would not only be good for children but would help parents get back to work, too.

The point of all this is that we should use the talent and energy of everyone who can make a contribution, and address any barriers to work that they face, but that

[Mr McFadden]

is not the Government's response to the backlogs; they have proposed staffing cuts of 20%. How will that help anyone to get a passport, driving licence or health treatment quicker, or get their case to court sooner? Is it really the best that the Government can come up with? Is it even a real response, or just another initiative thrown up to provoke a debate that distracts attention from the real issues that people face?

The issue is not just about the workforce; it is also about using innovation and technology to make public services better for the public. Covid has been described as the great acceleration. It was a time when years of change were compressed into months—in education, in the way we work, in the way we shop and pay for things, in accessing healthcare and so on. The question is how we make the most of what we have learned, and of all the other rapid changes in daily life that are powered by technology, to reform our public services for the future. Our ambition should not be just to return to where we were in 2019; it should be to improve, so that we can have high-quality public services for all.

We already knew that the Conservatives were running a high-tax, low-growth economy—we have said that many times—but the backlogs that I have outlined in public services, in area after area, show that it is also a high-tax, low-delivery economy. We have the highest tax burden since the 1950s, but people cannot get a passport or an appointment with a dentist. That is simply not a good enough deal for the British public.

The Prime Minister says that he wants another two terms in office, but our public services cannot afford another two terms of backlogs and chaos. This Government are not really governing any more. They are simply campaigning.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My apologies to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for attending the start of this debate tardily. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a Scottish dimension? We talk about the number of Governments we have had. Today, pregnant mothers have to make a round trip of more than 200 miles from Caithness to Inverness to give birth. Health services have gone backwards in my constituency, so all that is being said is also relevant to the Government north of the border.

**Mr McFadden:** I am glad that the hon. Member had the opportunity to make that point, whether he is wearing a tie or not.

The sole purpose of the Government is the survival of the Prime Minister. They have trashed standards in public life, as we have seen; they have damaged our standing in the world; and they are now trashing service delivery. When people pay the price for Government dysfunction in constant delays and backlogs, which have a damaging effect on quality of life; when the things that we used to take for granted become an endless slog and a debilitating battle; and when all this comes at the price of broken tax promises, people conclude that they cannot rely on the Prime Minister and on this Government. That is what is happening. As long as he and they remain in office, the chaos that has led to Boris Johnson's backlog Britain will continue.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the shadow Chief Secretary—do forgive me: the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Simon Clarke.

4.21 pm

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke):** I hasten to say that we very much remain in office, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to respond for the Government to this debate. I begin by saying, as I have on many occasions, that we understand the impact of global inflationary pressures on the cost of living. We have already acted in many different ways to ease those pressures, and we will continue to do so; we are acting, as we see it, reasonably and responsibly to help UK households get through this. The reality is that we are experiencing a perfect storm of international supply shocks. High global energy and commodity prices, together with problems affecting international supply chains in the wake of the pandemic, have pushed up prices around the world, and consumers and businesses are feeling the pinch.

**Chi Onwurah:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Clarke:** Gosh, it is early for an intervention, but why not?

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank the Chief Secretary for giving way. Is it his view that 10 years of austerity economics, which slashed the capacity of both central and local government to spend, left our Government's public services with the resilience to meet the demands of the covid crisis, and the cost of living and inflation crisis?

**Mr Clarke:** I take the view that 10 years of responsible government made sure that this Government had the financial resources available to unleash £400 billion of support for the UK economy in response to the pandemic.

On top of the issues with supply chains, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly worsened the situation. I know that the House is united in the view that we should stay the course with Ukraine and stand up for freedom and democracy there in the face of this barbaric onslaught, but that comes at a cost. Domestic factors have also started to play more of a role. For example, although our very low rate of unemployment is welcome and good in its own right, that contributes to the relatively high rate of inflation.

Rising inflation poses a challenge for the public finances, as it does for family budgets. As in many other countries, high inflation is acting as a curb on growth. The good news, which I will come to, is that the Government have the tools and the determination to tackle inflation and boost growth—namely, an independent monetary policy, a responsible fiscal approach and a focus on supply-side reform.

**Hywel Williams:** I notice that the right hon. Gentleman did not include Brexit in his little list. Last week, the Resolution Foundation said that by 2030, Brexit will cost the average worker more than £470 per annum in lost pay. Would he like to include that in his list?

**Mr Clarke:** Well, there have been many projections about Brexit, many of which have proved totally wrong. I certainly do not regret my vote to leave the European Union. We managed the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe;



we are able to create our new freeports; we are free of the European Court of Justice; and we are not sending huge sums to Brussels, and can instead deploy that money for the public good. Frankly, those are all reasons why this Government were returned with a thumping majority in 2019. Crucially, it is a settled question, and it would be well for this country to move beyond it. There are all sorts of debates to be had about how we can take advantage of our decision to leave the European Union; those would be a more productive use of this House's time.

We have a plan to grow the economy sustainably, boost productivity and improve living standards for millions of households in the years to come. In the past two years, the Government have demonstrated our determination to lead this country through the worst crisis—indeed, crises—in living memory. We will do the same as we tackle the challenges of today. As I have mentioned, the Government have taken steps to address the cost of living challenges. We are putting £37 billion into helping households, and are targeting that support at those who need it most. The households most vulnerable to high inflation will receive an extra £1,200 this year, with the first payments coming next month. Everyone will benefit from our energy support package, which will provide £550 for 28 million households.

**Dr Luke Evans:** I have had the good fortune to go to Hinckley jobcentre to see how things are functioning there, given the adversity that our constituents face. One of its strongest features is the household fund, which delivers to those who are most needy. It gives the officer who sits in front of an individual the flexibility and accountability to support them at that point. Is that not exactly what we should be doing—targeting our greatest support at those who are most vulnerable?

**Mr Clarke:** I completely agree. That has also been my experience at my jobcentre. It is really important that across the House we emphasise that our jobcentres are a fantastic source of support and not something to be scared of. The teams in my constituency could not be more committed to helping the public; I am sure that the same is true of those in my hon. Friend's constituency. That is a really important message, given our aim of getting as many people as possible into work.

Crucially, our package of support is more generous than what the Labour party suggests; that may be why there has been some chuntering on the Opposition Front Bench. The public, if they are in the 8 million means-tested benefit households, will receive £1,200 under our plans, compared with only £600 under Labour's. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said of our intervention:

"On average the poorest households will now be approximately compensated for the rising cost of living this year."

On top of that, we have cut fuel duty, and we have set aside £1 billion to help those who are most in need with the cost of essentials such as food, clothing and utilities through the household support fund, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) mentioned.

There are other ways of putting money back into people's pockets. From next week, as the Chancellor explained in the spring statement, working people

"will be able to earn £12,570 a year without paying a single penny of income tax or national insurance... That is a £6 billion... tax cut for 30 million people across the United Kingdom".—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 340.]

**Rushanara Ali:** The Chief Secretary mentions ways of putting money into people's pockets. Will he explain how he will recover the £26.8 billion that the Treasury has lost to fraudsters and error, and the £11 billion lost by failing to insure against interest rate rises? If the Government could recover that money, or if they had not wasted it through fraud and mismanagement, there would be billions of pounds in the public purse to support our constituents right now. Instead, it has been lost through incompetence.

**Mr Clarke:** I respect the hon. Lady from our days of old on the Treasury Committee, and I completely share her commitment to managing public money responsibly, but I gently disagree with those numbers. Clearly some fraud has been perpetrated during the pandemic, and we are managing it actively; indeed, in July, the new public sector fraud authority will go live, backed by some £25 million of additional funding, which is a welcome step. However, sometimes the figures cited in fraud debates capture items such as the write-down in value of the personal protective equipment that was purchased at an absolute premium at the height of the pandemic and that subsequently became worth much less in an era of much greater supply. We should be careful to take the issue seriously, but should not convey the impression that things are as bleak as the hon. Lady makes out.

**Rushanara Ali:** Will the Minister give way again?

**Mr Clarke:** I am going to make some progress at this point.

The Chancellor has also announced his intention to cut the basic rate of income tax from 20p to 19p in the pound from 2024. This will be the first income tax cut for 16 years, and it will be a £5 billion tax cut for 30 million people. The Chancellor has also said that he will set out his support for businesses in more detail in the autumn Budget.

Crucially, everything that we have done has been done responsibly, reflecting our continued commitment to strong and sustainable public finances. In direct contrast, the Labour leadership has so far promised £99.5 billion of day-to-day spending commitments—

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** Where?

**Mr Clarke:** I can provide the hon. Gentleman with the full details if he would like a list.

However, Labour has only announced £7.5 billion in revenue to pay for those commitments, less than one tenth. That leaves a £92.5 billion fiscal black hole of unfunded public spending commitments, which would almost double our current borrowing. This year we will spend £80 billion just paying interest on our debt. That is nearly four times what we spent last year, and those numbers should concern the whole House. The Office for Budget Responsibility made it very clear at the time of the spring statement that our fiscal headroom could be "wiped out by relatively small changes"

to the "economic outlook". Labour's £92.5 billion black hole would mean an extra £3,303 per household in general taxation or extra borrowing. In opposition, parties have the luxury of promising it all and not being responsible for delivering any of it.

**Rushanara Ali:** It is rather rich for the Minister to lecture the Opposition about funding when he has not even been able to tell us how much will be lost in fraud on his watch. His own counter-fraud Minister, after he resigned, said that it had been

“happy days if you were a crook”.

That is what his Government are doing—dishing out money to crooks. Perhaps the Minister could answer my earlier question: how much money has been lost to fraud and incompetence, and how will he recover that money?

**Mr Clarke:** We have set out a very clear plan to recover that money, and we have provided regular periodic updates on the progress that we are making against fraud, but we do not accept Lord Agnew’s characterisation of the situation. We continue to pursue this, and obviously the authorities reserve the right to pursue individuals and companies wherever it is clear that wrongdoing has occurred.

As a Minister, I am proud to be part of a Government who support people through difficult times, but that needs to go hand in hand with fiscal responsibility. The support that we are providing is timely, temporary, and targeted at those who need it most to avoid pushing up prices and interest rates further.

The motion lists a number of other issues, including passports, driving licences, GP and hospital appointments, court dates, and airports. Let me take each of those in turn.

Owing to covid-19, more than 5 million people delayed applying for British passports. Following the return of unrestricted international travel, there has been unprecedented demand for new passports, with 9.5 million applications forecast for this year. That compares with 4 million applications in 2020 and 5 million in 2021. Since April 2021, 650 additional staff have been brought in, with a further 550 arriving over the summer, and those numbers are starting to tell: more passport applications are being processed than ever before. In fact, between March and May alone, the Passport Office completed the processing of some 3 million applications. Since April 2021, people have been advised to allow up to 10 weeks to receive their passports, and 98.5% of applications have hit that target. For the small percentage of customers whose applications take longer than 10 weeks, and who are due to travel within a fortnight, there is an expedited service, at no additional cost, to ensure that they obtain their passports in time.

I am encouraged by the hard work of employees at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to clear the backlog in the processing of driving licence applications and waiting times for driving tests which built up throughout the pandemic and last year’s industrial action. I am confident that the DVLA remains on track to reduce waiting times further over the course of this year.

On NHS waiting lists, I want to take this chance to thank the NHS for the commitment with which it is tackling the backlog that built up during the pandemic. This Government are already instituting one of the largest catch-up programmes in the history of the NHS, spending more than £8 billion between this financial year and 2024-25 to tackle the backlog so that the NHS in England can deliver some 30% more activity in 2024-25 compared with pre-pandemic levels.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): In the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, nearly 18,000 women are waiting for a breast scan that is overdue, largely because of a shortage of individuals who can perform those scans. Five full-time equivalent posts have been left vacant. Does the Minister agree that something needs to be done to tackle these workforce issues so that we do not fail to deliver key services and increase the risk of avoidable death?

**Mr Clarke:** I want to reassure the hon. Lady and her constituents that we completely agree that there is a need to ensure that those sorts of scans happen as speedily as possible. That is why the total budget of the Department of Health and Social Care in 2024-25—that is to say, at the end of this Parliament—will stand at £188 billion a year. That is a truly colossal sum of money and it equips the NHS to bear down on precisely these backlogs in a way that will help women in her constituency.

**Dr Luke Evans:** I sit on the Health Committee, and we were talking this morning about some of the problems with the workforce and the interaction between primary care and secondary care. One of the responses was that the 42 new integrated care systems that have been put in place will give us the flexibility to change the system. Does the Minister agree that this is exactly the kind of planning and foresight that allows us to deliver better for the future, and to future-proof our health service to try to deal with some of the problems that we all know are affecting western world medicine?

**Mr Clarke:** I agree with my hon. Friend. It is crucial that the NHS continues to reform and, frankly, become more fit for a technological age, as well as for one in which we can anticipate these problems ahead of time. We should act to improve the use of all the technologies, which will mean that we get more value for taxpayers’ money. With an ageing society that is plagued by so many avoidable and preventable conditions, we need to be able to catch them in time, and that planning and foresight will be crucial for the future.

**John Redwood:** When I asked representatives of the Health Department how many chief executives there were in NHS England, they said that they did not know. Has my right hon. Friend had any more success than I have in finding out how much senior management there is, how it is aligned with the interests of patients and how wisely it is going to spend the extra money he is giving it?

**Mr Clarke:** My right hon. Friend is right to say that with this budget for the NHS comes a responsibility for that organisation to be absolutely open and candid—in a way that, frankly, it has too often not been—about where its resources are deployed, and certainly to avoid funding a culture of managerialism at the expense of the patients. We have had recent success in securing some of the data that we have been looking for, but this is a subject where ongoing pressure from across the House for greater transparency is welcome. Certainly if there is any data that we hold that my right hon. Friend would like to see, I will do my best to facilitate that.

**James Daly:** I welcome the steps the Government are taking to address the challenges within the system. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a bit rich for

Labour Members to be lecturing anybody on waiting times when waiting time targets in Wales have not been met for many years? As of May 2022, nearly 700,000 patients were waiting for care, which is a 50% increase since February 2020. That is a record to be ashamed of.

**Mr Clarke:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The performance of the Welsh Government in this area is genuinely concerning, but this also demonstrates a point about fundamental fairness. This debate is sometimes mischaracterised as everything being this Government's fault, but as we have heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the performance of the Scottish healthcare system is blighted by many of the challenges that we are facing in England. Clearly there are also problems in Wales and significant problems in Northern Ireland. What matters is that we set out a clear plan to deal with them.

Our NHS elective delivery plan states that by next month no one will be waiting more than two years for elective care, except where patients choose to wait longer for some reason, and in a number of highly specialised areas.

We know that considerable progress has been made in achieving that target. The number who have waited two years or more in acute hospitals has fallen by 15,000 to 6,700, down from a peak of 22,500 in January. At the same time, the Government are on track to deliver our manifesto commitment for 50 million more primary care appointments by 2024. GP appointment numbers have already recovered to pre-pandemic levels, with 25.3 million taking place in April, of which 1.3 million were covid vaccinations.

The motion also mentions court dates, where we are also making good progress. We are providing almost half a billion pounds to address criminal court and tribunal backlogs.

**Rob Butler:** The shadow Chief Secretary was reluctant to give me a straight answer to my question, so I wonder whether the Chief Secretary would tell me whether he believes the strike by barristers will lengthen or shorten the waiting times in our courts. Does he think strikes by public service workers more generally will do anything to help our economy and our recovery from the covid pandemic?

**Mr Clarke:** I thank my hon. Friend for his substantive question, and there was a certain reticence from the shadow Chief Secretary to answer it. The public will look in consternation at barristers striking when there is an offer on the table of a £7,000 a year pay increase for that profession. It comes down to a test of values: if they are serious about tackling the backlog in our courts, they should get to work, accept the pay offer and move forward. It would be helpful if the official Opposition, rather than looking at their feet or their phones, would get on with the job of persuading public service workers that the best interests of the public and those workers themselves lies in accepting reasonable pay offers, moving forward and not further gumming up public sector delivery by taking unnecessary strike action.

We are providing some half a billion pounds to address criminal court and tribunal backlogs. We have also extended 30 Nightingale courtrooms to help manage

complex cases that would otherwise crowd out cases that are easier to answer. We are also investing £200 million to complete the £1.3 billion court reform programme. Reform is making our courts more modern, with a wide range of new online services to make the courts more efficient—this includes rolling out a new digital platform to manage 1.5 million annual criminal cases.

Finally, on airport delays, the reality is that we are seeing disruption globally in the travel sector as it is reopening, at pace, after almost two years of being shut down during the pandemic. Anyone who has seen the scenes recently at Schiphol or Dublin will recognise that, fundamentally, this is an international challenge. Where possible, the Government are supporting our aviation sector to manage the risk of disruption this summer. That includes using our post-Brexit freedoms to provide the sector with more flexibility when training new employees; working with Border Force to ensure preparations meet passenger demand; and allowing HMRC employment history letters to be used as a suitable form of reference check. Last week, we also laid regulations before Parliament that will help airlines prevent last-minute flight cancellations during the summer peak by allowing a one-off “amnesty” on airport slots rules.

While we are working around the clock to help people get on with their daily lives, the Labour party has, once again, chosen to side with its trade union paymasters and join the picket lines. During the pandemic alone, we delivered some £16 billion of emergency funding to keep the railways running, which is equivalent to £600 for every family in the UK. That level of subsidy is unsustainable and shows why reform is needed now, but instead of working together to achieve the reforms we need to make the railways fit for the future—and it is eminently achievable and fair, and really important—Opposition Front Benchers have backed the strike action and joined the picket lines. Those strikes have stopped people from getting to work, created additional stress for students taking exams and created untold problems for patients needing treatment. The shadow Front Benchers wish to form a Labour Government, but through their actions it is clear that a Labour Government would be content to see the country brought to a halt by militant union leaders. On this issue, the Opposition have displayed no leadership whatsoever.

I said that I would come back to the issue of inflation, and how the Government are addressing it. As the Chancellor told the House last month, we have three key tools at our disposal: independent monetary policy, fiscal responsibility and supply side reform. We have every confidence that the independent Bank of England will take decisive action to get inflation back on target, with it having averaged precisely 2% over the last 25 years. Our second tool is responsible fiscal policy. We know that any fiscal support we provide must be timely, targeted, and temporary, to avoid making the situation worse, by causing inflation, and interest and mortgage rates, to go up further than they otherwise would.

We are also taking an active approach to supply-side reform through initiatives such as the energy security strategy, which will reduce bills by increasing energy supply and improving energy efficiency; moving 500,000 jobseekers off welfare and into work; doing more to support older people back into the jobs market; and making our visa regime for high-skilled migrants one of the most competitive in the world.



[Mr Simon Clarke]

The Opposition have no plan to tackle inflation. If they support double-digit, inflation-busting pay rises for public sector workers, do they accept the inflationary effect that will have? Does the shadow Chief Secretary accept that that would lead to higher and more prolonged inflation, hammering the incomes of more vulnerable households? How does Labour propose to pay for inflation-busting pay rises? Every Labour spokesperson who refuses to answer those questions—and they all do—is ducking questions that are fundamental to the running of our economy and our society. The public will draw their own conclusions.

We understand that growing the economy sustainably into the future is by far the best way we can support families in the long term. That is exactly why we will continue to invest in capital, people, and ideas, so that we can boost productivity and improve living standards. It is why we will cut the burden of taxation as we move out of the shadow of the pandemic over the years ahead. In his February 2022 Mais lecture and in the spring statement, the Chancellor spoke about his plans to create the conditions for private sector growth by supporting a culture of enterprise. Together, our plan for growth and our tax plan represent an ambitious strategy for boosting growth and productivity. By contrast, the Opposition call for a “new approach” to the economy. It is not a new approach: it is the same old Labour—uncosted spending, higher borrowing and a surrender to hard-line trade union bosses at every turn, every time. This Conservative Government will not make those mistakes. We will stick to our plan, make responsible choices and guide our country through difficult times to better days ahead.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I calculate that to give each Back Bencher equal time will require a time limit of about eight minutes. In that way, we will get everybody in.

4.46 pm

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): In April the UK had a national net debt of £2.4 trillion—that is 12 zeros. The Chief Secretary was brave when he spoke about fiscal responsibility. The motion starts by noting that “UK economic growth is forecast to grind to a halt next year, with only Russia worse in the OECD”. That would be bad enough, but when one actually analyses what the OECD says, the position is even more stark. It says:

“GDP is projected to increase...in 2022, before stagnating in 2023. Inflation will keep rising and peak at over 10% at the end of 2022 due to continuing labour and supply shortages and high energy prices. Private consumption is expected to slow as rising prices erode households’ income. Public investment will weaken in 2022 as supply bottlenecks hamper...investment”.

It is a gloomy prognosis.

The IMF’s numbers make for troubling reading. The 1.2% growth forecast for the UK next year is the lowest of the advanced economies. That growth is also lower than emerging and developing Asian economies; lower than Latin America and the Caribbean economies; lower than the middle eastern and central Asian economies; and lower than sub-Saharan Africa. All of that at a time when, as the motion says, “food prices, petrol costs and bills in general are soaring”.

Given that inflation in the euro area was at 8.1% in May, one could make a credible case that this is a global phenomenon. However, some of the problems are self-evidently self-inflicted. Only a fool would deny that many of the continuing labour and supply shortages are a direct result of the self-inflicted economic harm that is Brexit, leaving the single market and ending the free movement of labour. I know that the Minister said that Brexit is done and we need to move on, but I am not sure that there is a way to resolve many of those issues without addressing the freedom of movement and the single market issues.

Who pays the price of the failures? The OECD rather helpfully tells us:

“Vulnerable social groups have been particularly affected by the pandemic and poverty is set to increase as jobs are lost and self-employed see incomes dwindle”.

It will not be the Tory donors and cronies who benefited from the dodgy personal protective equipment contracts who will suffer. It will not be the bankers whose bonuses are proposed to be uncapped. They will not suffer, but then these people never do.

When the OECD talks about poverty being set to increase, we must also remember that this is not all by chance. It is not all a result of covid. It is not all because of external inflationary pressures. It is not all other people’s fault. It is a result of removing the universal credit uplift. It is a result of increasing national insurance. It is a consequence of the Tory policy of taxing the country more than it has been taxed for the past 70 years.

However, the motion before us also recognises that this failing and out-of-touch Government are leaving the UK with backlogs, such as the long waits for passports, driving licences, GP and hospital appointments, court dates and at airports. These things are all happening; we are seeing them with our own eyes. Many of these problems are of the Government’s own making, and their failure to understand, let alone tackle them is, I think, to their shame.

Let us look at the passport fiasco. Three weeks ago, I went to the pop-up passport office in Parliament with 24 cases. I went again last week with a further nine. Those are not unusual numbers; every MP has this. The staff there are incredibly helpful, but it is clear that the entire system is broken. Staff are drowning in the backlog of work. This is about not only families desperate not to lose hard-earned cash through cancelled holidays because they do not get their passports in time, but the impact that this is having on business. A local businessman told me recently:

“I travel abroad regularly for business and was unable to send off my passport for what could be 10 to 12 weeks. I was planning to use the fast-track service or online premium as my passport runs out in September. In the last six weeks, there has been no availability from Glasgow and I was planning to travel to Belfast or Durham, which were the only passport centres available.”

He told me a couple of weeks ago that

“as of last week, the passport website has been down with no access or availability. My current passport runs out on 11 September. I have business trips booked through May and June and, while I believe you can travel with up to three months on a passport, there is no guarantee that the airlines will allow you to fly.”

What sort of Government allow their Departments and agencies to fail like this, effectively stopping businesspeople travelling overseas to win new orders or to source raw materials or equipment?

And on an associated point—this is another Government failure—I have a local business that had advertised a professional management role. It told me that it did not receive a single eligible candidate from the UK in five months. It did, however, find a very good candidate in the United States and applied for a sponsor licence under the skilled worker immigration route, only to be denied on the grounds that they had not, apparently, provided all of the required information, while at the same time receiving no request for any additional information. This is Kafkaesque bureaucracy. It is a system that is designed to fail. The problem is, though, it was not just one person who did not get a job. The failure to bring this managerial role person on board has resulted in the business postponing the recruitment of other managerial and supervisory positions. What sort of Government would deny businesses and therefore the economy the opportunity to grow because they cannot issue a visa to someone who is self-evidently qualified to receive it?

Of course, the failures and backlogs are not all in passports and visas. I want to turn briefly to another constituent and the DVLA. This alludes to something that the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury said. A constituent who wrote to me yesterday said:

“I voluntarily surrendered my licence in June 2020 due to ill health, I have since reapplied...after I was advised that I should reapply for my licence. Since then, 19 weeks have passed and I have only heard from the DVLA to advise they had all the information required, this was on the 16th May when I made contact with them. I have enquired a few times since... I have contacted them via a special e-mail address that is set up for front line workers as this is meant to be a faster process.”

God help the poor souls who do not have access to the faster process. He went on:

“I am currently working as a community mental health nurse...my team works with severe and enduring mental health and requires a lot of travel for home visits, some of which are emergency situations. As you would expect this is having a massive impact on the service that I as a community mental health nurse can provide due to not being able to drive.”

This is not just backlog Britain; this is broken Britain. It is businessmen who cannot travel, businesses unable to recruit and mental health nurses unable to visit their patients.

Instead of the underlying problems being fixed—I am not talking about the short-term mitigation—what do we have? Threats of privatisation. At its heart, that is what this is all about: more private profit from the public purse going to the same people and, as I am sure none of us would be in any doubt, a yet more expensive and even poorer service for the people who depend on all these agencies.

4.56 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I will keep to the eight minutes you have asked of us, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will take the opportunity to focus on three issues. Two of them, long waits for driving licences and backlogs at the airports, are mentioned in the motion; the third, delivery of rail, is not. However, while it may not have made it on to the motion, we are certainly all aware it was an issue for us last week and will continue to be so.

Looking first at the backlogs at the airports, there have been issues and challenges there. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury is absolutely right to say that we are not alone: Schiphol had a cancellation rate of about 11% during

the period in question, while Gatwick's, for example, was 2%. The situation has been poor across Europe, but it is particularly challenging for passengers to have their flights cancelled at the last minute.

One large reason for it is that only on 17 March did the industry get complete clearance for travel restrictions to be dropped in their entirety. Airlines were also required by Parliament to use 70% of their slots, or they would lose them. A combination of those two factors, and the fact that many airlines had taken out covid loans and had to start paying them back, led to a decision that they would ramp up over summer. However, it has been challenging for them to do so. There were 5,000 jobs lost in the international travel sector in this country on a monthly basis, and that has had an impact.

The airports collectively lost £10 billion, so it has been very difficult for them to ramp back up, and it takes a long time to get staff on to the frontline. It can take as much as three months to go through the vetting and clearance process. Of course, that has to be strict—it is for security—but I will shamelessly plug the Transport Committee's recommendations here.

The first recommendation was for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to help with a personal statement where people cannot fill in all the parts of their five-year employment history as required. It is great to see that that is now in place. Many people worked in different sectors and parts of industry that have gone under during covid, and it has been difficult to get that five-year map. That is a great change, as is the ability to train workers while they are in their final vetting stage; again, the Government have accepted the recommendation for more flexibility. The ability to train more people within the line of sight has also helped. I praise the Government for the work they have done to make that easier.

However, the number of flights being cancelled at the last minute is just not good enough for passengers or for the industry. I welcome the steps the Government have taken to ease the 70% rule: for airlines that cancel with 14 or more days' notice, that flight will go towards their 70% rather than counting towards them losing the slot. That is the kind of flexibility the industry needs.

I particularly praise Gatwick airport, which has taken the novel approach of capping the number of flights. It could see that the industry was trying to fly at 2018 figures but did not have the staff to do so, as I have just mentioned. The cap should make for a more bearable experience for passengers. The flights that are cancelled would just be those flying to the same destination on the same day; otherwise, the airlines would have to pay out. Sensible measures have been taken, and I welcome them. I would just say to those on the Front Bench: can we please get the Civil Aviation Authority more up-front powers? It is still going through the court process from the Ryanair industrial action of 2018 because it does not have the ability to stop poor behaviour when it occurs. However, I do welcome what the Government have done.

On long waiting lists for driving licences, as has been mentioned, drivers have been unable to take up work because there has been such a long delay to the paper-based process. According to the DVLA, at one point, due to social distancing, reductions in staff on-site and industrial action, the backlog got to 1.6 million. We have continued to write to the DVLA as a Committee and hold it to account. It last reported that the backlog was down to

[*Huw Merriman*]

890,000. It always has a run rate of 400,000 at any one time but assured us that the rate will get down to the business-as-usual rate by September. We will continue to hold it to account. At that time, it was the one sector of the civil service, or agency, that seemed to be struggling, and there are questions for the management as to whether people really can work from home in a manner that for other parts of the civil service and agencies seems to work quite well. Management are on notice that they need to do better.

The third aspect, which is not referenced in the motion but is so important, is rail. I talked about the 5,000 jobs lost each month in the airline industry because it had to make its own way through. We supported rail to the tune of £16 billion. There were no redundancies apart from a package of voluntary redundancy that was announced, and got a high uptake, last year. In direct contrast to what the airline sector saw, the rail system has been supported by us all. It is incredibly disappointing to see the strikes. I call for the unions to look at the reforms as not just a way of increasing productivity that will give their members a pay rise, but as making the railways safer for the workforce and for passengers. Why do we still require people on the track when technology can do it better, so it is safer for them and safer for passengers? We need both parties to work together to end the strikes. Rail is not being delivered, and it would have been nice if the Opposition had recognised that we all need to support it.

My last point is on the impact of inflation. In all three sectors I have talked about, industrial action has been occurring or is ongoing. Inflation-busting pay increases are completely counterproductive for those who are seeking them but also for the wider public who have to pay for them, because all they do is put up inflation even more and take away the pay rise at that end. They also have to be paid for. Let me give an example. The refuse strike at Wealden District Council in my constituency has been settled at a cost of 27%. That will be paid for by all council tax payers in my constituency. The last increase in council tax has all been eaten up by the previous pay settlement, so there will not be enough to fund this one, and all the benefits we could bring to the district council are being taken away. How will it be paid for? The council cannot go into deficit and therefore there could be job losses, so one person's pay rise is somebody else's job loss.

With the cost of living challenges, I understand that there will be pay demands in the public sector, but we all know—certainly Conservative Members do—that somebody has to pay for that, and it will be all our voters. We also know that inflation breeds inflation, and so it knocks out the pay rise. It effectively becomes a zero-sum game. I hope that all of us in Parliament can call for restraint—for people to be sensible and reasonable, and try to find productivity gains to pay for those increases—but if we are not careful things will get very bad indeed in the public sector and that will not benefit anybody in this place.

5.3 pm

**Darren Jones** (Bristol North West) (Lab): We pay taxes for the Government to run our public services, and many of my constituents are asking: what is the

point? From driving licences, to passports, to immigration decisions, to dental appointments, to ambulances, to GP and hospital appointments, backlog Britain is a daily reality for so many people across the country. If Ministers were running these public services as private companies, they would all be bankrupt—and what is their response? It is to charge us more by putting up our taxes while cutting the number of frontline civil service staff providing those services. How Ministers can think that cutting staff and putting up the cost is the answer to backlog Britain, I do not know.

Ministers have said, and will continue to say, that they must take these measures—putting up taxes and cutting staff—because of the economic situation. But after 12 years of Conservative economic mismanagement, they have only themselves to blame. After 12 years of economic mismanagement, the national public debt has increased by billions, from only 60% of national wealth in 2010 when Labour left office, to 80% before covid struck, to now being nearly 100%—all under the Conservatives' watch. After 12 years of economic mismanagement and repeated tax rises, tax revenue is projected to hit 35% of national wealth by 2025-26, which is the highest sustained level of taxation since the second world war. After 12 years of economic mismanagement, our economy has gone from flatlining to declining. Britain is becoming less competitive, less productive and less wealthy thanks to the Conservatives' economic mismanagement.

Now more than ever, with the cost of living crisis affecting so many, the public want to know that their taxes are being spent well. Yet this Government's disregard for public services is self-evident. Many of my constituents in Bristol North West have written to me over the past few months about the problems they have experienced at the Passport Office, which is just one example of a service in the reality of backlog Britain. All of them are desperate after weeks and months of delay. One was left waiting for nearly six months for their passport to be renewed, with their long-planned holiday in jeopardy and their formal complaints left unanswered. Another had their passport lost by the Passport Office for months, with the result that they were unable to travel to visit a sick relative. A third, also with their passport inexplicably lost, was unable to attend a relative's funeral despite weeks and weeks of chasing.

I say to the public that they should keep a close eye on this lot in government, because rather than outlining how the Government will fix the problems, the Prime Minister's response to backlogs at the Passport Office was to threaten the service with privatisation. Year after year, cut after cut, I worry that our schools and hospitals could suffer the same fate. We are an ageing population, and the British people will need to rely on our national health service and social care more in the future, yet right now our health service is struggling to cope.

A constituent recently wrote to me to share their experiences of needing an ambulance during an emergency. They reported that they had to wait for as long as 12 hours for an ambulance to arrive after first calling 999. They explained how they now worry about dying alone in the future. Another explained that they were forced to wait for two months, rather than the expected two weeks, for an urgent cancer referral to specialists. If we want Britain to be competitive in this globalised world, our young and working people need to receive the best



education and healthcare available. However, because the Conservatives have left the economy smaller, poorer and more indebted, we will have less money to pay for those public services. Bit by bit, those who can afford to use private services, whether dentists, GPs, care homes or private tutors, will have no choice but to do so—many already do.

I have spoken before in this House about the breadth of problems my constituents have encountered in trying to access NHS dental services, which, in my view, have largely been privatised already by the back door. Constituents tell me that waiting times are getting worse and worse, and that the Government fail to intervene. Next, I am sure that the Conservatives will encourage those who can afford it to go private, leaving underfunded public services for those who cannot. Before long, our public services will be changed forever, with only those families able to afford to pay for the best from the private sector able to get the support they deserve.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, including on privatisation, but there is another point, which is that the poorest in our society pay the most for services. They pay the most for banking services, and they pay the most for energy through prepaid meters and other things. We have a further widening, not just of incomes, but of costs to the poorest in society, pushing them further and further away from being able to live decent lives above the breadline. Is that not a broader effect of what is going on?

**Darren Jones:** My hon. Friend is right, and it is for the Government to do something about it. What is the point of having a Government or paying taxes if the Government stand by and say, “Oh well, this is just something that we cannot really affect”? Inequality is growing and it is now impossible for people to make themselves wealthy in our country without inheriting wealth. These issues are getting worse and worse, and the Conservative Government think it should just be left to the market and that the Government have no role to play.

In the backlog Britain that exists in reality today, whether that is passport services or elsewhere, Ministers sit by. They blame anyone else they can think of and threaten public services without taking any responsibility for their role as Ministers of the Crown. It is their job to fix these issues. Why are they not doing so? Until I see the Conservatives get a grip of the economy—*[Interruption.]* The Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister for Security and Borders are chuntering, but they are welcome to intervene.

**James Daly:** Does the hon. Gentleman make the same points to the Welsh Government regarding their appalling NHS waiting times?

**Darren Jones:** I am a Member for Bristol, but I point out that the Conservative and Unionist party ought to take some responsibility from here about what is happening across the country and the Union. Once again, however, its Members deflect responsibility and distract the public from the real cause of our problems, which is 12 years of Conservative economic mismanagement.

The facts may be uncomfortable, and Ministers may chunter, but they come from the Office for Budget Responsibility and the national statistician. Ministers

have no answer to that evidence of the Government’s economic mismanagement of the last 12 years—they merely deflect and blame others. Until I see a Government who are ready to get a grip of the economy, with a plan to make Britain stronger, more successful and more sustainable, with the energy to not just survive until the next vote of no confidence, but invest in and modernise our public services, I have little hope that we will move away from the Conservative legacy of the high-tax, low-growth backlog Britain that we live in today.

5.10 pm

**Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): I rise to speak against the motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I feel a sense of déjà vu, because I spoke in an Opposition debate last week on a similar motion. Once again, Opposition Members criticise and talk Britain down, but offer nothing constructive to deal with the problems that the country faces, having been impacted by the unprecedented pandemic and a global economic situation. They are also transparent in not attacking their own politicians who have power in this country, who face and acknowledge the same problem that we are talking about.

I maintain that it is only because of our actions since 2010 when the Conservatives took power that we could spend the money that we needed to insulate ourselves and our public services from the pandemic. We had to do that because Labour bankrupted the country in 2010, and our responsible approach from 2010 to 2018 allowed us to protect the services that we needed to protect and spend the money on them and vulnerable people throughout the pandemic.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) talked about this country’s indebtedness. I agree that this country is in a large amount of debt, but I remind him that in his constituency, people were kept in employment and businesses were kept in business because of the furlough scheme that the Government created. Does he think that should not have gone ahead?

**Darren Jones:** As I said in my speech, the national debt level had reached 80% of national wealth before the pandemic. How did that happen?

**Paul Holmes:** It happened partly because we were investing in services. The hon. Gentleman said in his speech that the Government were woefully in debt. I take it, then, that he did not back the action that we had to take during the unprecedented pandemic and global situation to protect his constituents and the businesses in his constituency. The people out there will take what they need to from his speech.

The action that I have outlined led us to have 7.5% of economic growth in 2021, which was the largest increase in economic growth anywhere in the G7. That has now stalled, but that is because of the global situation in which we find ourselves. Let us remember that if the Opposition had been in charge, we would have come out of the pandemic more slowly, because they wanted to keep us in lockdown. We would have had a slower vaccine rollout—this Government spent the money necessary to get the vaccines onboard—and lower economic growth. Opposition Members now have the cheek to absent themselves from acknowledging the pandemic

[Paul Holmes]

and the global situation. Once again, they present a vision full of hindsight that is lacking in any reality whatsoever.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is talking about the pandemic and growth as we come out of it. Will he comment on how the Government failed to lock down quickly at various key points, which prolonged the pandemic and made the related reduction in economic activity deeper and worse?

**Paul Holmes**: My comment to the hon. Gentleman is that this country lifted back up while his party was still calling for us to be in lockdown. We lifted up quicker than the Leader of the Opposition wanted us to; he wanted us to lock down again, so I will not take any lectures from the hon. Gentleman about what the Government have done in lifting us up and getting the economy moving.

The action I was outlining means that £37 billion has been invested in the economy; at no stage today was that acknowledged by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). It means £650 for recipients of means-tested benefits, £300 for pensioners in receipt of the winter fuel payment and £150 for people in receipt of disability benefits—and we have cut taxes for 30 million people to the tune of £330 a year.

However, there is an issue on which I have some sympathy with Members and those outside this House. I am a Conservative—I do not think that I need to declare that in the House—but I am a Conservative who believes that we can grow the economy if we keep more money in people's pockets. I gently say to the Chief Secretary that people are looking to him for tax cuts—for the economy, the middle classes and vulnerable people. We need to go further with tax cuts, so that we get the economic growth that we need.

The Labour party should not be allowed to be disingenuous with this motion; the Government have invested in public services. I want to pick up on two points that the shadow Minister outlined. What kind of world do we live in when the Labour party, the supposed party of the NHS, moans that we are under-investing in the NHS while consistently voting against the Government's record investment in it? The Liberal Democrats voted against it, too. We put £36 billion of funding into the NHS, which is £12 billion a year of extra funding, and they opposed it at every turn. They opposed us in every Division we had on NHS spending, and now they say that we are not doing anything. That is not a consistent approach from the Labour party. There are record numbers of doctors—124,000 of them—as well as 300,000 extra nurses, and I remind the House that Labour Members, the Liberal Democrats and those from other parties voted against those measures.

In the passports debate two weeks ago, I said to the shadow Home Office Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), that although the Opposition say that the Government are not taking any action on passports, 700 extra staff are being recruited to the passport service. There are 500 already, and they are not privatised staff, but staff of Her Majesty's Passport Office, whom we are investing in, so that passport applications are completed on time. Some 90% of applications are

completed within six weeks; 98.5% are completed within 10 weeks; and 1 million passports were processed in March 2022. Seven million would be processed in a normal year. I say today what I said then: there is a lack of acknowledgment of the effect that the pandemic and lockdown have had on international travel. They have meant that more people are applying. However, we are taking the action necessary to make sure that passport applications are completed on time.

Today we have heard about Labour failure in Wales and Manchester. As this debate has gone on, we have heard about Labour failure in London; the Metropolitan Police Service is being put into special measures. It is controlled by a Labour politician, but nobody on the Labour side of the House criticises the Labour party, or those in power who have the budgets and the means to make the changes that the people they represent need. The Labour party attacks us. The public see that the party has no vision for this country, and that it does not play on a level playing field, given that its elected politicians are failing because of the same circumstances that Labour Members have mentioned today. What we see here is what the public will see, which once again is a carping Opposition with no practical, constructive or sensible solutions for the unprecedented problems of the day. They need to stop voting against measures that tackle the problems that they complain about. They complain about us not taking action, but why do they not march through the Division Lobby and vote with this Government for record amounts of money for public services, and then come up with a constructive solution afterwards? They have not done that at all.

Finally, it would be nice if, just once—even if they disagree with the core principles of this Government—Labour Members told the truth: that they would not, and could not, have done much differently, given the circumstances we faced in the pandemic, and with the global economic crisis. The public would respect this Parliament a lot more if we genuinely worked together, instead of Labour Members carping from the sidelines. This Government are taking action on the NHS and passports, and are making sure that the most vulnerable people in this country are looked after. That is why I was elected to this House, and why the Government were elected to office in 2019. Labour Members should stop criticising. They should come to the table and provide solutions, but I doubt we will ever hear them.

5.19 pm

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I congratulate the Labour party on bringing forward today's debate, and acknowledge at the outset—I am seeking common ground with those on the Treasury Bench—that government is hard. Government means not being entirely in charge of events, and the Government must be responsible for things beyond their direct control. The SNP has been the Government of Scotland since 2007, and it has seldom been easy to achieve the results we wanted, but we see the verdict of the people of Scotland on the performance of the SNP Government: the 2019 Westminster election, the 2021 Holyrood election and the local election this year have been resounding SNP victories.

**James Daly**: The hon. Gentleman is making a very fair point, but is that the reason why A&E waiting times in Scotland are at a record high? In May over

10,000 people were waiting over two years for medical treatment; is that not a shameful record for the SNP Government?

**Alyn Smith:** I was hoping to find common ground, rather than hear endless whataboutery. We could all swap stats about the performance of our relative Governments, but I am here to critique the performance of this UK Government and try to find solutions. Have there been challenges? Of course there have. Are we all facing common challenges from the international global situation with covid? Of course we are. It is how we respond to those challenges, the decisions we make, and how we resource our public services that we can be judged by. The people of Scotland judged the SNP Government, and resoundingly backed us. Of course there are challenges, but I am proud to stand by the SNP's record.

To govern is to choose, and it is the choices of this UK Government that we can critique today. I endorse the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) about the underlying causes of policy failure, the UK Government's wrong decision in leaving the EU, and doing so in the way they did. That compounded a number of our difficulties, just as wrong management choices affected the delivery of public services. I will not belabour or repeat the points my right hon. Friend made, but the SNP remains very clear about our ambition for Scotland: we want an independent Scotland, back in the European family of nations. The people of Scotland will have a choice on that in October 2023. We will come back to that discussion at the proper time, I do not doubt, and I look forward to that.

**Paul Holmes:** May I intervene?

**Alyn Smith:** Please do; this will be good.

**Paul Holmes:** I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman, especially after I have just made a speech. Talking of delivering public services and the economy, the First Minister today outlined her plan for independence, but she failed to mention what currency the SNP proposes for an independent Scotland, and whether independence would have a negative or positive impact on the economic outlook of Scotland.

**Alyn Smith:** As I say, I look forward to the debates that we will have in the coming months, and I look forward to the decision of the people of Scotland on those matters.

I have said that it is difficult to be in government, and I acknowledge the problems the UK Government have faced. I am honestly not here to score political points. I will focus my remarks solely on passports and driving licences, because that has been a considerable difficulty for hundreds of the people I serve in Stirling—and, I suspect, for thousands, if not more, people across all our constituencies. I say hand on heart to the UK Government, constitutional politics aside, that I want this fixed. It needs to be fixed a lot more quickly.

I listened carefully to the Chief Secretary's comments on passports and driving licences, and I am not sure that many of my constituents in Stirling would agree with his rather Panglossian analysis. There have been clear failures in the delivery of these services. I agree

that the backlogs in both the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and Her Majesty's Passport Office were unprecedented, but they were not remotely unforeseeable, and the scale of the Government response was inadequate. We need a laser-like focus on that in this discussion. We need far greater investment in these services, and far greater support for the hard-working staff who are swamped in trying to deal with the backlogs, which are having significant knock-on effects on the livelihoods and mental health, as we have heard, of many millions of the citizens we serve.

I have three examples from Stirling—this is just a selection from this morning's postbag. One constituent applied for his child's passport on 30 March—13 weeks ago this Wednesday. He was to travel on 25 June, but he cancelled, lost the money and rebooked for 6 July. There was no response at all to his requests to expedite the application, and with just seven days to go, there is still no passport.

Another constituent applied on 2 March for passports for herself and her four-year-old daughter, so that they could travel on 1 May—it was to be their first holiday. Their passports were late and they missed their holiday. In another constituent's own words:

"I went to the Glasgow office today and waited for hours in the queue. They weren't going to see me as I don't travel in the next 48 hours. However, I pleaded my case and the lovely lady agreed to at least check everything was ok with my application. It was not. Though they received my supporting documents recorded delivery, HMPO have lost them (3 birth certificates). This resulted in me quite literally running down to the Glasgow registrar office".

It said it could provide the certificates in 24 hours. My constituent continued:

"I am now on a train back to Stirling to go to the registry office there who have agreed to print them off...then I will head back to Glasgow to have them proceed with the application."

Missed holidays are not the biggest crisis in the world, but missed livelihoods are, and the failures of the DVLA are even worse. A number of HGV drivers and people dependent on driving for their work have been unable to work and in danger of losing their livelihoods and employment because of the delays.

I always hope to find consensus and to suggest solutions. To solve a problem, one first needs to acknowledge it. I therefore urge a bit more humility and honesty from the Government in dealing with the passport and DVLA issues in particular. There has been investment—I acknowledge that—but it has not been adequate. We need more. The establishment of a Westminster helpdesk for MPs, while welcome—we have used it—reveals something of a Westminster-centric attitude. What we actually need is far more people on the phones, available to our constituents and citizens who need the advice. That advice needs to be properly resourced.

I acknowledge that there has been investment, but it has not been enough, so to talk about tax cuts in general, as an ideological point, is to miss the point entirely. This is a problem that hundreds, if not hundreds of thousands, of our citizens are facing right now. The Government have to deliver public services, and they have not done remotely as well as they need to. For hundreds of thousands of constituents, backlog Britain is a very real and pressing problem. I therefore congratulate the Labour party on bringing forward the debate and urge the UK Government to do better.



5.27 pm

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), who seemed to argue that incompetence is justified as long as a party gets the democratic mandate to continue to act in that manner. I welcome his straightforward comments accepting that the SNP Government, who have responsibility for the matters that we are discussing, have faced the same challenges, including those resulting from the pandemic, as the rest of the world, and, like others, found difficulties in overcoming them, hence some of the bad figures that I quoted. I thank him for his straightforward response.

In talking about the delivery of public services—the Labour party, who brought forward the motion, do so with such certainty of criticism and purpose—we must look back to Labour’s previous actions as well as at its current actions, because clearly it must be doing something right. I gave the example—it is worthy of repetition—that Labour politicians criticise Conservative politicians for challenges regarding waiting times, yet in Wales 700,000 people are waiting for planned care, which is a 50% increase on February 2020, and no Opposition Member makes any reference to it. If the Welsh Government have any idea of how to address that, I would welcome Members sharing the news with us. What is the idea? What will they do? There is nothing on that. *[Interruption.]* I will not give way.

So we go on and look back further. The criticism in respect of the NHS is that, in effect, money has been put in but wasted in various ways. I thought, “I must look back at when Labour ran our NHS. I’m sure that there is a real record of investment and getting a really good bang for the taxpayer’s buck.” Although I am the very proud MP for Bury North, I am from Huddersfield and my local hospital was under threat under the last Labour Government because of the decision to build Calderdale Royal Hospital.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is talking about the Labour party’s delivery of the NHS. Is he not aware that public satisfaction with the NHS was the highest it has ever been when Labour left office?

**James Daly:** The hon. Lady talks about public opinion. Calderdale Royal Hospital was constructed with a £34 million private finance initiative deal that, at the last reckoning, cost the taxpayer £740 million. The last Labour Government wasted millions upon millions of pounds on the NHS that should have been invested in modernising and developing frontline services—it was absolutely criminal. We have made record investments throughout our time in government, as shown in the increased number of nurses and the increased services that my constituents are able to access, although there are challenges.

**Margaret Greenwood:** The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Surely he must be aware that his Government’s Health and Care Act 2022, which was enacted just a month or so ago, opens up the NHS to private sector takeovers that will be deeply inefficient because money that should be spent on patient care will be taken out and given to shareholders.

**James Daly:** Privatisation of NHS services began under Labour. There was more privatisation under Labour, so I thank the hon. Lady for giving me the opportunity to highlight Labour’s desire, when it was last in power, to privatise large parts of the NHS.

**Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend remember Labour’s famous slogan before every general election: “We have just 24 hours to save the NHS”? Well, it has been a very long 24 hours since 2010, has it not?

**James Daly:** I remember another slogan from when Labour left office: “there is no money.” I agree with my hon. Friend.

We talk about figures all too often in this House, and we can come up with any figure. It could be £1 billion, £2 billion, £500 billion or £500 million. That is not the delivery of public services; it is just us coming up with figures. The question is: what delivery model will get bang for our buck and deliver services so that people in Scotland do not wait so long in A&E and so waiting lists are not as long in Wales? The delivery model is the issue.

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman keeps referring to the healthcare system in Scotland. When will the English Government implement free prescriptions and free annual eyecare for the people of England? When will they implement free social care for the elderly in England?

**James Daly:** There is record investment in the NHS in England, and it is for the decision makers, those who deliver frontline services and medical professionals to make those choices. The hon. Gentleman is saying that politicians, not medical professionals, should decide the right choices for patients. *[Interruption.]* It is strange that he is laughing, but he makes my point on the method of delivery.

I have a constituency example of what this Government have done to deliver public services. I have already spoken of the Mayor of Greater Manchester’s appalling supervision that led directly to my local police services, and the local police services of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), being put in special measures, and to the most vulnerable people in our communities being put at risk. My local council, a Labour council, was given £122 million to support people, businesses and frontline services during the pandemic. Under the £37 billion package that was before the House last week, 12,000 households in my constituency will get at least £600 to support them through this period, and most of them will get up to £1,200. When we talk about those figures and what the Government have done, we see that they are supporting the people in Bury to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. The problem is that the delivery model is Labour-controlled Bury Council, which is incompetent, I am afraid, and its record would suggest that. We therefore need a wider debate about how we link the money that the Budget and the Treasury gives to local and regional government and how that is spent in the most efficient way.

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He rightly points out the grotesque incompetence of our Mayor.

The second largest police force in England, Greater Manchester police, is failing; it is considered to be inadequate. I was wondering whether he could remind me who the Health Secretary was when people were drinking water out of flower vases at Mid Staffs and, apparently, satisfaction with the NHS was at its highest.

**James Daly:** The Mayor of Greater Manchester has been consistent in his past and present career regarding the delivery of public services. The important point is that we have to learn from the mistakes that my hon. Friend highlights and make sure that public services are delivered in a different way.

The Government have invested more than £400 billion during the pandemic. Not only have they given the metropolitan borough of Bury the £122 million that I mentioned, but both constituencies in Bury have got upwards of £200 million. There are three free schools and there have been two levelling-up fund bids, as well as all sorts of other things—including the purchase of Gigg Lane, Mr Deputy Speaker—directly to help and support the aim of us all to make sure that public services are delivered in the best possible way. However, we cannot have this debate simply about figures. We have to work out a way to ensure that managers in the NHS and civil servants in various councils throughout the country deliver on the manifesto and the mandate that is given by the Government through record levels of investment in schools, the NHS and all the other things that we are discussing.

The Government's record is something to be proud of. We heard from the Opposition what their plan is: nothing. There is no plan. This is simply an opportunity to read out a load of manufactured points, rather than supporting the Government in their efforts to level up and make sure that public services are delivered in the interests of constituents throughout the country.

5.37 pm

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak after the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly), who seems to take the line that because someone else is doing badly, it is okay for this Tory Government of 12 years to do badly; and that because somebody else is failing to deliver somewhere, it is entirely right for the Conservative Government to fail and not deliver for the public in this country. When questions are put to them about when they will deliver free prescriptions for England, free eye tests on a 12-monthly basis and free social care for everyone, they fail to address them. They use smoke and mirrors when addressing the 12 years of failures from this incompetent Tory Government.

Earlier this month, we discussed the unacceptable waiting times facing people who are seeking to renew or apply for passports. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government. During my contribution to that debate, I stated that the passport delays were but one instance of the backlogs being faced by my constituents under 12 years of this Conservative Government. For the past two years, I have spoken to hundreds of constituents whose visa applications are still outstanding, with some people waiting for more than a year without a word from the Home Office. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government. Even simple matters such as

the issuance of a biometric residence permit are subject to mind-boggling delays. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

**Paul Bristow:** Forgive me if I am wrong, but has the hon. Gentleman just committed his Front Benchers to free eye tests on the NHS, free social care and free prescriptions? Is he now saying that that is the policy of the Labour party?

**Tahir Ali:** I was referring to how the Conservative party uses smoke and mirrors to blame everyone else for its failures.

I have spoken to asylum seekers who have not received a single update on the progress of their application for asylum. These are people who do not have the right to work or any recourse to public funds, so making them wait for months at a time without providing an update on their application is not only incompetent, but profoundly cruel. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

Things do not get any better when we look at services such as healthcare. I recently visited Sparkhill primary care centre in my constituency. Dr Al-Qazi, a well-recognised and respected GP, runs the practice. I spoke to patients and doctors there about the strains on GP surgeries. Capacity is a serious issue, with recruitment problems and growing patient numbers making it difficult for GPs to meet demand. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

Despite repeated promises of extra funding from this Government, Dr Al-Qazi had not seen an extra penny. An obsession with targets, without any of the promised extra resources, is tying GPs down and preventing them from prioritising patient care. I must say that the GPs and patients I spoke to expressed no confidence in this Government's ability to deliver. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

In Birmingham and across the west midlands, NHS waiting times are the worst since records began. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

People are facing not only 12-hour waits at accident and emergency departments, but significant waiting times for hospital appointments. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

I have spoken to several constituents who, because of the long waiting times for life-changing surgery, are now turning to private providers, whether they are affordable or not. Recent research by the University of Birmingham on waiting times and operation backlogs has shown that more than 100,000 people in Birmingham are waiting for surgery or need invasive procedures to check for cancer. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

The research also points to the fact that many more people are on hidden waiting lists that are not represented in official data. It therefore concludes that growing waiting lists may become an inevitable feature of NHS care in future. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

All this means that people across the country are essentially being forced into private care because of the serious backlogs confronting the NHS. The burden of these backlogs is being carried by families and by those

[Tahir Ali]

least able to afford it, while the Government flounder. Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

To my mind, all these backlogs demonstrate two clear things. First, this Conservative Government are incapable of ensuring that even the most basic services are provided to constituents in a timely manner. Secondly, they are all so completely out of touch with the British public that they feel no urgency about getting a grip on the situation and introducing measures to relieve the backlogs. It seems that backlog Britain is here to stay as long as we have this rudderless Government standing in the way of solutions.

In summary, passport renewal times: up. Home Office application times: up. Driving licence times: up. GP appointment times: up. Hospital appointment times: up. Ambulance waiting times: up. NHS dentist times: up. A&E waiting times: up. Police waiting times: up. Cost of living: up. Mortgage rates: up. Food banks: up. Gas and electric bills: up. Court waiting times—

**Hon. Members:** Up!

**Tahir Ali:** Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government.

5.44 pm

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): It is, of course, a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali). He talked a great deal about the need for free prescriptions; I think it must have escaped his notice that the Government have now vaccinated 150 million people with free covid prescriptions.

Listening to the Opposition, one would think that this was a Government who were failing at everything. We have heard nothing but doom and gloom. There has been no recognition that when the whole world was hit by the worst global pandemic for a century, this Government delivered the first approved vaccine roll-out anywhere on the globe. We have heard nothing about the fact that that was followed by the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe—and at the same time the Government delivered £400 billion of support for businesses, which preserved 14.5 million jobs: that is why unemployment is now at its lowest since 1974.

**Margaret Greenwood:** Will the hon. Lady not acknowledge that it was actually the national health service that delivered the vaccine roll-out?

**Anna Firth:** The national health service was funded and run by those on the Government side of the House. Perhaps the hon. Lady has not noticed that. If the Opposition had been in charge, she would of course be saying that it was they who had rolled out the vaccine.

**Paul Bristow:** In fact, it is a little bit worse than that. If Opposition Members had been in charge of the vaccination process, we would not have jabbed nearly as many people, because they would have supported the EU scheme rather than ours.

**Anna Firth:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Nor would we have come out of lockdown at the earliest possible moment, which has preserved the economy and jobs. The main point, however, is that we have heard no solutions from the Opposition.

The motion mentions GP and hospital appointments, and that is what I want to talk about today. In the health system, the Government are looking for new, innovative solutions to solve the problems that we are experiencing. Of course there are problems: we have just been through a global pandemic which saw the whole country in lockdown and our hospitals and GPs focused on treating millions of covid patients and on the vaccination programme that I have just been talking about, so inevitably there have been delays to regular and routine appointments.

**Steven Bonnar:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being very generous.

I wonder how much responsibility she thinks the Prime Minister should bear for that situation, given that in the very early stages of the pandemic he was coming in here and gloating about shaking hands with covid patients. That set the scene for the early response from the Government to the pandemic.

**Anna Firth:** I think the hon. Gentleman is missing the entire point that I am making. I am acknowledging that our health service has quite rightly been treating covid patients. Now that the pandemic is over, we are of course looking towards dealing with the backlog.

In Southend West, I, like many Members in other constituencies, receive complaints every week from constituents who are experiencing delays in getting appointments with their GPs. One constituent who wrote to me had suffered a minor head injury and ended up having to call an ambulance and go to the local A&E because they could not get a GP appointment. I have raised the issue of ambulances in the House before. However, we have a Secretary of State who is focusing on the issue and is already making progress. That is why we were able to announce this week that we are set to eliminate two-year waiting lists by July, and that is why, because of our management of the economy, the NHS budget is set to grow by an average of 3.8% every year up to 2024-25. As we have heard, by the end of this Parliament we will be spending £188 billion on the NHS, up from £133 billion. That is an increase of £54 billion—over 40%. That is possible despite the poor financial circumstances that we inherited. This Government have increased investment in the NHS every year since we came into office in 2010.

In Southend West, which I represent, we are leading the way in improving people's healthcare. Due to the actions of myself and other Essex MPs, we will have an increase of 111 ambulance staff over the coming months and 11 new ambulances will be on our roads by the end of July. Earlier this month, Southend Hospital began an innovative enhanced discharge service. This is a collaboration between the council, the clinical commissioning group and the hospital, and it is helping people to get home when they have been in hospital, and to stay there. It is a brilliant therapy-led assessment service that really puts people at the heart of ongoing care, and I am delighted that the Government are supporting the scheme.

**Margaret Greenwood:** The hon. Lady is talking about the discharge from hospital process that was brought into law through the Health and Care Act 2022. Is she aware that the Government do not even know the



clinical outcomes of these people? I have submitted written questions on a number of occasions to ask how many patients who were discharged under the discharge to assess process were readmitted to hospital within 30 days, but the Government do not know. Does she agree that the Government should really have done the work and found that out before going ahead with a process that puts very vulnerable patients at risk?

**Anna Firth:** I suggest that the hon. Lady should be congratulating this Government on delivering a £36 billion package to reform the NHS and social care and on tackling issues that Labour Members have ducked for years.

I want to return to the improvements at my own hospital. Patients are now being welcomed through the doors of a new two-storey outpatients building that is creating space for an extra 200 people every week. This state-of-the-art £1.2 million building includes 14 new consulting rooms, seven offices and a large waiting area. It is initiatives such as these that are leading the fightback against delays and waiting lists at the hospital, as opposed to just talking about them. There are also exciting new plans to build a brand-new £8.6 million entrance at the hospital, improving clinical provision, accessibility and the whole experience of patients, staff and visitors. This building will attract private capital funding. There will be no extra cost to the hospital trust or to the taxpayer. It is exactly this sort of innovation that we are looking for.

I am also pleased that our local GPs are looking at ways to improve their waiting lists. As I have mentioned, waiting lists are a huge problem. Having people waiting in a queue on the phone at 8 o'clock in the morning and being unable to book an appointment is something that none of us wants to see continue. The Pall Mall surgery in my constituency, which I had the pleasure of visiting earlier this week, has introduced a new e-consult scheme. Patients can enter their details online, which are then triaged by a clinician. This allows the surgery to triage 100 patients in the same time that traditional appointments would have taken to triage 15. The point of this is not to deny people who need to see a GP a face-to-face appointment but to ensure that our resources are used to their maximum effect so that the GPs can see as many patients as possible face to face.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. I just want to remind the hon. Lady of what Madam Deputy Speaker said earlier. She said that people should look towards sticking to about eight minutes, and we are over that now.

**Anna Firth:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I come to my final point, which is about the reconfiguration of the accident and emergency department at Southend Hospital. That will deliver crucial improvements, and the Government announced funding for it in 2017. The business case was approved by regulators and by the Treasury in 2019, and only last month the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), restated that we would be getting this funding. It would be wrong of me not to use this opportunity to ask, once again, that the Department of Health and Social Care releases this funding to Southend Hospital.

5.55 pm

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth).

I wish to speak in favour of the motion and to pick up on some of the serious concerns about backlog Britain, illustrating how it is linked to the long period of low growth and under-investment in key public services that goes back to the austerity period and the decisions made by Governments since 2010. Before I do, I wish to pay tribute to our public sector and public service workers, who have done the most incredible job for a very long time—for their whole careers—but particularly in the past couple of years, during this unprecedented crisis the country has faced. I am sure that all of us, across the House, want to wish them the very best and show our support for them. We respect them and think they do the most wonderful job for our communities across this country.

While I touch on the work that those workers have carried out, I want to ask Ministers to think seriously about what it feels like to be a frontline public sector worker. I ask them to imagine themselves into the position of a nurse in the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading, of a local GP or of many other local public sector workers in my constituency. I ask them to think about that and respond in the fullness of time.

In particular, I ask Ministers to think about not only the pressures caused by the pandemic, but the long effect of austerity, the lack of funding and particular local problems we face in our area. For example, two GP practices have closed in my constituency and others are under severe pressure. We have a problem with looming GP retirements and other pressures arising from severe shortages of skilled staff. We have problems with numbers being reduced in Thames Valley police. Admittedly, the Government are recruiting more police, but they are doing so belatedly and there are questions as to whether they will be able to replace the officers who have been lost. There are serious problems with school funding and pressures on school budgets, because of the misunderstanding of the way in which the teachers' pensions need to be funded by schools. There is a series of serious problems, and I ask Ministers to think deeply about that and address them when they respond to us later today. I hope they can learn the lessons of these mistakes and rethink Government policy.

In the time available, I wish to focus on one service that has caused serious problems in my constituency. I refer to the mismanagement of the passport service during the past few months, as we have come out of the pandemic. Let me illustrate some of the problems that I have encountered as a constituency MP. I have dealt with 59 cases in recent weeks of people waiting for passports, sometimes for up to 12 or 14 weeks. Those affected include not just families who want to go on holiday and rightly deserve to do so after the awful time of the pandemic, but people waiting to see terminally ill relatives and people who need to go abroad for urgent reasons. The delays are lengthy and there is a lack of communication with residents in my area, and I understand that colleagues from across the House have suffered with this as well. People are not being given updates. I have often had residents come to me saying, "I am about to go on holiday. I am due to go in two weeks but

[Matt Rodda]

I still have not heard anything from the Passport Office.” That is not good enough and it reflects a wider lack of planning, which I want to pick up on in a moment.

**Margaret Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. We know that the Government want to cut 91,000 jobs from the civil service. On 2021 figures, that would mean the loss of almost a fifth of all civil servants. Those cuts could mean more than 11,000 job losses in the north-west, where my constituency is based, with 3,500 in Merseyside and 400 in Wirral. Does he agree that if the Government go ahead with these job cuts, my constituents, the region’s economy and the level of services that people receive will suffer?

**Matt Rodda:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She is highlighting clearly the issues in her area, and the same applies across the whole country. The Government are expecting public service workers to catch up and deal with an unprecedented backlog, while threatening deep cuts. As she has rightly said, many of the services provided by the civil service are in Government agencies rather than in Whitehall, which employs only a tiny proportion of the overall headcount.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. To add to his point, it is foolish to suggest that there is somehow some unnecessary flabbiness in the civil service or in local service delivery, because so much that has been added was driven by the need to make trade deals, with teams being brought in to negotiate those deals, and to support the Afghan situation and now the Ukraine situation. That is why we have so many people in our civil service right now.

**Matt Rodda:** My hon. Friend makes a good point about the need to respond to crises and the pressure on the public sector as a whole.

I thank the Minister for Security and Borders, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who is in his place, because he and his colleagues have been generous in supporting me in dealing with some of my constituency cases. However, the fact that Ministers have to intervene illustrates some of the management failures in the system, which ultimately reflect poorly on them and their colleagues in government.

I ask Ministers to think about the case study of the Passport Agency. It provides a vital public service, and it has been expected to catch up with a large backlog very suddenly. Why, when the pandemic was clearly coming to an end, was there not more planning, more foresight and a more strategic look ahead at the likely implications for the head count needed in the offices that process passports, as well as the implications for the public and the economy of severe delays in that vital public service? I am afraid that the Government have been found very wanting in that instance, and it illustrates the wider failure of leadership and management in the current Administration that dates all the way back to their election in 2010. I urge the Government to think carefully about the implications of the problems we now face.

That issue also links to the way the Government operate at a political level. It is interesting that many of the problems are occurring at the very time when we see turmoil in the governing party. All too often it suggests that Ministers are more bothered about the internal factional issues in their party—the Prime Minister’s survival or demise—than about managing public services in a responsible, sensible way. I ask them to get back to the day job and get a grip on those vital services, support public service professionals, provide them with the correct amount of resource, and encourage them in their vital work.

6.2 pm

**Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate on public services, because it gives me the opportunity to thank everyone who serves my city, Peterborough, by working in our public services. There is little to be happy about when it comes to the motion. As usual, the Opposition moan, groan and clip their speeches for social media, but they have no plan whatever for the economy or the reform of our public services. It is spend more, borrow more and pile on more debts for future generations, but they say absolutely nothing on jobs. On this side of the House, we know that it is work that will grow the economy, increase tax revenue and fund public services.

It is worth reminding the House that every single Labour Government have left unemployment higher when they left office than when they formed their Administration. This Government have delivered the lowest unemployment since 1974. Opposition Members have completely ignored that and, on jobs and on work, they have nothing to say.

The debate gives me the chance to celebrate good public services in my constituency. A shining example is the Thistlemoor surgery, run by Neil Modha, who is an inspirational local doctor in Peterborough. The surgery serves 29,500 patients, 80% of whom do not have English as a first language. The surgery has just received an outstanding grade from the Care Quality Commission. I thank Dr Azhar Chaudhry, who works with local mosques and communities, along with Dr Lubna Salim, Dr Lubna Akbar, Dr Mohammed Mukhtar and Dr Syed Hussein. Paulina Janczura is the manager of a team of 85 staff, all from different backgrounds, mirroring the background of the population that Thistlemoor surgery cares for. These are doctors, nurses, paramedics and admin and clerical staff doing an outstanding job for my constituency.

Peterborough is also the home of the Passport Office. We have heard lots of Members talk about Passport Office failures, and they are absolutely right to raise frustrations expressed by their constituents when it comes to delays on passports. However, we must also remember that staff in the Passport Office in Peterborough and elsewhere are working incredibly hard. We must always remember that when we speak in this House and on behalf of our constituents, because, sometimes, they can be left feeling unsupported, especially by those who stand up and make overly critical speeches.

There is a disappointing example of public service delivery in my constituency. The residents of the beautiful village of Thorney have temporarily lost in-person services at Thorney Medical Centre. This is down to a lack of

admin staff. It is worth mentioning that the staff do a wonderful job and certainly do not deserve abuse, which, regrettably, is becoming all too common across the NHS. Local people rely on the service. Local councillors and I are campaigning for this service, along with Jenner Healthcare, to reopen as soon as possible. A meeting has been set up on Friday, and I am confident about what will happen with this vital surgery on which so many people in Thorney rely.

If I may, I will tell the House one more story of public service delivery in Peterborough. Very sadly, this involves the Labour Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. We have already heard about Labour's failure in public service delivery in Manchester, in Wales and in London, but, unfortunately, we now have to move on to Labour public service delivery failure in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The combined authority is the accountable body for Net Zero Hub projects across the whole of the south-east. That put the Mayor, Nik Johnson, in the lead for spending from Hampshire to Kent, and from London to Peterborough. For that reason, the Government handed him £80 million for energy projects and £118 million for sustainable warmth projects—more than double that of any other comparable authority. That should mean cheaper bills and warmer homes in Peterborough. He has had the money for months. It was his chance to make a difference, so what of that whopping sum of £198 million? How much has he used? Staggeringly, the answer is less than £6 million.

In fact, the Mayor has written a letter to the Government, begging for yet another extension to the deadline for spending it. But I am told that, because of his “poor delivery performances and assurance processes”

the Mayor's request will be refused, because it would break Her Majesty's Treasury rules. It gets worse. The Government do not even believe that he has the capability or the capacity to deliver, because the hub has spent nothing on home improvements so far—nothing, zero, absolutely nothing. Thousands of homes in Peterborough will lose out as a result, but not so in Cambridge. Cambridge City Council put its own bid together for sustainable warmth funding and got just over £6 million, in partnership with some of the local councils close by. Unlike homes in Peterborough, they will get the improvements because they bypassed our failing Mayor—a Labour Mayor.

Cambridge City Council led this bid, and it obviously knew the Mayor well enough not to trust him. It takes Labour to know Labour. I am told that the Government have already received formal complaints from four different councils about the combined authority-run hub. More complaints are likely when other councils find out what our Mayor has done and the amount of money that he will be returning—unspent—to central Government. It really is a national scandal—a scandal covering a third of a national funding pot and a fifth of the country. Only Nik Johnson's other scandals make this the least likely thing to prompt him to quit. Yet there is no longer any question but that he should. This is a failure of public service delivery. This is an example of Labour failure of public service delivery.

6.9 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the motion today. The official Opposition termed the subject

“Backlog Britain”, but “Backlog, broken, Brexit Britain” would have been a more apt and relevant title—they should shoulder their portion of responsibility for much of that, given their leader's weakness and their inability to hold this shambolic Prime Minister and his Government to account.

The UK is the sick man of Europe, with a despot leader who does not rely on the rule of law to keep order—quite the opposite; he chooses to break it freely and consistently, whether international or domestic, with nothing limited or specific about it. As with the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill that came through this place last night, laws are being broken knowingly and willingly.

If I were to throw out the figure of tens of thousands, I would be speaking not about the opportunities made available to us via a post-Brexit bonanza, but the number of people waiting for their passports to be processed by this Government's Passport Office—a number that grows by the hour. It is frankly staggering that this Tory Government have sunk to this new low, such a low that they now cannot even get the most basic of tasks, arming our citizens with their passports, sorted out. The reality is that I could have picked any Government Department to focus my comments on today. The DVLA, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Passport Office—the whole Government are in complete disarray.

Everyone could see that in excess of 5 million people would be applying for passport renewals this year in the wake of a pandemic which saw two lockdowns where people could not leave their house, far less the country. The impeccable foresight of this Government led them to do what? To create more backlogs than necessary by cutting the number of civil servants staffing those Departments by more than a fifth in the past couple of years. They have plunged the entire travel industry even further into chaos in the wake of their incompetent pandemic border policy, with people now forced to cancel flights and travel plans due to the delay in issuing passports.

It would be remiss of me, when touching on transport matters, not to put on record my solidarity with and support for the workforce and the members of the RMT union striking for a fair pay for a fair day. I also place on record my admiration for Mick Lynch, leader of the RMT union, in how he has handled the heavily slanted media reporting we have seen from some commentators across the Brit-Nat media outlets—for the avoidance of doubt, I am talking about Sky and the BBC. I also noted with some admiration his choice of socialist revolutionary.

Issuing passports and driving licences and keeping people on the move via public transport are the very basic asks of any Government. Yet this Government, led by a law-breaking Prime Minister, have utterly failed our constituents on every count. Families across the four nations of the UK, as we all know well, are already suffering under the turbocharged Tory cost of living crisis, and yet this Government are completely failing to even acknowledge their mismanagement of the situation.

Blissful ignorance works well for the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and it looks to be catching right across that Government Front Bench. The Government know fine well that the cost of living is rocketing and that, for the vast majority of



[Steven Bonnar]

those we represent, every penny is a calculated and measured spend. Yet my constituents have been left with the only viable option of paying extra of their hard-earned money, in the hope of obtaining their passport in time for travel. It is completely unacceptable—but, of course, an inhumane policy such as the despicable Rwanda plan, which costs half a million pounds for every empty plane sent, must be funded somehow, mustn't it?

My constituency office in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill has been inundated with hundreds upon hundreds of passport, visa and immigration related inquiries. I have constituents who need to spend whatever little time is left with a terminally ill parent in Australia, met with intransigence; another who needs to access urgent specialist cancer treatment in Canada, met with intransigence by this Government; and another who needs to attend their brother's funeral in India, met with inaction from the Government. Those are real concerns, real problems, real emergencies and real people that this Government do not have a shred of compassion for, let alone any attempt to understand or accommodate. While we focus on trying to sort this stuff, highlighting individual Government inadequacies along the way, that leaves less and less time for the long list of other issues that we need to deal with that are once again at the heart of this Government's "steal from the poor and give to the rich" agenda.

**Paul Holmes:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Steven Bonnar:** I have heard enough from Conservative Members, and the hon. Gentleman has spoken many times, so I will push on and make the points that I am here to make.

The cost of living is getting higher and higher for our constituents. There is the cost of gas and electric, and of petrol. There are the soaring food prices for families and sky-high council bills, and inflation is soaring over 9%. That is all before the real implications of Brexit, which are staring us all right in the face, truly begin to bite. This is, without question, the most incompetent Prime Minister that this place has ever seen, but those on the Labour Benches do not get away scot-free. The Leader of the Opposition and of the supposed workers' party is too busy banning his own MPs from picket lines to do so much as land a glove on the Prime Minister. We in Scotland know that both parties in this House shoulder some of the responsibility for the absolute shambles of Brexit, and of the Brexit negotiations thereafter. It is down to both the Government and Labour, with their "We will make Brexit work" mantra. Brexit will not work. It certainly will not work for Scotland.

Thankfully for the people of Scotland, we have a way out—another option. We have a choice. The people of Scotland will weigh up the potential of an independent Scotland in Europe, versus the pain of a backward, broken, Brexit Britain. There is no choice at all this time around; the day is fast approaching when we take back our independence.

6.16 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There is an old saying that you cannot solve a problem if you do not know that it exists. While I hope that the contributions to this debate have spelled out in no

uncertain terms where the problems are, there has been a failure right across Government to measure performance, which is part of the reason we are here now. To illustrate the point, I will highlight some of the written questions I have asked on these issues.

I will start with the most recent. Yesterday I got an answer to a question asking what the average waiting time is for an assessment for personal independence payment from the point of application. The answer I got was:

"the information requested is not readily available and to provide it would incur disproportionate cost."

I am sure that Members recognise that phrase very well. People claiming PIP usually need immediate help, but how can the Department judge whether it is doing enough on that score if it cannot even tell us how long it takes to get to an assessment? I know some of the practical consequences of that. I have a constituent with multiple long-term conditions who was disgracefully turned down for PIP back in October 2019 and still has not had her appeal heard. She had another go at it last week, but the appeal was cancelled for the umpteenth time because no one from the Department was available to register their objection to her appeal. How is that justice for that individual? How is it anything other than a damning indictment of the way that the Department works?

At least the response to that written question was rather more straightforward than the one I got from the same Department on the average online journal response time for universal credit claimants:

"Universal Credit is a 24/7 digital service."

Well, that is really helpful for understanding how long it takes people to get a response.

Moving on to the Department of Health, I asked it what the average length of time was for a resolution to complaints to the Vaccination Data Resolution Service regarding incorrect vaccination records. I was told that the information was not held centrally—again, a phrase that I am sure that many Members are familiar with. The Government need to get a grip on this, because I know people who have been trying to correct their records since last year, which means that they are having trouble travelling abroad because their vaccination records are not up to date. That shows that it is not just GP appointments, specialist referrals, ambulance waiting times and A&E waits that the NHS is struggling with. However, at least there is some kind of measurement of those issues, although it has not gone unnoticed that for quite a lot of them, the goalposts have moved in recent times.

As many Members have said, the biggest issue in the inbox at the moment is passport delays. It has been for at least the past couple of months in my constituency. I asked a written question about processing times for passports way back in April. Despite having a couple of weeks' notice of the question, the Department could not get an answer to me before Prorogation, rather conveniently. Last week I finally got an answer to the question; I was told that between March and May, more than 90% of applications were processed within six weeks, with approximately 98.5% completed within 10 weeks. Obviously the Prime Minister told us a few weeks ago that everyone was getting them in four to six weeks, which was clearly incorrect, but I think we have done enough on his exactitude recently, so I will not go any further into that.

The issue has been live for many months now, but it was only last week that the Department was able to provide me with information on its own performance, which takes me back to the original point: the Government have either wilfully or negligently decided not to mention their own performance. I think they are doing that because they just do not want anyone to know how badly they are doing.

On the issue of the Home Office backlog, my constituency office phone bill last month was far larger than normal. It was more than £260. When we dug a little deeper, we found that most of it was down to my excellent caseworkers being put on hold for hours at a time when ringing various Home Office hotlines. If we multiplied that by all the Members here, it would mean that more than £2 million had been spent in one year on calls to one Department's hotlines. If that is what it is costing us here, imagine how much the British public are having to pay. It is not just backlog Britain; it is rip-off Britain.

I am reminded of a constituent who told me about his passport renewal. Having paid an extra £70 to get it checked by the Post Office, he had to make an emergency dash to Durham on Friday, which cost him £100 in fuel, and then had to pay another £90 to the Home Office to get the passport issued, despite the fact that the application had been sent in more than 10 weeks ago. Just for good measure, he could not work that day, so he lost another £200 in earnings. He could not do his job because the Ministers could not do theirs.

Let us make it clear that the blame lies at the feet of Ministers, not with the hard-pressed civil servants who are doing their best. As we have already heard, the Government think that we can cut civil servants by 20%. One can only imagine the backlog we would face if that went ahead. This backlog is across every facet of life. The child waiting for their education, health and care plan; the teenager waiting months for a driving test slot; the young family waiting for their passport renewals; and the pensioner waiting for the ambulance to arrive—everywhere we turn, there is another person unable to get on with their life because the Government have failed them. It is not just the failure of the Prime Minister; over the past 12 years, each of his predecessors has decided, time and again, that public services are not a priority, and that they can get away without investing in those services and the people who run them.

**Matt Western:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. One of the learnings of the past two years, and one of the concerns, has been about the cuts to local government and our local administrations. They performed very well in the disbursement of support to businesses and so on, and were doing well with test and trace. The Government seem to be doing the reverse of what is obvious and logical, which is delivering services well.

**Justin Madders:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I declare for the record that my wife is a member of the local authority. When we first entered the covid crisis, there was already a system in place for contact tracing through local authorities. Unfortunately that was not deemed good enough by this Government, who decided to spend an awful lot of money on private providers. On the Homes for Ukraine scheme, I get a lot of compliments from residents on how the council is

reacting, and a lot of complaints about how slow the Home Office is to respond. The power of local government cannot be overstated, and we should value more the great service that it provides.

In conclusion, we have seen over the past few months that a decade of austerity has consequences, and the folly of it has been well and truly exposed. This Government should hang their head in shame and step aside for a party that believes in public services, and has a record of delivery in government that this lot can only dream of.

6.24 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to conclude the Back-Bench contributions to this debate. This Tory Government's catastrophic Brexit and austerity agenda are fast pushing the UK economy into recession, as evidenced by the fact that the UK has the slowest growth of any G7 economy, according to the OECD. The chief economist at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been highly critical of the length of time it took the UK Government to act to help people with the additional financial pressures caused by inflation. She noted:

"Inflation continues to hit highs not seen since the early 1980s, heaping more pressure on millions of families who were already struggling...The support package announced last month shows the Chancellor is finally grasping the scale of the crisis. The continuing rise in food prices means the decision in April not to uprate benefits in line with inflation has left low-income households...facing a difficult—"

really difficult—three months until they receive their first payment in July.

It is extremely reckless and frustrating that the UK Government have decided to bring forward legislation that deliberately sets them on an entirely avoidable collision course with the EU. Risking a disastrous trade war in the middle of a cost of living crisis is unthinkable and indefensible. This news has been met with dismay by Scottish businesses, which stand to face months of uncertainty in a year with record increases in their input prices. Scotland has a direct interest in the Northern Ireland protocol, particularly with regard to trade and border control, yet despite repeated requests, the UK Government have shown absolutely no willingness to engage with the Scottish Government on those issues.

It is staggering that Labour and the Liberal Democrats remain committed to Brexit, even as it causes vast damage. Last week, the Resolution Foundation put out a report, "The Big Brexit: An assessment of the scale of change to come from Brexit", which noted that the long-term aggregate impact of Brexit

"will be to reduce household incomes as a result of a weaker pound, and lower investment and trade."

Scotland's food and drink sector has borne the brunt of a hard Tory Brexit. In 2019, Scottish exports were growing consistently in all directions—to the rest of the UK, the EU and the rest of the world. We now know that Scotland's total trade with the EU was 16% lower in 2021 than in 2019, and Scotland's trade with non-EU countries fell by only 4% in the same period. An Office for National Statistics report found that Northern Ireland's GDP grew by 1.4% from July to September 2021, compared with gains of only 0.9% and 0.6% in Scotland and England respectively. That may well be due to Northern Ireland having continued access to the single market.

[*Marion Fellows*]

Brexit is hindering the UK's potential as a key 21st-century trader, and is actively disadvantaging UK producers and businesses. The UK's new relationship with the EU implies an increase in trade costs of 10.8% for exports to the EU and 11% for imports from the EU, and those figures rise to more than 16% when accounting for the fact that the EU is likely to integrate further in future years. It is the SNP's view that rejoining the EU at the earliest opportunity as an independent country represents the best future for Scotland. I am happy that more and more people in Scotland are coming round to that point of view.

Transport is being run into the ground, especially for people who travel by train or plane. There are vast queues at Dover, with people forced to wait in unsanitary conditions, due to Brexit delays and mitigating measures have been limited by the fact that the Transport Secretary—

**Chris Clarkson:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Marion Fellows:** No, I am not going to take interventions. I need to finish and allow the Front Benchers to fight it out.

With the UK Government's failure to back a Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) to absolutely outlaw fire and rehire, they have shown that they actually have no time for this. They are encouraging this abhorrent practice—P&O being only one example—and we are now seeing this being carried out in other areas of the economy. Fire and rehire is a shame on this country and it is a stain on this Government.

I understand that I do not have much time so I want to move on briefly to talk about passports, or the lack of them, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. We have heard consistent examples from across the Chamber today and I have many examples of issues with passports. The one sticking in my craw right now is that of a father who is terminally ill and cannot get a passport to go and visit his daughter. I cannot do anything about this because there are two days of queries, and I have to sit and wait before I can go down to the hub. I have been down at the hub many times, and I have nothing but admiration for those who work there, but they should not be there. There should be no necessity for such a hub, and we should get this whole business of passports sorted out. It was an accident waiting to happen—it did not just appear out of nowhere—and there should have been forward planning for this.

The DVLA has been a thorn in my side for many years. One of the biggest parts of that, which has had an impact recently, is the fact that many of my constituents are applying to have their licence returned, but are left unattended in the vocational doctors queue. It is not unusual; I have had numerous complaints about this from HGV drivers over the years. They are signed off as fit to go back to work, but there is a shortage of doctors at the DVLA to sort this out. That also needs to be sorted.

What is the Prime Minister's answer to these hard-working Government Departments? I do not know whether I can say this, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the word "arse" is a good Anglo-Saxon word. The Prime Minister has threatened to "privatise the arse" out of Government agencies—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. That is an unparliamentary expression.

**Marion Fellows:** It is a quote, Sir—a quote from the Prime Minister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I still think it is unparliamentary.

**Marion Fellows:** Oh, right then: the Prime Minister has threatened to privatise a body part out of Government agencies, including the DVLA and the Passport Office as a result of the public facing lengthy waits for vital documents.

This Government have to go, this Prime Minister has to go, and when Scotland is an independent country in Europe, we will be much better off.

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

6.33 pm

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** I would like to start by thanking all the hard-working people who keep our public sector and our public services going day in and day out. They are not responsible for the fact that our country is so bogged down in backlogs and bureaucracy. Indeed, as we have heard throughout this debate, their professionalism and dedication to public service stand in stark contrast to the shambolic performance of this Conservative Government.

I would also like to thank hon. Members, particularly those on the Opposition Benches, who through their speeches and interventions in this important debate have expressed genuine concern on behalf of their constituents about the desperate state of the Prime Minister's backlog Britain, as opposed to those who have attempted to defend the indefensible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) made a thoughtful speech and pointed out that if Ministers were running a business it would be bankrupt by now. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) gave a barnstorming speech: "Welcome to backlog Britain, thanks to 12 years of a Conservative Government." is the line that came through very clearly. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) called on the Government to learn the lessons and focused in particular on the chaos of the Passport Office. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) recounted the appalling costs to his constituents of the backlogs and dysfunction at the heart of this Government, demonstrated by the failure to answer his basic parliamentary questions.

Conservative Members consistently attempt to blame covid and the lockdowns for the mess in which we now find ourselves, but backlog Britain cannot be blamed simply on covid and the lockdowns. The reality is that the underlying causes of the mess we are in predate the pandemic and the challenges we now face have got worse since the end of lockdown. That is because backlog Britain has been created by two basic failures: first, a failure of resilience caused by a decade of underinvestment by the Conservatives in British businesses and public services; and, secondly, a failure of governance caused by Ministers walking away from their responsibilities and utterly failing to plan for the end of the covid restrictions. The combination of those two fundamental



failures with the fact that we have a lawbreaking Prime Minister who has lost the confidence of 40% of his own MPs and has basically become a national embarrassment provides all the ingredients for a catastrophic breakdown in the systems and institutions that keep our country going.

On the failure of resilience, the decade leading up to the pandemic was defined by a staggering lack of investment by the Government in the private sector, which led to low growth and weakened British business—so much so that Britain became the European capital for hostile foreign takeovers. The Conservatives failed miserably to meet the average growth rate for similarly developed countries and as a result the Government unlocked less private investment than in all but two of the 38 comparable countries. If the Government had matched that growth rate, the Treasury would now have £12 billion extra in the Exchequer, and if they had matched the growth rates achieved by Labour Governments between 1997 and 2010, they would have an extra £40 billion to spend.

Low growth meant less money to invest in public services. NHS waiting lists were already at record highs, and as the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), pointed out in his opening contribution, there were already more than 100,000 staff vacancies while court backlogs were already growing by 23% in 2020. Lower growth inevitably meant weaker public services and less flexible local government, resulting in a less resilient economy and public sector. It also left our critical national infrastructure dangerously reliant on China for everything from personal protective equipment to our nuclear energy supply.

Resilience is about being able to absorb and bounce back from shocks when they hit, but that lost decade of underinvestment removed our shock absorbers: the British state was surviving hand to mouth—it was walking on thin ice; it was hollowed out by the toxic combination of incompetence and indifference that has characterised successive Conservative Governments since 2010. And now we see that this ice is breaking and the result is backlog Britain.

**Huw Merriman:** Given that there have been four Conservative election victories—or, at least, four Conservative Governments—is the hon. Gentleman saying that the people cannot be trusted, that the Conservative Government are not as bad as he says, or that the Labour party has been particularly hopeless at giving an alternative message? It must be one of those three things.

**Stephen Kinnock:** The British people participate in democratic elections, and when we see the desperately bad results that this Conservative Government are delivering, I am absolutely confident that at the next general election they will deliver a landslide Labour Government. Then we will see the changes our country needs, rather than the incompetence and indifference we see from the Conservative party.

That leads me to the second fundamental failure: the failure of basic competent governance. Mr Deputy Speaker, you do not have to be Mystic Meg to know that when the pandemic abated, the lockdown restrictions would be lifted. We all knew that GP, A&E and hospital waiting lists were skyrocketing, with 4,500 fewer GPs to

take appointments than 10 years ago. We also knew that the court backlog was at a record high, with the victims of the most serious violent crimes, including rape, having to wait two or three years for a case to come to court. We also knew that people would want to go on holiday and that they would need passports.

There was no need for a crystal ball—it was happening in front of our very eyes—but while AstraZeneca and the NHS were rolling out the vaccine at speed, the UK Government were patting themselves on the back and wheeling suitcases full of booze into No. 10. Backlog Britain represents a shameful dereliction of duty by a Prime Minister who is utterly out of his depth. Instead of meeting Britain's challenges, he prefers Government by gimmick. There are lots of big, flashy announcements, but nothing ever seems to get delivered. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is not designed to solve any of the immediate problems, and it will take months to get through Parliament. The Bill of Rights is an empty distraction that will just increase the backlogs in the courts system, and the Government have sent £120 million of taxpayers' money to the Rwandan Government for a press release.

There is a world of difference between campaigning and governing, and the Government appear to be permanently stuck in campaign mode, constantly hunting for wedge issues that will enable them to pick fights and sow division, inflaming tension, rather than building consensus. They are not even campaigning for the Conservative party. No, their campaigns are focused on one aim and one aim only: throwing red meat to Back Benchers so that the Prime Minister can carry on squatting in Downing Street.

One of the many fundamental differences between Government Members and Opposition Members is that we believe in an active state. We believe that the state should work in partnership with the private sector and civil society to facilitate sustainable economic growth and the smooth running of the systems and institutions that underpin and empower our economy and our communities. We believe in investing to help the private sector to grow so that British businesses can create jobs, improve productivity and compete internationally rather than sell out to the highest foreign bidder. We believe in investing in public services so that NHS hospitals do not have to choose between treating covid and screening cancer, and we know that the backlogs are clogging up our courts, our ports, our A&E departments, our GP surgeries, the Passport Office, the DVLA and our asylum system. That is holding our country back.

Government Members do all they can to avoid any state support whatsoever. They see government as the very last resort, and the result is the mess that we are in. The result is backlog Britain.

A Government who fail to plan are a Government who plan to fail. A Government who fail to build resilience are a Government who leave us exposed to shocks. A Government who blame anyone and everything for their own failures will never step up and take responsibility for cleaning up the mess they have made, and a Government led by a man who is utterly unfit for public office are bound to end in disaster. Backlog Britain is the consequence of all those failings. The British people deserve better than this.

6.43 pm

**The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds):**

The Government absolutely recognise the difficulties that families across the country are facing. It is a concerning time, and that is why we are taking concerted and wide-ranging action, the details of which I will come on to highlight, to ensure that people and businesses get the support that they need.

Countries around the world are seeing slowing growth and higher inflation, and I am afraid the UK is simply not immune. This month's OECD economic outlook says:

"The world is paying a heavy price for Russia's war in Ukraine. It is a humanitarian disaster, killing thousands and forcing millions from their homes. The war has also triggered a cost-of-living crisis, affecting people worldwide. When coupled with China's zero-COVID policy, the war has set the global economy on a course of slower growth and rising inflation".

Our priority is ensuring people get the support and help they need, continuing our responsible economic management and helping people to stay in jobs.

It is important to note what has happened in the labour market. Economists had projected that unemployment would peak during covid at somewhere close to 12%. In the event, it peaked at 5.2% and is now down below 4%. The unemployment rate is now close to historic lows, and youth unemployment is at near record lows, at nearly half the rate during the same period of 2010. Redundancies are at the lowest level since records began in the mid-1990s. Total real wages are 3% above pre-pandemic levels.

We must never forget that by far the most important thing for living standards, for fighting poverty and for the dignity of families throughout the country is having a job, and it was the decisive action of this Government that kept so many people in jobs through the pandemic. The furlough scheme and the self-employment income support scheme, which together went to an estimated 14.7 million people, helped to protect jobs, businesses and livelihoods. Some £100 billion of loans and grants were made available to support businesses of all sizes. And now, as we find ourselves in another global phenomenon, the Government are rightly stepping up once again.

We understand just how hard the rising cost of living is for families across the UK, and we are taking significant steps to ease these pressures. Central to that effort is the £37 billion to help households, especially those most in need, with the cost of living. We know that the best approach to managing pressures in the long term is helping people into work, supporting them to increase their income and helping them to keep more of what they earn, hence the reforms to universal credit and the taper rate, the increased national living wage and the higher national insurance thresholds.

This has been an important debate, with good contributions from both sides of the House, and I thank everyone who has contributed. I thank the Opposition spokespeople, the right hon. Members for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and I thank the hon. Members for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for Stirling (Alyn Smith), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill

(Steven Bonnar), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

I also thank my Conservative colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), with his Treasury Committee background, spoke with great authority and knowledge. He acknowledged some of the changes we have made to help the travel trade, to which I will return in a moment, and he reminded us of the lesson of history on wage price spirals and the ultimate importance of driving productivity to make sustainable rises in real wages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), in a very perceptive speech, noted the repetition we sometimes hear from Opposition Members, who do not always match it by voting with us to support investment in our key public services. He rightly said that every Member should acknowledge the problems we face and should work together on the issues, and I strongly agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), in a similar vein, pointed out some of the issues facing both the Welsh Government and the Westminster Government, including on the national health service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke of the great success of the vaccine programme. She rightly spoke with great respect of national health service clinicians and staff in her constituency, and she covered some of the innovation they are driving in Southend.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) spoke of the importance of employment, and I echo and wholeheartedly agree with what he said about the hard work of staff at Her Majesty's Passport Office, particularly in his constituency.

Let me turn to some issues that came up a number of times, starting with passports. We discussed the subject of passports across these Dispatch Boxes during an Opposition day debate two weeks ago. On that occasion, hon. Members may recall my acknowledging that although 98.5% of UK passport applications are being processed in 10 weeks, some of our constituents have clearly not received the level of service that they rightly expect. It is incumbent on us to do everything we can to address that.

To give some background, in a normal year before covid, some 7 million people would apply for a passport. During the period of covid, that number came right down. The projection is that 9.5 million people will apply for a passport this year, which is an unprecedented rate of year-on-year growth. The hard-working staff in HM Passport Office really have stepped up to the plate. In March, April and May, around 3 million applications were processed. I acknowledge, absolutely, that there have been difficulties with specific cases. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw spoke with compassion about a particularly compelling case. If she comes to me after the debate, I will make sure that she is put in touch with a Minister to discuss that further.

When I spoke about this two weeks ago, I said that on the most recent reporting, 650 additional staff had been added to HM Passport Office since April 2021. That figure, on the most recent statistics, is now up to 850, with the recruitment of a further 350 staff in train. Suppliers and contractors have also increased their

resourcing and we have added a further service desk and added capability on couriering. The service has continued to improve, and more passport applications are being processed now than ever before.

**Darren Jones:** Will the Minister confirm whether civil service cuts will apply to the Passport Office after that period of recruitment?

**Damian Hinds:** It would be quite wrong for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box and give analyses of and running commentaries on what is a sensible and important exercise to go through—[*Interruption.*] Well, it is. We have just been through two enormous events—leaving the European Union and the coronavirus pandemic—which have involved all manner of changes in how the civil service operates, some of which are temporary, whereas some are more sustained. Meanwhile, there have been opportunities, as there always are, to look afresh at how we do things. It is right for Government to do that on behalf of our taxpayers and all our electors, to whom we have a duty to spend taxpayers' money as efficiently and effectively as we can.

Let me turn to airports, which a number of colleagues spoke about, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle. There has been a sharp increase in passenger demand after a very suppressed period. That has put considerable pressure on the aviation sector, resulting in some passengers experiencing unacceptable delays and, in some instances, airlines cancelling flights. As Members on both sides of the House have noted, we have seen some of these effects in other countries, including members of the European Union.

A number of operational challenges have contributed to the situation, including staff shortages, crew availability and issues relating, in some cases, to covid restrictions still being in place in other countries. Although the private sector—the aviation industry—is responsible for resourcing airports and airlines, we rightly work with that important sector, which supports a lot of jobs and prosperity, sustains business travel, brings tourists to this country and generates a lot of export earnings. We have worked with the sector to support it in a number of ways.

On 29 April, we laid a statutory instrument to make use of our new Brexit powers to allow Ministers greater flexibility over regulation. That allowed for temporary changes to permit certain training to be undertaken while background checks are completed, helping to speed up recruitment but without a change in security assurance. Having listened carefully to the industry, we were also able to agree that HMRC employment history letters could be used for a time as a suitable form of reference check, with safeguards, to reduce the time that recruiting takes.

On the inbound side, which is an area of Home Office responsibility, Border Force is working to a projection that demand will go back to pre-pandemic levels and is staffing accordingly. Our collective focus must be on ensuring that people can get away for business travel, to help to create prosperity, and for their well-earned summer breaks, on time and as hassle-free as possible.

On driving licences, let me first say that if the right hon. Member for Dundee East comes to me with the

case that he mentioned of the community mental health nurse in his constituency, I will make sure that a conversation takes place with the appropriate Minister. More than seven in 10 people apply online for driving licences; there are no delays in those applications. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is also back to normal times for vehicle registrations and non-medical driving licence paper applications. The remaining area in which more improvement is needed is applications from those with a medical condition. As colleagues may know, that part of the operation was hit by industrial action, but it is anticipated that it, too, will be back to normal timings by September. In the meantime, the DVLA continues to recruit more staff and utilise overtime to reduce medical application delays, and has opened further customer service centres in Swansea and Birmingham.

On the national health service, it is true that following the disruption of covid, the elective waiting list has grown in England, in Wales and across the United Kingdom, as it has grown in other countries. I place on record my enormous appreciation, gratitude and admiration for everybody who works in our national health service: their contribution throughout the pandemic has been absolutely exceptional. GP appointment numbers have now recovered to pre-pandemic levels; as of April, there were 1.26 million GP appointments per average working day. The Government plan to spend more than £8 billion to support the NHS to provide the elective care that was delayed by the pandemic. With the additional £1 billion that we announced for the second half of 2021-22, that could fund the equivalent of approximately 9 million more checks, scans and procedures.

There is no doubt that these are difficult times. Covid-19 was a major, indeed unprecedented, time in global history. The war in Ukraine is devastating for the people of Ukraine, and the economic shockwaves are felt far beyond, too. As Ministers, we are here to be held to account for the Government's response, quite rightly, but I must say to the Opposition that they cannot just will away these huge global challenges with wishful thinking and fantasy economics.

Calmly and determinedly, this Government are stepping up to face these challenges head on. We do not underestimate the scale or complexity of them. We will not waver. We will weather these storms. With the fortitude of the British people, the creativity and belief of British business and the innovation of British entrepreneurs, we will emerge stronger than ever. The British people know that dedicated public servants are working flat out for them. They can be assured that they have a Government who are taking the difficult decisions and who are on their side.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes that UK economic growth is forecast to grind to a halt next year, with only Russia worse in the OECD; further notes that GDP has fallen in recent months while inflation has risen to 9.1 per cent and that food prices, petrol costs and bills in general are soaring for millions across the country; believes that the Government is leaving Britain with backlogs such as long waits for passports, driving licences, GP and hospital appointments, court dates, and at airports; and calls on the Government to set out a new approach to the economy that will end 12 years of slow growth and high taxation under successive Conservative governments.



## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 (Consequential Provision) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 11 May, be approved.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### CUSTOMS

That the Customs (Amendments and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2022 (S.I., 2022, No. 615), a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 June, be approved.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Authority and Combined Authority Elections (Nomination of Candidates) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 6 June, be approved.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## PETITION

### Pryzm in Watford

6.59 pm

**Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of Watford residents to save Pryzm nightclub from closure. As the only town-based nightclub in Hertfordshire, Pryzm has had many names over the past 40 years—Baileys, Destiny and Oceana, to name but a few—but one thing is true: it has always been the beating heart of Watford's night-time economy, with many businesses relying on the thousands of visitors each weekend, creating friendships and forging memories and even relationships. There is no doubt that Pryzm's closure would be a devastating loss for our town.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urge the local council to engage with developers and urge them to withdraw their planning application or refuse the application to build on the site of Pryzm in Watford, and should the application be refused, to urge the landlord not to evict Pryzm nightclub as tenants.

And the petitioners remain, etc

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

*Declares that Pryzm in Watford should not be closed down; further that Pryzm is the only town-based nightclub in Hertfordshire; further that Pryzm is a long-standing part of the culture of Watford; and further that if the planning application to build houses on the site and Pryzm itself is approved, it will have a detrimental effect on the local economy and especially the night-time economy.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urge the local council to engage with developers and urge them to withdraw their planning application or refuse the application to build on the site of Pryzm in Watford, and should the application be refused, to urge the landlord not to evict Pryzm nightclub as tenants.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc]*

[P002742]

## Hammersmith Bridge: Restoration Funding

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

7 pm

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Members who are present for this important Adjournment debate.

Here I am again, and talking about Hammersmith bridge again. It has been closed to vehicles for three long years, and that closure is still having a huge impact on the everyday lives of residents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields, and much more widely across south-west London.

I last held an Adjournment debate on the closure—and, hopefully, the reopening one day—of the bridge in April 2021, and I have raised it in the House several times since then. Since that debate there have been welcome stabilisation works to make the bridge safer, and it has reopened to pedestrians above and river traffic below. However, I am here again because there has still been no agreement on the building of a temporary vehicle bridge, on any date by which the restoration of the bridge will be complete, or on when—and residents are crying out “When?”—the bridge will fully reopen. I hope to hear much better news from the Minister this time than last time, and I know that plenty of people in Putney and across south-west London are listening to the debate and also want those answers.

The Government have been dragging their feet, and the taskforce has had no task and no force. Responding to my last debate, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), simply said:

“The buck stops with Hammersmith and Fulham.”—[*Official Report*, 14 April 2021; Vol. 692, c. 442.]

That was a very disappointing end to the debate. I will be describing all that Hammersmith and Fulham Council is doing now, because it is the council that is responsible for the bridge, and explaining why it is the Government who need to do more.

It is Hammersmith and Fulham Council that made the assessment of the danger in the first place, has made the business case for the stabilisation works and funded those works up front, and has drawn up the memorandum of understanding between the council, the Government and Transport for London, the three parties that will be responsible for the funding. However, Transport for London does not have the funds to restore the bridge because of reduced fees and other payments as a result of covid, so it comes down to the Government. What have the Government done, what will the Government do, and when will the bridge reopen?

Let me first say something about the impact of the closure. It has resulted in between 500 and 4,000 vehicles a day coming through Putney High Street. Local residents complain constantly of increased travel times for journeys by bus and car, of increased congestion and pollution and of accidents on the roads, especially involving children near the schools on the most affected roads.

We want more safe cycle routes in Putney, and in Wandsworth we have one of the highest “propensity to cycle” ratings. However, the increased traffic and traffic jams make cycling more dangerous and put people off cycling. In meetings that I have held with potential

cyclists, most people say they feel that Putney Hill, Putney High Street and Putney Bridge are very dangerous roads. That in turn means worse air quality, because if there are fewer cyclists on the road there are more vehicles, which add to the congestion. As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, each year more than 4,000 Londoners die prematurely as a result of air pollution, and more than 500,000 people in London boroughs suffer from asthma and are vulnerable to toxic air.

Recently, for Clean Air Day, I undertook readings using an ultra-fine particle counter—lent to me by Imperial College—along Putney High Street and the Lower and Upper Richmond Roads, the main diversion routes from the bridge. The readings were exceptionally high, even from inside homes along those roads. Residents have shown me the black soot that builds up in their homes, and companies tell me about the impact that the poor air quality is having on their business.

The Putney Society is concerned about this as well, and it has sent me the following statement about the impact of the bridge closure:

“Congestion is at an all time high with roads leading towards Putney Bridge clogged up before 7 am in the morning, with traffic jams continuing well into the evening. Prior to the Bridge closure in 2019 Putney already suffered from one of the most polluted High Streets in the country. And despite positive measures such as the introduction of cleaner buses and the ULEZ zone, our pollution levels continue to exceed UK legal limits, in part because of additional traffic resulting from the Bridge closure. Around 60 constituents die prematurely each year because of this pollution, and we now face the prospect of this continuing for several more years until Hammersmith Bridge is fully repaired.”

The statement continues:

“The extra traffic has affected thousands of people. Aside from the impact of pollution on residents’ health, children and students have suffered disrupted journeys to their school or college; workers, especially those travelling from Roehampton, have faced significantly lengthened bus journeys and businesses have had delayed deliveries. And the most vulnerable people, who require access to healthcare, whether appointments or vital emergency treatment, face delays in getting an ambulance or reaching nearby hospitals. Why? Because ambulances can no longer take a short hop across the Bridge to Barnes or beyond but now spend much, much longer in traffic”.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, particularly in drawing attention to the fact that the closure of Hammersmith bridge is having a sub-regional and regional effect. It is much wider than just the immediate locality. Does she find it surprising that the Government have dragged their feet all the way along the line on this, first by asking Hammersmith to find all the funding, then £64 million and now a third of the cost, which is more than double what they would propose for similar schemes? Does she agree that until the Government are prepared to take their responsibilities in this matter seriously, we are not going to see progress?

**Fleur Anderson**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We have just had a debate on Government failure, and this is Government failure 101. Not keeping a major transport route open in our capital city and letting it stay closed for so many years—and who knows how much longer—is a Government failure. They need to step up with the funding, and I will be outlining more information about that.

[Fleur Anderson]

Hammersmith bridge is a very unusual bridge, and this is why it requires special attention from the Government. It is a grade II listed structure and part of Great Britain's engineering heritage. It is also one of the world's oldest suspension bridges, and only five years younger than the Brooklyn bridge in New York. It is unique, having been built out of cast iron, wrought iron and wood. No Government, surely, would allow the Brooklyn bridge to stay closed, so why let Hammersmith bridge do so? It has suffered from over seven decades of deterioration and corrosion. This corrosion, along with the fact that the bridge was designed for the needs of the 19th century, is what makes Hammersmith bridge one of the most expensive bridges in Britain to repair. When warnings of its possible imminent collapse forced its closure, I perfectly understood that the engineers faced huge challenges.

Transport for London has estimated that the repair bill could be between £141 million and £161 million. By comparison, the cost of repairing other Thames bridges is far smaller. For example, Chiswick bridge cost £9 million to repair, and Albert bridge cost £9.7 million. In those cases, Transport for London largely funded the works, paying between 85% and 100% of the costs. The responsible council was not left to foot the bill in the way that Hammersmith and Fulham Council is being asked to do. The bridge is a special case, both historically and financially, and it needs a different funding package from the Government.

Overall, there needs to be a change in bridge policy in London. Lambeth Council has five bridges, but is responsible for none of them. Southwark bridge and London bridge are managed by a trust. Two railway bridges are managed by Network Rail, but Hungerford railway bridge is managed by Westminster. The policy is all over the place. I think it might be time to look at the inequity of bridge responsibilities in London, because it is clear that the system is failing us over Hammersmith bridge. But we are where we are, and there is currently an agreement that the Government, Transport for London and Hammersmith and Fulham Council will fund it.

The Mayor of London has repeatedly sought to meet the Transport Secretary to discuss this and a range of London transport funding issues, but these requests have all been refused. Twenty meetings with Transport for London have been cancelled by the Department for Transport or the Treasury since the last TfL funding deal was agreed. The last time the Transport Secretary and the Mayor of London spoke and discussed Transport for London funding was on 30 May 2021. That is shocking to hear, as Londoners are being let down by this Government. We need them to work with the Mayor, and I hope to hear more of that from the Minister later. We are talking about a national transport route, and the Government must lead the way in funding and reopening it. If a toll is going to be made necessary because the Government will not fund the bridge, has the impact on Putney residents been factored into that business case?

What has Hammersmith and Fulham Council done? Can we say that the buck stops with it? Last November, the council submitted a full business case to the Department for Transport for the stabilisation works, at a cost of £8.9 million, which was £21 million less than the TfL stabilisation plan, so this is a major saving to the

taxpayer. To speed up the repair programme, the council decided in December to make the cash available up front, rather than wait for the DFT and TfL governance processes to sign off their shares, as that process is simply too cumbersome. That enabled works to begin several months early. The DFT did not sign off on its one-third share until 22 March this year, many months later, showing that the Government are dragging their feet. The phase 1 stabilisation programme was able to get under way on site in February. It will stop the risk of collapse and prevent future closures to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic, which I, of course, welcome. On 7 March, Hammersmith and Fulham Council signed off a further £3.5 million investment so that it could crack on with all the essential expert studies required to obtain Government and TfL funding through the full business case. That includes essential concept design work, geotechnical studies, crowd loading assessments and traffic modelling. I understand that the council and the DFT officials are working together on completing the business case, but when will that be done? Will funding be ready to go as soon as that is completed and approved, so that we do not have any more delays?

The latest investment of £3.5 million by the council to deliver those essential studies has again been paid for by the council up front, rather than having to wait for the DFT and TfL governance processes to kick in. This signing off of money, at its own risk for the council, in order to expedite bridge works is a situation that the council says cannot continue. I understand that the impasse is now the memorandum of understanding, which would confirm the one shares payable for the council, the DFT and TfL, but that it has not been signed. The latest draft version was sent by the council to the DFT on 14 September 2021, but it has not yet received a response from Ministers or their officials. So I hope that I will not hear, "The buck stops with Hammersmith and Fulham Council" from the Minister again. The Government need to recognise the huge impact of this closure on people in Putney and beyond, and they need to take far more proactive and urgent action.

I shall finish with some questions for the Minister. When is the next meeting of the taskforce? When will Secretary of State sign the memorandum of understanding to enable the next phase of the works to continue as fast as possible? What is the hold-up on that? Has an assessment of the impact of a proposed toll, or of any other financial proposals, on routes through Putney been carried out? Would the Government consider underwriting the full works? When will the building of the temporary bridge start? How long will it take? Is there a deadline from Ministers for the completion of this project, as we would certainly like to see that there is and that it is as soon as possible? I ask again, and I will keep asking, what have the Government done, what will they do and when will Hammersmith bridge reopen?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Sarah Olney has asked permission from the mover of the motion and the Minister to make a short contribution in this debate. Both have agreed and I have been informed.

7.14 pm

**Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD):** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for securing this debate



and I thank the Minister and you for allowing me to contribute briefly to it. As I am sure everybody knows, the closure of Hammersmith bridge has had an enormous impact on my constituents. I wish to raise two issues, following on from the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Putney outlining the situation. The first is that on 25 May 2022, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham issued a prior information notice, announcing its intention to seek external funding for its third of the cost of strengthening Hammersmith bridge. As the hon. Lady asked, does that mean tolls? We are desperately seeking further information on that important point from the Department. I am not against tolls. If they are required to get the bridge open, there may be public support for that in Richmond Park, but it needs detailed consideration by all parties, including the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. Any tolls would weigh heavily on my residents, and we need a full exploration of all the factors. For instance, would tolls mean that people continue to use Putney and Chiswick bridges and avoid Hammersmith bridge and the tolls? Tolls are not unknown on London bridges, but not within the lifetime of anyone here.

My residents would also want to know who will have to pay the tolls. Might there be exceptions for Richmond residents, or will the exceptions just be for buses and emergency vehicles? We need more information. I urge Baroness Vere, the Minister responsible, to reconvene the taskforce so that the issues can be urgently discussed by local stakeholders, including the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made the point about the strategic issue involved. In Richmond, planning permission for housing developments, school place planning and healthcare planning are being affected. Will my residents have access in the long term to services, including schools and healthcare, on the north side of the Thames? It is really urgent. We know that jointly Transport for London, the Department for Transport and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham are committed to reopening the bridge, but without the funding to do so, their commitment is not worth very much. When it comes to five and 10-year planning for education and healthcare, we do not know whether services on the north side of the Thames will be accessible to people in Barnes. That is a real issue for parents who are thinking about schooling for their children. Will they be able to cross the bridge and access schools in Hammersmith and further afield? I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the debate to the House, and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute.

7.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on championing Hammersmith bridge once again, and on securing the debate. I also note the contributions by the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). I have listened carefully to them, and I appreciate that the subject is of keen interest to their constituents. I understand the impact of the bridge's closure to motor vehicles on many of the people in constituencies around Putney, and throughout south and west London.

As the hon. Member for Putney is aware, the bridge is owned by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and, as such, the borough has the responsibility for maintaining the bridge. The decisions on its repair lie with the borough. The bridge is a unique wrought iron structure, and has served generations of Londoners for nearly 200 years. It is deeply concerning that the bridge has had to close, first to motor vehicles in 2019 and then to all users in 2020. Of course the safety of those using the bridge was and remains the greatest priority. That is why my Department has done everything in its power to assist the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and Transport for London with the project, and to facilitate the full reopening of the bridge to all users, including motor vehicles.

I turn to the progress that has been made and some of ways that we have assisted. In 2019, we established the Hammersmith bridge taskforce, led by Baroness Vere of Norbiton, and it has met several times. The taskforce brings together all the key stakeholders whose input is required to deliver successful outcomes for pedestrians, cyclists, river traffic, and, eventually, motorists. The taskforce has been instrumental in organising stakeholders to work together in developing a clear course of action to enable the bridge to open.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) asked about the prior information notice that was issued by Hammersmith and Fulham. That PIN was issued on 25 May, with a deadline of 10 June. It was then extended to 15 June. Meetings with interested parties are taking place over the next few weeks to gauge interest and to seek feedback on the proposals. This is a crucial step in the process, and in developing an understanding of the market's appetite and of the options being considered by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

On the timelines, since the establishment of the Hammersmith bridge taskforce, the project has made significant progress. Thanks to Government funding—some £4 million was provided on 31 October 2020—the bridge was able to reopen on 17 July 2021, albeit on a limited and controlled basis, to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic. The next stage of the project—reopening the bridge to motor vehicles—is under development by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. Providing a schedule for full reopening is part of the development process. Whether to impose tolls is a decision for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. We expect the borough to engage with residents as it deems appropriate, so that it can understand any implications, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park set out.

**Sarah Olney:** Can the Minister bring any influence to bear on her colleague in the other place, Baroness Vere, so that she reconvenes a taskforce that will enable the whole issue of tolls to be properly, widely and publicly discussed with the relevant stakeholders?

**Trudy Harrison:** I will now set out exactly what is happening. Much good progress is being made. Following the complete closure of the bridge in 2020, the Department for Transport provided £4 million of taxpayers' money, which enabled a comprehensive investigation of the overall structure and condition of the bridge. Through that investment, we had pretty much world-leading engineers working to develop a complete picture of the issues facing the bridge. Those works determined that the bridge was in a better condition, thankfully, than

[Trudy Harrison]

first thought, and that led directly to the bridge reopening, albeit on a temporary and controlled basis to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic.

**Andy Slaughter:** I am in a state of despair, listening to the Minister. The cost of reopening this bridge could be £160 million. Hopefully, it will be less, but it is of that order. It is about the same as building a whole new Thames bridge, and it is fantasy for the Minister to say, “The Government are providing £4 million,” and “The Government have done this or that.” All the initiative so far has been taken by Hammersmith and Fulham Council—whether that is on the memorandum of understanding, on the proposals for the cheaper Foster COWI bridge, or on the stabilisation work—to get the bridge open permanently again to pedestrians. This is a strategic route through London. The Government must step up to the plate. I know that this is not in the Minister’s brief, but please could she take this issue seriously? It is affecting hundreds of thousands of people all across London and the south-east.

**Trudy Harrison:** I reject the characterisation of my Department as not taking this seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know that when one is potentially spending more than £100 million on a new bridge, much consideration and engineering knowledge will need to go into things such as a review by the Case for Continued Safe Operation Board. The board monitors the condition of the bridge, and has enabled it to stay open to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic. I am relieved to say that since that reopening, no further closures on safety grounds have been necessary.

The commitment to this project did not stop at the initial £4 million investment—not at all. In the TfL extraordinary funding and financing settlement of June 2021, we committed to sharing the cost of reopening the bridge. We have committed to that funding with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and TfL. We reiterated that commitment in a subsequent settlement, agreed in February 2022. That commitment ensures that the Government will fund up to one third of the cost of opening the bridge to pedestrians, cyclists, river traffic and—depending on those costs—buses and motor vehicles as well.

The first part of that commitment has already been delivered. Earlier this year, the Department approved the full business case from LBHF for the stabilisation works on the bridge. Those works will ensure that the bridge will remain open to pedestrians, cyclists, and river traffic permanently, with no risk of further temporary closures due to unsafe conditions.

The approval of the business case was a condition of the Government’s releasing their third of the funding for stabilisation. I am pleased to say that in May this year, my Department provided the borough with almost £3 million to allow the works to progress unimpeded by financial concerns. That brings the total investment to date to nearly £7 million.

It is thanks to the excellent work and diligence of my Department, TfL and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham that the works are already well under way. At long last, the residents of this part of London can see tangible progress being made. The borough is now managing the works, and will be providing my Department with regular updates on progress.

The next stage is to strengthen the core and renovate other structurally significant parts of the bridge. The strengthening phase of engineering works will build on stabilisation works; on its completion, the bridge can open to all users, including buses and motor vehicles. LBHF is required to submit a further business case to my Department and to TfL; in that business case, we would expect to see that the proposed method of strengthening is viable, offers value for money and minimises disruption to current users of the bridge. That is essential. The business case will also set out the final cost estimate for strengthening the bridge and, once approved, will allow my Department to release its third of the funding.

**Fleur Anderson** *rose—*

**Trudy Harrison:** Sorry; unfortunately, I cannot give way due to time. All three parties will work together over the coming months to ensure that an HM Treasury Green Book-compliant business case is developed and submitted for approval as soon as possible.

In closing, I re-emphasise that reopening Hammersmith Bridge to all users is and remains a Government priority. Restoring full access to this vital south-west London artery will improve the lives of thousands of residents, commuters and businesses who have, as we have heard this evening, been long deprived of a convenient route across the Thames. I also restate my Department’s commitment to funding up to one third of the cost, on approval of an appropriate business case.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and for their dedication in highlighting the issues that the continued closure of the bridge causes for their constituencies and others in the surrounding area. I reassure them that we are working tirelessly to deliver the full opening of the bridge.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.28 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 June 2022

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

## Freedom of Religion or Belief: International Conference

9.30 am

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK-hosted International Conference on the Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Colleagues, the world is changing. We cannot be complacent about peace and stability. We need only look to Ukraine to see that. Millions of people today are being denied their freedom of religion or belief. FORB violations are getting worse in severity and scale. Across the world, people are losing their jobs, education, homes, livelihoods, families, freedom and access to justice, and even life itself, simply on account of what they believe. People are being discriminated against, marginalised, beaten, threatened, tortured and killed, and too often by their own Governments—the very Governments with a duty to protect their citizens' freedom of religion or belief.

Why should that be, in the 21st century? Key exacerbating factors include rising intolerance and oppression by authoritarian regimes such as China, Myanmar and Afghanistan; frequent terrorist attacks by extremist groups, as in Nigeria, which now often function transnationally; the use, or rather misuse, of increasingly sophisticated technology to oppress minority groups; and the increasing FORB abuses during the covid pandemic.

We must actively protect free societies, and FORB is essential to that. When FORB goes, so many other basic human rights fall away too—yes, freedoms of speech, expression and association, but also access to healthcare, food and work, and even liberty and life itself. Discrimination damages democracies. Persecution impedes the development of the skills and talents of all, and impoverishes economies, so religious freedom is not just a benefit to those with religious beliefs; it is a benefit to all.

When President Roosevelt, one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the United Nations, envisioned a world of peaceful coexistence between nations, he stressed the need for four essential freedoms to exist in any stable, secure, democratic society: freedom of expression, freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom of belief. When FORB is respected, societies are more likely to be stable and secure, and to flourish economically. They are less prone to extremist attacks. So it is not to put too fine a point on it to say that in promoting FORB we are promoting peace. Indeed, promoting FORB is essential to securing global peace, and doing so now is as critical as ever.

The UK Government are deeply concerned about the increase in FORB violations globally and see defending FORB as a human rights priority, as part of what our Foreign Secretary calls the international network of liberty, so the UK is next week hosting a major international conference in central London—the 2022 international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): There is clearly a great deal of interest among parliamentarians about when the independent review—the Truro report—will be published. Will my hon. Friend, who is the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, confirm that publication is at hand? Will she also make it clear that as the Truro review is a manifesto commitment, although there is clearly more work to do on it, there is no question whatever of work on specific recommendations ceasing just because the review is taking place?

**Fiona Bruce:** I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Work is indeed in hand, and I concur with his view that work on that manifesto commitment and on the recommendations of the Truro review must continue. It is far from complete.

At the ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, we will welcome hundreds of delegates from over 60 countries, around half of which will be represented by Government Ministers. We will also welcome faith and belief leaders and representatives, civil society activists, academics and—importantly—FORB abuse survivors with their powerful accounts to tell. On 5 and 6 July, after a keynote speech from the Foreign Secretary, we will hold sessions on promoting FORB in the face of global challenges; early warning, and atrocity prevention; FORB and education; promoting FORB in the digital world; engaging the next generation; the multiple vulnerabilities of women and girls; FORB and the media; inspiring parliamentarians; and much more.

Those of us who have planned this conference could not have worked harder to ensure there is a diversity of participants from all faiths and none and from across the world. As the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I was involved in setting up a civil society advisory group representing many faith and belief backgrounds to help with the planning of the conference. We cannot afford for that conference to be merely a talking shop; it has to lead to increased global action and help drive forward international efforts to protect and promote FORB for everyone, everywhere.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on having secured this important debate. Two years ago, I had the great privilege of meeting the Bishop of Truro at his official residence down in Feock in Cornwall. Does my hon. Friend agree that this would be an appropriate time for those countries that attend the conference to establish their own Truro review to ensure that they maintain the objectives that are so clearly outlined in the bishop's report?

**Fiona Bruce:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One aim of the conference is to share best practice on how countries can prevent FORB violations and how they can work together to do so. I am firmly convinced that the recommendations of the Truro review set a standard that it is worth other countries looking at and indeed following. However, no one country has all the answers; we need to work together to build the capacity of FORB defenders and persuade violators of the positive case for change.

Freedom of religion or belief needs to be mainstreamed by Governments globally. It is not a side issue for individuals, communities or countries; Governments need to recognise the importance of including FORB in foreign and other policymaking, or we will face increasing



[Fiona Bruce]

challenges to peace across the world. Legal systems need to be strengthened to ensure that when a country has signed up internationally to FORB principles, such as through article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, that translates into practice on the ground, so that when a young woman who has been so-called forcibly married—that is, raped—goes into a police station, she can expect justice, not to be turned away.

We will be asking questions such as, what best practice can countries share to promote FORB and prevent its violation? How can we better protect the many women and girls from minority groups who suffer double jeopardy on account of their gender and their beliefs? How can we ensure that victims receive better treatment and effective trauma care? How can we address the lack of religious literacy about FORB among policymakers, which was one of the excellent recommendations in the Truro review? And how can FORB, and the reasons why it matters to everyone and to whole societies, not just those with religious beliefs, be introduced into education syllabi to inform young people and, hopefully, to inspire a whole new generation of FORB champions to spread the word about its importance, just as they have about climate change?

Achieving real change will require international collaboration on FORB, involving not only Governments but civil society organisations, which are so often at the forefront of reporting FORB abusers. That is why civil society engagement with our conference is so critical.

Addressing FORB will require political will and enduring commitment from the highest level of Governments if it is to be effective, and that will need to be backed up by real resources. We need to find ways to prevent violations of FORB from occurring, working with religious communities to do so and to discover flashpoints. We must seek to identify and disarm sources of tension. We need to build resilience and to encourage and foster dialogue.

The international community needs to develop mechanisms to help co-ordinate the increasing number of groups concerned about and working on FORB internationally. How can we better monitor FORB violations? Governments need to develop effective early-warning mechanisms to prevent mass atrocities. Countries need to work together to hold perpetrators of FORB violations to account through targeted sanctions, to ensure more follow the lead of the UK and other countries on human rights-based sanctions. Last month, I held a debate about FORB and digital persecution. We need to look at ways to prevent the misuse of technology and at how to use digital mapping to identify and track FORB violations in order to deliver more targeted interventions.

As we have planned the conference, we have deliberately invited a good number of young people. We need to help, support and inspire the next generation of FORB champions and to provide support for FORB defenders, particularly those persecuted for speaking up for this human right. The next generation need education curricula promoting an understanding of FORB, as do the wider public.

In the months running up to the conference, I and my deputy special envoy, David Burrowes, have toured the UK with a roadshow, speaking to community groups in about 25 towns and cities and raising awareness of FORB. This is a typical reaction:

“I had no idea that this amount of persecution is happening in the world today.”

More information about our tour is on the website [endthepersecution.uk](http://endthepersecution.uk), including free toolkits for places of worship, schools and communities to help spread the word about FORB and its importance.

We are looking for more countries to sign up in support of FORB, to develop coalitions of the willing. This year, I chair the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance—or IRFBA. I have been pleased to see more countries become members—there are now 36. We work to ensure that FORB is championed across the world and that FORB violations are called out.

The work of IRFBA is strengthening. In the past year we have issued statements on Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine and Nigeria, and in support of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Ahmadiyya and the Baha'i. Most pleasing has been the action that has followed these statements, such as in Afghanistan. IRFBA helped trigger one of our countries to provide visas for targeted religious minorities, and another country to provide a plane so that 190 people from Afghanistan, threatened on account of their beliefs, were flown out to safety. Many of them would almost certainly be dead now had IRFBA not intervened.

Our IRFBA education working group has informed the ministerial conference session, as has our deep dive into protecting religious heritage. The sight of the hugely significant UNESCO religious sites in Ukraine being destroyed by Russian forces has been appalling and is an affront to the people of Ukraine and the world. We at IRFBA now look forward to being a key vehicle to help deliver on the outcomes of the ministerial conference and to further galvanise multilateral efforts.

Working internationally on FORB, I have come to realise how our Parliament's cross-party work on FORB is pre-eminent across the globe. The UK has a unique, good story to tell about our cross-party work, and the impact of our all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I have no doubt that the ministerial conference would not be happening next week but for the work of our APPG over the past 10 years. It is now the largest APPG in Parliament, with almost 160 parliamentarians as members. I pay tribute to our current chairs—in the Commons, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and in the Lords, Baroness Cox.

Next week, in addition to the UK Government hosting the ministerial conference, we will have a superb range of more than 100 FORB fringe events, co-ordinated by the APPG and the growing UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum of civil society groups. Some of those fringe events will be in the QEII centre, where the ministerial meeting is being hosted, but others will be in Parliament, elsewhere around Westminster and across the country, with most needing no pass to attend—see the website [www.londonforbfringe.com](http://www.londonforbfringe.com) for details. For anyone who cannot travel, the ministerial event will be livestreamed—see the FORB ministerial section on the [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) website. Together, let us ensure that the right to FORB is shared across the globe and reaches those parts where freedoms are dimmed or darkened today—places such as China, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and many others.

I will finish where I started, in Ukraine, and with the wording of the statement on Ukraine, which I issued as chair of IRFBA:

“As members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, we commend the courage, dignity and determination of the people of Ukraine and their leadership. We stand in solidarity with them, including religious communities throughout the country. We condemn Russia’s premeditated, unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine, our fellow IRFBA member.

Ukraine is a strong democracy whose diverse population includes Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, non-believers, and members of other religious groups. With its multiplicity of faith perspectives, Ukraine has been a strong and active defender of the human right to freedom of religion or belief, and was one of the earliest countries to commit to membership of the IRFBA and its principles. Its legislation guarantees the equal rights of people of all religions or beliefs.

We denounce President Putin’s cynical attempt to misuse, for his own ends, the history and suffering of people during the Holocaust and World War II, including Ukrainian Jews. His baseless claim that Ukraine is a hotbed for neo-Nazism is just one of the many pretexts fabricated for his war of choice. This is not the first time the Kremlin has falsely accused its neighbours of neo-Nazism and fascism as a cover for its own provocations and human rights abuses.

We urge the Kremlin and Russia’s military to cease its illegal invasion and respect the safety of the civilian population of Ukraine, including all religious communities, and to respect the individually held human right to freedom of religion or belief at all times.

We call on all Russians, whatever their religion or belief, to stand up for peace.”

9.49 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on bringing forward the debate. She is a dear friend and colleague, and I am pleased to see her in such a prominent role for our Government and those with Christian and other beliefs across the world. It is very pleasurable for me to be involved in a debate alongside the hon. Lady. The debate will be a milestone for the UK, as we look forward to the international conference, to which the hon. Lady referred.

As chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, I declare a keen interest in this issue, and it will probably be no surprise that the matter is very close to my heart. Indeed, every Thursday in the main Chamber—if God spares me—I ask the Leader of the House a question that relates to religious belief. He always responds in a positive fashion, and it is encouraging to have a response like that from the Leader of the House. We stand up for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no belief.

The hon. Lady referred to some of the visits that the APPG has made in the past few years, including to Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Last week, we went to Nigeria. Also present is the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), who is another dear friend of mine, because we share many of the same interests in human rights and protecting religious beliefs. He, I and other Members recently visited Nigeria, which I will speak about as I progress through my speech. It is a pleasure to speak up.

The hon. Lady referred to Ukrainians. The APPG visited Poland a wee while ago to encourage the Polish Government and people to continue to help Ukrainian refugees, but also to reiterate our support for them. In many cases, Ukrainian refugees have been put out of

their homes, victimised and brutalised, and their relatives have been murdered. Those things are real for us, and we speak up for the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Hindus, the Shi’as, the Sunnis, the Baha’is, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia—where they are persecuted—and on behalf of our stakeholders as well.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Hosting the conference is a privilege. Does the hon. Member agree that if we are to continue being a role model in freedom of religion or belief, we should be doing more to recognise and help the persecuted elsewhere, such as the Uyghurs, who are facing genocide by the People’s Republic of China?

**Jim Shannon:** I certainly do. The hon. Lady always makes very pertinent points in her interventions, and I thank her. I will speak about the Uyghurs shortly.

I am a Christian and, in this country, I have the right to go to church as and when I like. That should not be a privilege; it should be a right, but for some it is not. We are all born with a capacity to have a relationship with God, and we should be free to exercise or choose not to exercise that ability accordingly. That is at the heart of who we are as humans, but that freedom and birth right is not the reality for millions of people around the world, which is why the hon. Member for Congleton secured today’s debate. Many of us are motivated to be here on behalf of those people and their right to hold a faith, practise it, and freely change it if they wish to do so.

In a world of increasing division and hostility, I am glad to say that those of us who work to promote freedom of religion or belief in this House work across political divides and from a host of different faith and belief backgrounds. We put differences aside to recognise the similarities that unite us—similarities that are unfortunately disregarded and derided by extremists in other countries, and sometimes by extremists in this country. Yesterday I talked to one of my fellow MPs, who told me that she had been at a family event in the United Kingdom just this week and had been surrounded by a number of activists who publicly derided her and her staff in a way that was completely unacceptable. I feel for her.

May I say how pleased I am to see the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) in his place? I look forward to his comments. I am also pleased to see the Minister in her place. We thank her for answering our questions.

As chair of the APPG, I was in Nigeria last month with the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute in order to witness at first hand the devastating impact of living in a country with ongoing FORB violations. We had wanted to visit Nigeria for some time, because it is in the top 10 on the world watch list for those who are persecuted because of their beliefs. It was an emotional trip because it gave us the chance to see the issues at first hand and to understand what needs to be done to help those with Christian and other beliefs in Nigeria. We had a chance to visit some of the camps for internally displaced people. Some people had been there for seven or eight years. We have ideas for how we can progress that, and for how Nigeria needs to progress it too. We wanted to visit the north-east of Nigeria, where most of the persecution from Boko Haram and ISIS is taking place, but we could not because of the security situation—we

*[Jim Shannon]*

understood that—so we did probably the next best thing: we brought representatives of the Churches and so on to meet us in Abuja in Nigeria, where we had a chance to hear from them at first hand.

There are lots of things that need to be done. I will make some comments at the end of my speech, and I hope the Minister will respond to them. In Nigeria, an average of 13 Christians are killed each day due to religiously motivated attacks. The Sunday after we returned, 50 of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters were murdered in an attack, which made our visit to Nigeria all the more poignant. We focused on those issues, but for such a vicious, brutal, violent attack to take place just afterwards was hard to comprehend.

The total death toll among people worldwide persecuted for their faith or belief must be harrowing. Such facts must lead to a renewed commitment to ensure freedom of religion or belief for all, and to implement policies to make the dream of peace a reality. I hope that the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief will prompt a sharp shift in the degree of urgency—the hon. Member for Congleton referred to that—and fervour that this Government and others give to promoting to freedom of religion or belief. This is a time for leaders across the world, in all countries, to make real commitments to the wider international community and play their part in promoting freedom of religion or belief for all.

I am keen to hear what the Government will announce at the ministerial conference. Will they finally prioritise in the resettlement scheme those in Afghanistan who are at risk due to their faith or belief, rather than waiting until next year to give them priority and secure their safety? Will they do more to cut their ties with China, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to, due to its abhorrent treatment of the Uyghurs? We all deplore that; we can never understand how anyone can hate somebody so much. Will the UK use its relationship with Commonwealth countries to put an end to harmful blasphemy laws that are still in place? I am ever mindful that those countries make the decision, but blasphemy laws are used in a malicious, vindictive and clearly secular way against some people. Or might the Government stipulate, for instance, that aid or trade with a country should be contingent on an improved state of freedom of religion or belief for all? There is so much good that could be done, and so many across the world are waiting from it.

The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), who is no longer in his place, asked about the Truro review. We need the three-year progress review, but that does not mean that other work should stop; we need it to continue. We need the focus that the hon. Member for Congleton referred to. We need the manifesto commitment delivered, and we need the Truro report recommendations to be delivered in full. That is the hon. Lady's ask; it is mine too, and I hope it is that of other hon. Members.

As Ministers and freedom of religion or belief leaders convene across the way at the Queen Elizabeth II Centre for the two-day ministerial conference, I will be praying, as I do every morning, that a positive change comes from those efforts. I also hope that a lot of noise will be

made about FORB, and that politicians in this country take note. It cannot go unnoticed that the APPG has 160 members. It is not a numbers game; it is about the interest that MPs and lords individually have in these matters. We are very pleased that our stakeholders represent many religious groups—it is important that they do. We speak up for those with Christian beliefs, those with Muslim beliefs and the Baha'is. We do that across the world all the time.

Across the two days there will be a host of events in Parliament as part of the FORB fringe conference. I encourage all my fellow MPs to attend and participate. I come to most of these debates because of my interest in the subject, but I come to other debates to support other Members' issues, because it is important to encourage each other where we can.

The events, which will be sponsored by a range of non-governmental organisations and charities—I will be meeting Lord Ahmad and the Pakistan religious minorities this week, or certainly next week—will promote freedom of religious belief internationally, and they will cover a range of FORB topics, from country-specific challenges and thematic issues pertaining to FORB to what is being done to ensure FORB for all. We need to look at what needs to be done as well. There will be over 30 events in Parliament altogether, which indicates the interest. If those who have an interest wish to attend, they will have plenty of choice. There is no excuse for Members not to find at least one event that piques their interest. We all have a part to play in promoting FORB for all, and the time to play that part is now.

Many of us in the Chamber will be aware of the biblical reference to the mustard seed. I know that the faith of a mustard seed is enough to move mountains, and I know that so many communities and individuals around the world persevere in their faith or belief in the face of unbelievable brutality. Their ongoing bravery and courage is more impressive than moving mountains.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that we—and Governments—need to put what people sometimes call feet to our prayers? I can think of one example a few miles from my constituency office, where the Hebron Free Presbyterian Church opened its doors to fleeing evangelicals from Ukraine who were suffering persecution as well as the murderous onslaught of the Russians. We need those practical examples to be replicated across the country, and we should commend all those who take such endeavours to heart.

**Jim Shannon:** I certainly do. I know that group—Don and Jacqueline Fleming, and young Colin Tinsley. Don and Jacqueline live in my constituency, and I know that project and the work that they do, which is an outward expression of what we believe through our prayer time. It is expressed through our practical and physical giving and our ability to help those people from Ukraine. I find that project quite illuminating. We have been able to offer support in Newtownards as well. I am a great believer in the power of prayer. I believe that with prayer we can move mountains. A mustard seed might be small and look like it cannot do very much, but it does make changes, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right.



As the mountains move day by day, as more and more people suffer because of their faith or belief, let us ask what we will do to aid the growth of that small mustard seed. I look forward to other contributions, particularly from the Minister, to understand how the mustard seed can make a difference.

10.3 am

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** These debates go back a long way—over 20 years—and I have taken part in most of them. I remember a debate when Keith Vaz was sitting in the Minister's place. I instituted a debate on the persecution of the Karen people in Myanmar, and that persecution is still taking place. The lack of progress can be depressing, although I remember Keith Vaz telling me afterwards, "Who would think a small debate in Westminster Hall could actually make a difference?", and it has in that case. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for all the work that she does and for ensuring that once again we have a debate on freedom of religion.

There has been progress with the Foreign Office. When we started all those years ago, the Foreign Office took great care to be completely equidistant and say, "Oh, well, there's persecution of Christians on the one hand, but on the other hand," and so on. It is more proactive now, and we have had the Bishop of Truro report and my hon. Friend's office has been set up, so more work is being done. Gradually, we are raising interest in this subject.

The fact is that more Christians are being persecuted in the world, either through outright persecution, such as in North Korea or parts of north Africa, or by having their human rights severely limited, as in countries such as Saudi Arabia. This is a huge issue. I am not just going to talk about Christians; I am also going to talk about the difficulties faced by Muslims and by religious people around the world.

I want to illustrate the problem with just one case. I have gone on and on about it, but the only way to make any difference in this place is to make yourself a crushing bore on a particular subject. Maira Shahbaz is a Christian girl in Pakistan, who was just 14 years old when she was bundled into a car at gunpoint by three men and then drugged, raped, and filmed and photographed for use as blackmail. She was forcibly converted to Islam and forced into marriage with one of her abductors. Four months later, she managed to escape. She has faced death threats for supposed apostasy and for abandoning her supposed husband. An imam has certified that the wedding was invalid but the case in the civil court still drags on.

On 13 July—almost a year ago—I took a delegation to see the Home Secretary, no less, about the case. I received absolute assurances from the Home Secretary that she was fully cognisant of the case and was going to take action. Lord Forsyth went to see her a year before that and got the same answer. An excellent charity, Aid to the Church in Need, is willing to fly Maira and her family to the UK, help them get on their feet and make sure that they are integrated within the British-Pakistani Christian community here.

If ever in the whole of history there was a case where asylum was justified, here it is, so why has there been no progress? I suspect that there has been no progress—this is an allegation, which may be untrue, but I think I have

to make it—because our high commission in Pakistan is not looking at the case with sufficient seriousness. It may be that there are politics involved and that it does not want to irritate the Pakistani Government because of matters of global importance, such as dealing with the Taliban and all the rest of it. I do not know, but this poor girl and her entire family are in one room and nothing happens.

Meanwhile, 60,000 people a year are pouring across the channel. They are already in a safe country; they are not being persecuted in France. They are all very nice people and I have nothing against them individually, but they are obviously economic migrants. They are pouring across while there is one girl who apparently we cannot get into this country, although I would have thought she has a rock-solid asylum case. We go on and on as a Government saying how we have a wonderful record on asylum seekers. Let us give asylum here to people who are genuinely being persecuted, and let us deal with the economic migrant issue. The more economic migrants who are breaking the rules and pouring into the country, the fewer genuine refugees we can take.

Pakistan is a very important issue. Between 2015 and 2019, Pakistan was the largest recipient of direct UK aid, so we must have enormous influence. I really must ask the Minister if we are using it. Last year, we had the report by the International Development Committee on UK aid to Pakistan, which is an important issue. We had a submission from the Institute of Development Studies, which notes that Pakistan requires special attention regarding freedom of religion but reports that

"not many resources have been dedicated to this"

within the then Department for International Development's work on Pakistan. It adds:

"There is some focus on it through education programmes,"

but that has been

"a very small part of its overall programmes."

Can the Minister update us on whether that is still the case? When we are doling out so much taxpayers' money, why are we so supine when it comes to using our influence? What is the point of funding Governments that either run roughshod over freedom of religion or refuse to lift a finger to support it?

I want to be completely fair and deal with persecution of Muslims as well.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Blasphemy laws such as Pakistan's section 298 persecute people who share the overarching beliefs of the majority but are oppressed because they fall into a different branch of the religion, such as the Muslim Ahmadiyya community, which suffers enormous persecution in Pakistan. Does the right hon. Gentleman think there is anything the international community can do to encourage not just tolerance but respect of beliefs in countries such as Pakistan?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I agree entirely—that is the purpose of these debates. As we are only a group of Back Benchers, we ask our Government to raise the issue up the agenda and talk about all these minorities, wherever they are in the world, and view it as an important part of the Government's work.

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

We have seen casual violence against Muslims in India, a country with which we hope to have very close and friendly relations. I hope that our Ministers are raising that issue.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I want to draw his attention again to the key matter of the home demolition policy in India, which is destroying Indian Muslims' foundation for stability and even life. Does he share my outrage at that policy and agree with the all-party parliamentary group on human rights when it says that India is a "diminishing democracy"?

**Sir Edward Leigh**: It is obviously a very worrying situation. I do not want to go into too much detail on it, partly because I am not sufficiently briefed. However, the fact is that this casual violence is there. We should be concerned about that, in what is the largest democracy in the world.

The situation in Nigeria is dire. Just this month, a Catholic church in Owo was stormed by militants, leaving 50 dead. Imagine that: 50 people killed in a church. Bureaucrats here and in other western countries try to blame the violence in Nigeria on climate change and the competition for resources. I have heard their excuses again and again—"There are different tribes; there are hunter-gatherers; there are arable farmers."—but it simply does not wash. However much it departs from our comfortable, western, liberal mentality, the fact is that there is outright genocidal persecution of Christians by extremists in Nigeria. Members do not have to listen to me; the Catholic Bishop of Ondo, in whose diocese the attack took place, clarified that:

"To suggest or make a connection between victims of terror and consequences of climate change is not only misleading but also exactly rubbing salt to the injuries of all who have suffered terrorism in Nigeria."

We need our Ministers and civil servants to be honest. This is communal hatred and violent persecution. It is not about water supply or irrigation. It does not just affect Christians, although they are the canary in the mine. To be entirely fair, I have also pestered Ministers about Mr Mubarak Bala, the head of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who is facing 24 years in prison for leaving Islam. That is another case that we should perhaps try to pursue.

**Jim Shannon**: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing that forward. When he and I were in Nigeria, we had the opportunity to make that very point, and I hope that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), will mention that in his contribution. We were pleased at the response from the Government, so we are hoping that there may be some movement on that.

**Sir Edward Leigh**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very helpful intervention.

We have been very good at isolating Russia. We have heard about the complications in Ukraine, with the appalling violence by Russia against Ukraine and the churches that have been destroyed by bombing. Frankly, we have not been so good at taking on China over the

persecution of the Muslim Uyghurs, which has reached dystopian genocidal levels. It is a disgrace. I am all in favour of good relations with China, maximising trade and promoting prosperity. I understand that our influence with the Chinese Government—the Government of a very large, proud country—is limited, but we cannot shirk our duty, despite the economic impact. Perhaps the Minister could comment on that.

The Government could help UK business and industry to pivot away from China, even if it takes years, if progress is not made on the persecution of the Uyghurs. If a business's factory is in China, move it to Malaysia, Indonesia or Africa. If its research and development is in China, move it to Israel or Singapore, or perhaps even to Manchester, Dundee or Belfast. Our influence is limited, and my point is also directed at our own companies that are sourcing products from the area where the Uyghurs are being persecuted. What is going on there is a disgrace. Although our influence is limited, what influence we have we should use. We should not be afraid to speak out, whatever the impact on trade might be.

Freedom of religion or belief is one of the most essential human rights. It is under enormous threat all over the world. Our Government should be the leader in the world in speaking out in favour of religious minorities and their rights. The Government should expand the office of the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief and resource it properly. I welcome the appointment of David Burrowes as deputy to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. I hope that, just as we have acted with so much vigour in Ukraine, we can act with equal vigour to protect religious minorities of whatever faith, wherever they are in the world.

10.16 am

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I commend the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this debate. Let me take this opportunity to thank her for her ongoing work as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief—I can think of no one better suited to fulfil that role. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his ongoing work in the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. He is always a strong voice on this issue.

The freedoms we enjoy here in the United Kingdom came at a high price. For those who fought and died to secure our freedoms, we are forever in their debt. But having received that gift of freedom, we have a duty to do what we can to ensure that others, whoever they may be, who are living in fear under surveillance, threatened with imprisonment or death, are moving towards freedom, not further persecution. On a regular basis I raise that persecution with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Sadly, all too often it follows an attack on or slaughter of believers.

In the short time available, I want to mention two places where I urge the Government to do more, and which I hope will be a focus in the forthcoming ministerial conference. The first is Nigeria. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford eloquently outlined some of the points already. Open Doors, which we all know does an amazing job as a voice for the persecuted church, reports that in the first three months of 2022, 896 Nigerian

civilians were killed in violent attacks, including hundreds of Christians who were murdered because of their faith by extremist Islamic militants.

Nigeria is No. 7 on the Open Doors world watch list. More Christians are killed for their faith in Nigeria than in the rest of the world combined. The situation in Nigeria for those who follow Jesus is becoming increasingly dangerous, as greater collaboration emerges among Islamic militants. I urge the Foreign Office to do more to highlight what is happening in Nigeria and to work with the international community to address this horrific situation.

Secondly, I want to mention Myanmar. It is a matter of regret, but all too often the reality, that the international community move on to the next crisis and forget the one that went before. Myanmar remains in turmoil. The junta are still in control. With that control they are targeting religious minorities, including many Christians, who are often targeted by the Buddhist national military to suppress opposition. Majority Christian villages are being bombed and churches have been targeted. It is not only Christians who have been persecuted in Myanmar, however. Notably, thousands of Rohingya Muslims have been driven out of the country as well.

While there is so much focus on Ukraine, which is right, let the international community not forget Myanmar. Indeed, let there be a redoubling of efforts to restore democracy in that land, for the protection of all. Let me take the opportunity to mention a church in my constituency, Newmills Presbyterian church, which is doing amazing work with the Myanmar people. The church has a great feeling for those who are caught up in the turmoil.

My speaking time has almost run out, but let me conclude by urging those attending the conference to focus on outcomes and on acting to protect Christians in those places of persecution. Let the conference also focus on ensuring that those who wish to go there to spread the good news of Christ, evangelistically or practically, are safe to do so.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** I shall now call the Front Benchers, starting with the Scottish National party spokesperson, Brendan O'Hara.

10.21 am

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Mr McCabe; it is good to see you in the Chair this morning. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this important debate, and I thank everyone who has taken part. The debate has been extremely useful and thoughtful, and we have discussed not just what we can expect from next week's conference, but the wider challenges of protecting people's right to worship how, when and with whom they want, as well as defending the rights of those who have no faith or belief.

I am here primarily as the SNP's international human rights spokesperson, but I am also taking part because I am an active member—indeed, I am secretary—of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The APPG is led ably, as we have heard, by the formidable and ever impressive hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am an active member of the group because I believe that how a country, or a regime, treats an issue of freedom of religion or belief is

usually an accurate indicator of how it views the importance of the human rights of its citizens more generally. For me, the APPG is a human rights groups and an important part of the wider community of human rights defenders.

As we have heard all too often this morning, the need for groups such as ours to shine a light on FORB abuses has never been greater, which is why we in the SNP are delighted that next week's ministerial conference in London is taking place. We will support any moves to push for greater global action to support FORB, and we stand in solidarity with those beleaguered communities and those brave individuals whose fundamental human right to worship, or not, as they wish is under sustained attack. It is critical that, while we all get behind the call for greater global action, arrangements are put in place to ensure that the delegates to the conference get to hear directly from those religious groups, those humanist organisations and others that are, day in and day out, directly affected by the violence being perpetrated on them on the basis of their religion or belief.

I hope that the policymakers who gather in London next week are able to hear at first hand from the people in Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Myanmar, Xinjiang, Iran and elsewhere in the world who do not enjoy the freedoms that we take for granted. I thank the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for raising once again the case of Maira Shahbaz. I hope the Minister will remind the Home Secretary of the extreme importance of the case and the commitments that were made almost exactly a year ago.

Hundreds of millions of people are living in fear of persecution simply because of the convictions they hold or the faith they profess, and we have a great deal of work to do to protect them from those who would do them harm simply for practising their faith. As we have heard from several Members, there is no typical model of how that persecution manifests itself. It can come in the form of direct suppression or state suppression, or a heavy-handed crackdown, as we would recognise in China and its disgraceful treatment of the Uyghur Muslim population. They have been subjected to the most awful systematic and widespread abuses imaginable, at a scale and ferocity that is almost unparalleled in modern times.

The suppression of the 350,000-strong Baha'i community in Iran is another example of a state using its power to persecute and discriminate against a community because of religious belief and to deny people's fundamental right to practise their faith. In 2019 the United Nations recognised the Baha'i community as one of the most persecuted religious minorities in the world.

Of course, religious persecution can come from well-organised, well-armed and well-funded terrorist organisations, such as Daesh. Its attacks on the Yazidi people have been recognised by many, including many in this Parliament, as genocide. The attack on Sinjar by Daesh killed thousands. We do not know how many thousands because, to this day, the graves of men and boys are being discovered. We are well aware of the barbaric treatment suffered by Yazidi women, who suffered rape, torture, sexual enslavement, forced sterilisation and all manner of inhumane and degrading treatment by their captors. I take the opportunity to remind the House that, despite the military defeat of Daesh, 2,700 Yazidi women and girls are still missing and unaccounted for after all these years.



[Brendan O'Hara]

As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, I was on the APPG's visit to Nigeria with him and Baroness Cox. We went there to speak with Christian and Muslim religious leaders, civil society activists, people who had been displaced by ethnic and religious violence, and Nigerian politicians. We were also there to highlight the case of Mubarak Bala, the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who in April was sentenced to 24 years in jail for blasphemy. I assure the right hon. Member for Gainsborough that we raised the issue directly with the Nigerian Government, and indeed one of our group had a lengthy meeting with a member of Mubarak's family, so it is an issue that we are aware of and will not let go.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, it was a challenging visit, particularly when we were told by almost everyone we met that everything in Nigeria is seen through the prism of religion. All too often people are excluded and abandoned and the cleric, however radical, has replaced the Government as the voice of authority. We saw that for ourselves where we were there. The head of the Methodist Church and two other clerics were kidnapped. Just a week after we came back, 50 Nigerians were murdered in an appalling terrorist attack at St Francis Catholic church in Owo in the hitherto relatively peaceful state of Ondo. That was another worrying indicator that the violence usually seen in the north and the middle belt is spreading to the south of the country.

As the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) said, Nigeria is seventh on the Open Doors watch list of places where it is most dangerous to be a Christian. If that watch list was done purely on levels of violence experienced, Nigeria would be at the top. These are incredibly dangerous times for Nigeria. Given the history that the United Kingdom has with Nigeria, we have a particular responsibility to help the people there and do all we can to bring peace, stability and security to that country.

However, there is hope. There is a civil society that is desperate to build a new country and there are religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, who are doing great work in bringing communities together, but their efforts are being hampered by the endemic corruption that exists in Nigeria. I remember one meeting in which a woman told us that corruption has left people, particularly the young, without hope, and that feeling of exclusion is one of the main drivers of increasing conflict. She told us that politics is so divided in Nigeria that politicians have nothing left to sell other than division, and they stand on a platform of not being a Muslim or not being a Christian because they have no other vision to sell.

There are signs of hope, because people do not want to live in a country ridden with religious division and appalling acts of religion-based violence. Supporting civil society and bringing an end to endemic corruption is a prerequisite if Nigeria is to pull itself back from the brink, and we have to be part of making that happen. That includes supporting the rights of people such as Mubarak Bala and other humanists to hold the beliefs that they do.

One of the organisations we joined with in Nigeria was Bellwether International, a non-governmental organisation that works in pre-genocide and post-genocide

communities and has a significant presence in the internally displaced persons camps. Bellwether's founder and chief executive officer, Rachel Miner, came with us to Abuja and observed:

"The importance of Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be underestimated. It has the power to bridge the gap between the very worst of society and the very best. Together we can bring the best of society to the world and preserve human rights and human dignity at the same time."

That is what we should be looking for from next week's ministerial conference.

We have a fantastic opportunity to use the powers we have to bring the international community together and to highlight and call out abuses of freedom of religion and belief when we see them, without fear or favour, even when it is our own friends who are doing it and it is not perceived to be in our economic interest to do so. I sincerely hope that the UK Government take this unique opportunity to lay out their long-term strategy for tackling religious persecution around the world.

10.31 am

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): As always, Mr McCabe, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), whom I would like to call my hon. Friend, on securing this debate. She and I served together for three years on the International Development Committee nine years ago, and I saw then, as I do now, her complete commitment to an issue that is so important to humanity, human rights and civilisation. I thank her for her consistent championing of freedom of religion or belief in this place.

The hon. Lady opened the debate by saying that we can never be complacent about peace and stability—and hasn't that come true in today's world? Freedom of religion or belief is under threat, especially from people's own Governments, which is something we should be deeply concerned about. She mentioned the rising levels of intolerance and oppression by authoritarian Governments throughout the world, the increasing use of technology for repression of freedom of religion or belief and the discrimination that damages democracies so badly, and she was absolutely right to say that FORB benefits us all. It promotes global peace and wellbeing, and it is as critical now as ever.

Of course, the hon. Lady mentioned the ministerial conference on FORB that will take place in London next week. I have just spoken to the Dutch ambassador about that conference; he will be attending and was delighted that he will be there. Survivors of persecution will be there to give their own testimony, which is vital: there is no substitute for hearing from those people. As the hon. Lady said, achieving real change will require international collaboration on freedom of religion or belief. She praised the UK's cross-party work in this Parliament, which she said is pre-eminent around the world. That is absolutely true and I agree with her.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—again, my hon. Friend—who is always present at these debates. He is well known for his championing of freedom of religion or belief, especially the freedom of Christians from persecution. As we are all aware, he is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and he has made it very clear that this issue is close to

his heart. He talked about his recent visit to Poland and, as he says, he speaks out not just for Christians who are oppressed but for all faiths. Thank goodness he does: his voice is a powerful one in this House.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned something that is very important: the freedom to choose not to believe, which is so essential in today's world and always has been. He mentioned, as did other hon. Members, visiting Nigeria to witness the shocking violations of freedom of religion or belief in person.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Christians face persecution in many parts of the world, and that persecution is on the rise. It is estimated that around 91% of the murders of Christians happen in Africa, despite the continent having the highest number of Christians in the world. What can we achieve with our international partners, through the conference, that can help to relieve the pressure on Governments in countries such as Nigeria to tackle this problem?

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Perhaps that question is better directed at the Minister, but from my point of view we need conferences such as the one being held next week in London. We also need, as I think the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, more resources and more authority behind the individuals, such as the hon. Member for Congleton, who do their very best to ensure that freedom of religion and belief is a worldwide human right and that that right is enforced. Perhaps we need the United Nations to intervene as well; I do not know, but I would be happy to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

The hon. Member for Strangford said—I think I have got this right—that on average 13 Christians are killed every day in Nigeria just for being a Christian. That is a shocking statistic and it mounts up to an appalling loss of life. I am sorry to say that it will be the same for other faiths, too. The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government would prioritise the persecuted minorities in Afghanistan as well, because we know what is happening there. He also said he is a great believer in the power of prayer; long may that continue.

We then heard from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough, who quite rightly said that there is a long history of these debates—I have spoken in many of them. Gradually, we are raising interest in this subject, although I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree that doing so is a long haul. More Christians are now persecuted than ever before, but let us not forget the Muslims. He rightly mentioned the Shahbaz case, in which a 14-year-old was forcibly converted to Islam, married off, and then persecuted for leaving a faith that she had never held in the first place. He is right to continue to press the case with the British Government and with anybody who will listen. The Opposition support him in that effort and are willing to do whatever we can to help in that individual case, as well as in many similar cases. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned casual violence against Muslims in India and said that FORB is, of course, one of the most essential human rights.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who talked about the Myanmar Christians being targeted by Buddhists. We all think of Buddhism as a peaceful religion, yet the Buddhist majority

in that country is persecuting Christian minorities as well as, of course, the Rohingya Muslim people of that country. That is incomprehensible to most of us—indeed, to all of us in this Chamber. The hon. Lady also urged those of us who are attending the conference next week to focus on those being persecuted.

I have good reason to speak in this debate, not just because I am the appropriate shadow Minister but because my family has experience of religious persecution. My father escaped the increasing persecution of Jews in Europe to come to safety in this country in 1934, as a 12-year-old boy. We know what happened after 1934. His own parents were trapped in occupied Europe. Thankfully, his father was in Spain when France fell to the Nazis, but his mother was in occupied Paris, and it was only thanks to the generosity of the Portuguese authorities that she was able to get a Portuguese passport and therefore escape the persecution that her brothers had to suffer—one of them was murdered during the second world war. So this issue is very close to my heart.

**Afzal Khan:** I thank my hon. Friend the shadow Minister for talking about his family's experience. I want to draw his attention to the issue of racism that exists even today—the antisemitism and Islamophobia that exists in the UK. Does he agree it is vital that all parliamentarians lead by example and reaffirm their commitment to religious tolerance and freedom of belief? Perhaps the Minister can also touch on this issue; maybe it is a good time to accept the definition of Islamophobia. The Government have had three years to adopt the definition that all the other political parties have adopted. Why have they not done that when nearly half of religious hate crimes every year are committed against Muslims?

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I have been in this place for 25 years and I have not come across any colleagues, from any part of this House, who believe in religious persecution and who do not try to lead by example. That is really important. I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and I am sure the Minister will reply to the points directed at her.

When we see persecution still rife across the world, it is more important than ever that we, as parliamentarians from all the sides of the House, reaffirm our commitment to the values and principles set out in the 2021 G7 summit communiqué, which specifically referenced freedom of religion or belief for the first time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) pointed out, we have our own problems at home, with several forms of racism throughout society—whether it is antisemitism, Islamophobia or any other prejudice—but freedom of religion or belief must also be at the heart of our foreign policy. Where we are able to empower and promote individual and collective freedoms, we must do so. That is vital to international peace and stability, as so many hon. Members have pointed out.

It is just as important that we challenge those who choose to persecute others on the basis of their belief. As we have heard this morning, almost every religion around the world has been persecuted or subject to repression as a result of an individual's faith, but we must not forget the people who are being persecuted for being non-believers, as many Members have mentioned. The fact that at least 13 countries still have the death

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

penalty for blasphemy or apostasy is extremely worrying, but in many more countries people have been murdered for simply choosing not to believe. At least 83 countries have blasphemy laws more generally, with 30 countries classified by the Freedom of Thought Report as guilty of grave violations against the non-religious. This must be challenged in the strongest possible terms by the international community.

Just last week, we had the deeply disturbing news that the US Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*. As parliamentarians who believe in a free and equal society, we must make it clear that that ruling was a devastating setback for women's rights in the United States. The right of women to make their own decisions about their own bodies is a fundamental human right too, and it should not be interfered with in the name of faith or religion. Those who have faith, but also believe that access to abortion is a right that should be protected, will now be in an extremely difficult position and may be forced to choose between their faith and their political belief.

**Carla Lockhart:** I respect the hon. Member's opinion on this matter, but I remind him about the baby in the womb and the rights of the unborn child. So often we talk about the rights of women, which is right and correct—as a woman, I want to see rights for women—but in every pregnancy and every journey there are two lives. Both lives matter and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to think about the baby in the womb.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** Order. I do not want to interrupt a good debate, but I think we are drifting into quite a different subject. Can we get back to the motion?

**Fabian Hamilton:** I fully respect the hon. Lady's commitment and belief, but I also respect the right of other women to choose what happens to them and their own bodies. However, as you said, Mr McCabe, we should get back to the issue we are debating today.

The Government say they are

“deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of FoRB in many parts of the world. Persecuting people, or discriminating against them, because of their religion or belief is often closely linked to other foreign and development policy challenges.”

With that in mind, will the Minister outline what measures the Government have taken recently as a result of the abuses of FoRB? Will she give us examples of where the UK is tackling this problem?

Finally, I pay tribute to Rodney Ross and Alan Fell for their work in documenting and commemorating the contribution of British Jews during the first world war. Sadly, it is an often forgotten subject and I am delighted that their project will become a permanent record of the lives of the Jewish community in Leeds and throughout the country from 1914 to 1918. I commend their website to anyone interested in the subject.

10.45 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I start, as others have, by saying how grateful we are to our hon. Friend—we are collectively

calling her our hon. Friend—the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for securing this important debate and for focusing the attention of Members on the Government's upcoming ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief. I also thank our hon. Friend for all she does to advance freedom of religion or belief, as the Prime Minister's special envoy and as chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.

I am grateful to Members for their comments and interventions and will try to cover many of the points raised. Let me be clear that the Government are unwavering in our commitment to promote freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere. Next week, we will demonstrate that commitment by hosting the UK's first ministerial conference on the issue. It will bring together more than 500 delegates from more than 60 countries around the world. Representatives will include Ministers, but also representatives from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Baha'i and non-religious communities.

As the hon. Member for Congleton so rightly said, involving civil society is vital to championing freedom of religion or belief. The ministerial event will be complemented by a fringe conference organised by parliamentarians and civil society. All countries have an obligation to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief. We will share knowledge and build coalitions to take forward work on important areas, including gender equality, conflict and digital technology.

Many Members who took part in the debate mentioned women in particular. Around the world, millions of women and girls experience discrimination and violence on the grounds of their religion or belief, as well as their gender, and we will use the conference to advocate for them.

In war-torn and insecure places, people are often politically and economically marginalised because of their religion or belief. We will use the conference to stand up for marginalised groups and to advance open societies where tensions are managed peacefully and human rights are protected and promoted.

The internet has given people a new platform to express their beliefs, but it also provides a tool for harassment and persecution. We will use the conference to advance ideas to protect religious belief groups online. Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief is a global issue that transcends borders. We will use the conference to encourage our international partners to join us in making new commitments around those key policy areas.

The conference is just the latest step in the UK's leadership on freedom of religion or belief. It coincides with the third anniversary of the Bishop of Truro's report on the FCDO's support for persecuted Christians around the world. The bishop has been on the conference's advisory committee and will speak at the conference.

I pay tribute to my noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon for his work as the first UK envoy for freedom of religion or belief and for his leadership on this agenda as the Minister for human rights, which has involved working closely with ministerial teams across the FCDO, as well as with our hon. Friend the hon. Member for Congleton, who is so relentless in her commitment to promote freedom of religion or belief.



Work is continuing to deliver on the Bishop's review recommendations. I can confirm that an independent review of our progress will be published in the near future.

The Government's work to promote freedom of religion or belief broadly splits into three strands: action at home, collaboration with international partners and taking action on cases of concern around the world. To have influence abroad, we must set an example at home, so Government-funded programmes in the UK protect the rights of members of all communities to live free from fear, hate and violence. Our Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks programme enables people to report anti-Muslim hate crimes easily. Our support for the Community Security Trust helps to combat racism and antisemitism towards British Jews. Our commitment to turn our Online Safety Bill into law will also help to protect religious and belief groups online.

The second strand of our work is fortifying international efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief, including through the UN, the G7, the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and the international contact group. Last year, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad chaired a meeting of the UN Security Council to address the persecution of religious minorities in conflict zones, including in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. The third strand of our work is raising cases of concern and bringing other countries with us on this journey.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) spoke movingly about his family history of overcoming challenges to freedom of religion or belief. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also spoke movingly. In this place, we say that where Members are from is the place they represent today. The hon. Gentleman was, of course, born in Omagh, County Tyrone, the place of my own birth. As a child born and raised in Omagh, County Tyrone, during the early days of the troubles and as they continued, a lesson I have carried all my life is the importance of listening to others who have a different religious perspective, learning about what they believe in, and doing that with compassion to bring the sides together and reduce conflict. That is what a lot of our work overseas endeavours to do.

The hon. Members for Strangford, for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and others mentioned the situation in Nigeria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was the first to raise the case of the humanist Mubarak Bala. I thank the hon. Members who raised his case during the recent APPG trip—that was very appreciated—and I also raised it in a call with Nigerian Foreign Minister Onyeama last month. I particularly raised the length of Mr Bala's sentencing, about which many Members are very concerned. We are following the case closely. Individuals must be able to express their opinions freely.

A number of Members spoke about the situation in Nigeria. We condemn all incidents of intercommunal violence in Nigeria, which continue to have a devastating effect on communities, including Christian and Muslim communities. We recognise that religious identity is a factor in many incidents of violence and that it can form an important part of the identity of the groups affected. However, the underlying drivers are often complex and frequently relate to competition over resources, criminality and historical grievances, so the question is: what do we do about that? We are working on a number of initiatives to promote peace, human rights and freedom

of religion or belief across Nigeria. We have funded projects in Kaduna, Plateau and Benue states aimed at promoting tolerance and understanding, and strengthening links and dialogue between civil society groups, religious leaders and religious and non-religious groups. We also advocate for responsible journalism. All that takes place alongside other projects to tackle the other causes driving conflict.

I am particularly pleased that no fewer than 14 delegates from Nigeria have registered for the conference here. That includes groups working on interfaith dialogue. That is a real example of people from challenged areas around the world coming to this global conference, bringing their problems to share with others, and learning from others about how they can better tackle the issue.

A few other parts of the world have been mentioned. Earlier this month, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad spoke to Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs about protecting religious and belief minorities there, as well as about the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. In March, the Foreign Secretary spoke out about the situation in Xinjiang and Tibet in an address at the UN Human Rights Council. The Prime Minister raised his concern about the human rights situation in China in a phone call with President Xi on 25 March.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann mentioned Myanmar, where we are deeply concerned about the vulnerability of religious minorities and reports of the destruction of places of worship. We regularly condemn the violence on the ground and are funding the independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar to bolster the work of collecting evidence of serious human rights violations. We regularly raise this issue at the UN Security Council.

**Afzal Khan:** We have heard from many Members that religious persecution is still rife across the world. It is important that the UK challenges those who choose to persecute others on the basis of their belief, so will the Minister finally commit to sanctioning Chen Quanguo, the chief architect of the Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang?

**Vicky Ford:** I cannot commit to that here.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** And Maira Shahbaz?

**Vicky Ford:** I have to be really careful not to make comments that could put an individual or her family's life at risk. I am afraid that that is all I can say on the matter right now.

I will comment on the very moving situation in Ukraine, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton did. It is heart-wrenching to see the destruction of churches, and it is absolutely right that we should condemn all violations of international law pertaining to the protection of places of worship and cultural heritage, especially in Ukraine. She is also absolutely right to commend the bravery of the people of Ukraine—a country that celebrates a huge diversity of religion and a multiplicity of belief. Putin is trying to use disinformation to distract the world from the horrors of his illegal war and the Kremlin's false statements dishonouring those who fought to defeat Nazism in Europe. Nearly 2,000 years ago, St Paul wrote to the Ephesians and urged them to

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.”

It is absolutely right that, 2,000 years later, we also stand firm for truth and call out Russian mistruths.

[Vicky Ford]

I close by repeating the Government's firm belief that no one should suffer because of what they believe in. I really welcome the enthusiasm for the conference that we have heard today, and I hope that many Members will take part in it, because the Government are looking forward to continuing to work with all interested parties to advance freedom of religion or belief for all.

10.58 am

**Fiona Bruce:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their powerful speeches and interventions, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Members for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), the hon. Members for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), and others. I also thank the Minister for responding.

Let it never be said that any of us in this place with a particular faith do not speak out on FORB for all those who are persecuted, whatever their faiths or beliefs, and we have seen that today. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for speaking out as they have done, particularly on the Truro review. I can confirm that work will continue on it, because it is part of my mandate to ensure that it does, and it is also a manifesto commitment. That my appointment was made by the Prime Minister provides a signal internationally of the Government's commitment—right at the very top—to FORB for all, as does the ministerial on FORB that will be held next week in London. I am proud that the UK is demonstrating this global leadership—

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Bottom Trawling: Marine Protected Areas

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

11 am

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** I probably do not need to do this for a former Leader of the House, but I should point out that I am going to call Chris Grayling and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity to wind up, as is the convention in a 30-minute debate.

11.1 am

**Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. This may be unusual for a half-hour debate, but there are a number of colleagues here who may want to briefly join the discussion. The Minister knows that this is an issue of great concern to me. We have been here before, and I did a ten-minute rule Bill on this issue last year, but I want to keep it on the agenda. It commands concern across not just our House but the other place, where my noble Friend Lord Randall has taken my Bill from last year, improved it and tabled it again this year, and I wish him well with progress on it. I know that, without Government help, it will struggle to reach the statute book, but I hope that that is another indication to Ministers and officials of the strength of feeling about the issue.

Why does this issue command so much concern? The Government are rightly focused on improving our stewardship of the environment, and most people on both sides of the House share that view. Most of the public, who also share our concerns, would think that the presence of marine protected areas, covering around a third of our national waters, would play a big part in ensuring that we look after our own marine habitats. Whether we are talking about the smaller fish, the other creatures that live on reefs or the fish that live in broader areas around those marine protected areas—areas that we would hope would allow fish populations to recover and grow—the public would see those as central to our task of protecting the marine environment.

Sadly, as the Minister knows, the truth has been rather different. Our marine protected areas do not offer a lot of protection at all, particularly for our seabeds. The areas at the bottom of the sea are so important, because they are populated by the smallest creatures, which make up an important part of the natural food chains in our oceans. However, they remain open to large-scale trawlers dragging nets along the bottom, destroying much of what is in their path. The worst culprits are big international vessels that do enormous damage, as they use vast amounts of energy to scoop up everything as they go, and they have equipment that covers a vast area under water. That means, in reality, that those protected areas are subject to regular intensive fishing, which does huge damage to the ecology.

In total, less than 100th of 1% of our waters are covered by the highest level of protection, where all fishing is banned. Ninety-four per cent. of our MPAs permit bottom trawling; only 6% do not. That, in my

view, means that they really are not properly marine protected areas at all. There is an urgency about the need for change. We cannot go on like this, because the more time passes, the more damage is done and the more ecology is lost. We have 372 marine protected areas, including coastal and offshore areas, which represent around 38% of UK waters. However, most are not in good condition and have suffered significant habitat degradation. Bottom trawling is a key part, if not the key part, of the problem, with that scalping of the sea floor destroying habitats all around our coastal waters.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it must be remembered that fishermen have the world's greatest reason to be environmentalists? They know that if they get it wrong, they have done themselves and future generations out of a job. Consultation with long-standing fishermen must play a large part in any conversations regarding marine protected areas. Does he agree?

**Chris Grayling:** Yes, I do agree. Fishing communities need to be a part of the discussion, and local fishing communities in the United Kingdom are pretty good at looking after their coastal waters. The problem is the big guys who come in and Hoover the ocean floor. It is necessary to get the right balance, but we have to do a much better job on protection.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am grateful that my right hon. Friend is championing this matter, because it is so important, and I think there would be strong support on the Isle of Wight for a ban on bottom trawling in all MPAs. In a place such as the Island, a ban on bottom trawling in MPAs combined with, for example, a Reserve Seafood brand, as in Lyme Bay, would be very good news. In Lyme Bay, we see increased catches, increased job satisfaction and increased prices for the fish when fishing is done environmentally and sensitively. I am very supportive of that, and I look forward to helping my right hon. Friend in future.

**Chris Grayling:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes some very good points. This is about proper, careful stewardship of the ocean and the ocean floor. As he rightly says, if these things are done well, it can benefit everyone.

Of course, there is another issue, because this is not just about scalping the seabed; it is also about our ability to tackle climate change and absorb carbon. It is not just the fish and other creatures that suffer because of bottom trawling. Kelp and seagrass are enormously important as well, and are a crucial part of improving our absorption of carbon emissions. We know that bottom trawling can destroy them as well, so there is a variety of reasons why we need to deal with this issue.

One irony is that, from time to time, I get messages from constituents who did not back Brexit asking me what benefits it has brought the country. I remember many people saying that Brexit would mean the destruction of all our environmental protections and that Britain would become a pariah nation, but the opposite is true. We can now do something that we could not do before. Bottom trawling was just a reality of the common fisheries policy, and the Minister would have struggled to take the steps that I have been pushing for. We would

have had real difficulty overcoming either the vested interests in fishing fleets elsewhere or those countries that have no coast and that were not terribly interested in the issue in the first place. We are now free to act, and I thank the Minister for what she has done so far—the issue today is not a Minister who is saying no. I know she is sympathetic, for which I am grateful. I also know that she continues to face international pressures, and I encourage her to keep resisting those.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is absolutely right that we have to be mindful of the livelihoods of those who work on smaller fishing boats and in the ports around the UK. My Bill was not about getting rid of all of that. History shows that many ports are home to people who are good at managing their fisheries. It is the large boats that we need to deal with, and the Minister has made a good start with the initiation of a ban in four of the protected areas, including Dogger Bank. Well done to her for that step in the right direction.

I asked for this debate so that I could ask the Minister and her officials to move faster on their plans and so that I could share concerns about the approach taken so far. We really need to get on with this as rapidly as possible. There will be more and more pressure in this place to cover not just the first handful of MPAs but a whole raft of them. Although there has been a good start, I sense that progress so far is still much slower than most of us would wish. Of course, officials will want to take a careful and methodical approach, but there is not a lot of time to spare. The more time we take, the more damage is done, and the more damage is done, the longer the ecosystems will take to recover.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Not only is damage done, but the damage is increasing. In 2019, Greenpeace found that the amount of time supertrawlers spent fishing in marine protected areas had more than doubled, to 2,913 hours, in that year alone. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we have a real opportunity now to ban supertrawlers in every single MPA as a quick early win and then to help fishers move to different gear types to be more sustainable in their methods?

**Chris Grayling:** It is, as the hon. Gentleman says, the big vessels that are the problem. I am sure the Minister will take a careful note of those comments, with which I am extremely sympathetic.

There is another point of concern that I would like to put to the Minister. Not all of the protected areas are uniform in their underwater terrain. There are areas where there are reefs of great sensitivity surrounded by areas of sand on the seabed. That is just the reality of MPAs. The Marine Management Organisation, which is implementing the bans, seems not to be taking a uniform approach to all the protected areas. In some, it is deciding to ban bottom trawling in part of the MPA but not all of it. Effectively, it is saying, "You've got sandy seabeds, and they are not affected at all." I can understand, in theory, the logic behind that. The argument has been made to me by some in the fishing community, but I ask the Minister to think carefully about this.

First, it is going to be incredibly difficult to police. Who will be monitoring the movements of a trawler to establish whether it has approached or gone over the top of a protected reef?



**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): MPAs are monitored by the automatic identification system. In a recent incident on the Irish sea, not only did a fishing vessel swear at me over the radio and fail to display the correct lights, but it had also turned off its AIS, which meant that we could not monitor what those fishermen were doing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, even though we have the international convention for the safety of life at sea, we need legislation to ensure that the AIS systems remain working on commercial fishing vessels?

**Chris Grayling**: I absolutely agree. Frankly, I think that any fishing vessel that comes into UK waters and turns off the tracking systems should be banned from UK waters. It is as simple as that.

Whatever we do, we have to police very carefully. Problems arise if we only proscribe bottom trawling in part of a marine protected area. How on earth do we check whether a vessel has really passed over a protected reef or not? Who is policing that, watching the vessel every inch of the way and coming up with sufficient evidence to make it legally watertight to prosecute if it does it? Although it may be possible to segregate in a small number of areas where it is clear that that is the obvious thing to do, my message to the Minister is to please make that a rare exception rather than the norm. I do not believe that we have the ability to track and police those areas properly.

The other point about sandy seabeds is that they are not always areas of non-ecological importance. The opposite is often the case. These are areas with seagrass or kelp, and there are fish that live there as well. We cannot just say that it is fine to bottom trawl sandy seabeds but not if there is a reef there. Segmenting an area should be the exception, not the rule. The whole MPA should mean the whole MPA, and only very rarely should we take a different approach. The default position should be that the ban covers the whole area, and it is only in exceptional circumstances that we should we accept that bottom trawling can continue.

I stress that, whether we are talking about segregation of MPAs or a wholesale ban, this needs to be properly policed. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made a very good point. We have to have mechanisms in place, and we have to be tough. If somebody comes into our waters, breaks the rules and damages the ecology, I do not see why they should be allowed in our waters again—or, if they are a UK boat, why they should be allowed out to sea again. We want tough enforcement. In looking at what the Government are doing, I urge the Minister to act in this area.

This issue commands concern across the House. Concerns are held widely among people around the country—in fishing communities and elsewhere. We have to be careful about protecting the livelihood of people in the small boats that go out into coastal waters. They are, and have been for years, an essential part of the livelihoods of people in our smaller fishing ports. We cannot say to the fishing community, “No more. Away you go. Do something else.” That is absolutely not what this is about. This is about stopping industrial trawling in marine protected areas and getting rid of the equipment that scalps the seabed. It is about having proper protections for areas of great ecological importance and looking after our oceans better than we have in the past.

I thank the Minister for making a good start in this area. I know that she has had to fight battles to get the first four areas. It is a good start, but this cannot go step by step. I know that civil servants like to take things methodically sometimes, and I completely understand why—we will come back to the issue of due diligence following the Environment Act 2021 before too long—but we need to move as fast as possible. Otherwise, we are leaving our seabeds to be damaged and damaged again by trawlers that are getting bigger and bigger, and it will take our seabeds, reefs and marine species far too long to recover.

11.14 am

**The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis)**: It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. It is also a great pleasure to be here with my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and other colleagues with interests in fish. We meet relatively regularly in this Chamber to discuss various fishy issues.

I am particularly interested in this issue and I think that this has been a really useful contribution to the debate on MPAs. Our network of MPAs is one of our most important tools for protecting the wide range of precious and sensitive habitats and species that our water contains. We have established a comprehensive network of MPAs in the UK; we have 178 in England, covering 40% of English waters. In fact—perhaps I have not explained this sufficiently widely before—bottom trawling is already banned in 102 of those 178 MPAs.

MPAs protect specific features within the designated site to allow those features to recover to a favourable condition, meaning that they are in a good and healthy state. One example is the Solent and Dorset coast special protection area, which protects internationally important terns. Birds and other species can also be a critical part of the MPA network. The SPA is very important to the terns, as much of the sea around their breeding colonies is the ideal habitat for their plunge feeding.

We know that designating the MPAs is only part of the story. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell said, it is essential that they are properly protected; otherwise, they can do no good at all. We also recognise that there are growing spatial tensions between industries such as fishing, dredging, oil and gas and the renewable energies sector, alongside the very real need to conserve and enhance our marine environment.

Bottom trawling is a broad term used to describe methods of pulling fishing gear along the seabed to catch both fish and shellfish. Bottom-towed gears fall broadly into three groups—trawls, dredges and seines—with multiple types of gears within those groups. Bottom trawls are used by all parts of the fishing fleet, from small day boats to large offshore vessels. It is fair to say that all types of vessels can cause real damage if the wrong type of gear is used in the wrong way. The main effects of bottom trawling are linked to the scraping of the seabed by the fishing gear.

We need to be aware that approximately 45% of the value of the fish landed in the UK comes from bottom trawling, which includes cod, plaice and scallops. It is

therefore important that we work with the fishing sector as we begin progressively to reduce the adverse effects of these types of fishing methods.

**Luke Pollard:** The Minister is making a sound case of stating where we are up to. However, does she note that the supertrawlers, of which the UK has none and which so plunder many of our MPAs, land their fish in foreign ports? Many of our bottom trawlers already fish outside MPAs and land in UK ports. However, the trawlers over which there is real concern have no economic benefit to the UK because they land their fish abroad.

**Victoria Prentis:** The hon. Gentleman touches on a very important point, and I will be coming to supertrawlers later. As ever, we have to find the balance between actions that we know are not great for the environment and the economic benefit to and protection of coastal communities and the processing that is so valuable to so many of those communities. That is the point I am trying to make: this is an important and delicate balance. It is important that we recognise the scale of the challenge. Some 45% of the value of fish landed in the UK comes from this type of gear. We must continue to work with rather than against the fishing industry in getting that balance right.

A blanket ban on bottom trawling has all the appeal of simplicity, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell makes the case in his typically persuasive manner. However, it is fair to say that not all MPAs are designated to protect features that are affected by bottom trawling. The MMO and IFCA have embarked on a programme of detailed site-by-site analysis of each MPA. As I have said, they have done 102 bans of bottom trawling, so more than half—57%, I think—have already been dealt with in this way. Each assessment is informed by scientific advice, then byelaws are designed for each area. I do hear, however, what my right hon. Friend has said about making those byelaws sufficiently simple for fishermen to follow without difficulty. I recognise that that detailed approach takes more time than a blanket ban, but I think it is worth it to avoid unnecessary impacts on our fishing industry.

We have made the most progress in our inshore waters. There are 98 MPAs with byelaws in place to protect sensitive habitats and species from bottom trawling. The management measures have been brought in by engaging with the fishing industry, and also by engagement through the IFCA network, which has been very valuable in some cases.

My right hon. Friend was also seeking Brexit benefits. It is definitely true to say that in the offshore MPAs there is a benefit that we would not have been able to achieve without the benefit of Brexit. Before the end of the transition period, we really were restrained in implementing management measures in offshore MPAs because of vetoes imposed by other EU states that fished there. Now we are pressing on with protecting

those areas too, and I am pleased to say that on 13 June we put in place byelaws to protect four of our most sensitive offshore areas, including Dogger Bank.

We are definitely not going to stop there, and last month we published a call for evidence on the next 13 offshore sites. We have developed a programme to bring in management for the other 23 offshore sites in English waters by 2024. That is a workstream with which I am determined to press ahead, ensuring that we keep this moving.

The MMO has fully engaged with the fishing industry in developing those plans, and will continue to do so, to ensure that they provide robust protection and that they do not restrict fishing any more than they need to. We will also continue to work with our international partners, and we will—while not allowing them to veto our plans—aim to include them in our consultation process.

Supertrawlers have been mentioned by several Members. Those vessels are usually pelagic trawlers. They fish in the water column. As such, they are not likely to come into contact with the seabed habitats and species, which is what most of our MPAs are designed to protect. They do, of course, have a significant effect on the stock that they are coming to target. They are extremely efficient at fishing and can fish a stock extraordinarily quickly, but, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) has said, do not always land the catch in this country. There are many reasons for continuing to look at whether supertrawlers bring us real benefit. I am not sure that the most persuasive of those is the MPA network, but that does not stop us continuing to assess them.

Site-based protection does not mitigate the impacts from those vessels that target migratory stocks, which many of them do, but we are looking closely at what our policies for those vessels should be, and it is important that those decisions should be based on the evidence.

Following the work of my dear friend Lord Benyon, we are ready to launch the next set of work on highly protected marine areas—those areas of the sea that allow for the protection and complete recovery of green ecosystems. We have shortlisted five pilot sites for consultation, which will start shortly. For HPMA to be successful, we will need to work very closely with the local fishing industry, other marine industries and other sea users in designating, managing and monitoring what goes on in those areas. There is a great deal to be gained from those areas, both environmentally and scientifically, if we are able to get this work right, but it has to be done sensitively and relatively slowly.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell for introducing an interesting debate. Progress has been made, but he is right to keep pressing us on what we can do further to protect our precious marine environment.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.25 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Rights of Children (Police Custody)

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that no reference should be made during the debate to any ongoing legal proceedings.

**Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rights of children while in police custody.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. In March, I led an Adjournment debate following the incredibly concerning case of a constituent who was held in a cell for nine hours before an appropriate adult was called. Unbeknown to his family, he had been missing; he had not arrived at school, and they were unaware of his whereabouts. From that case and many others of a similar nature, it is clear that the law is simply not working for children in police custody. There is room for further debates on the general policing of minors and children, but today's debate is focused on the rights of children while in police custody.

I am sure the Minister knows that various legislative protections are in place to ensure that children are detained as a last resort, and for the shortest possible time. The failing is that this is clearly not happening, because the policies are being ignored. Some 50,000 children are held and locked up in police custody every year. Children are detained in cells in police stations that have primarily been built for adults. On average, children are detained for over 13 hours, with 21,369 detained overnight in 2019. The decision to detain children is approved 99% of the time, and it is time the whole process was reviewed.

According to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the role of the appropriate adult is to safeguard the interests, rights, entitlements and welfare of children and vulnerable people who are suspected of a criminal offence by ensuring that they are treated in a fair and just manner and can participate effectively. The Act derived from public concern over the Maxwell Confait murder case in my constituency in 1972, which led Parliament to pass the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, known as PACE. This year is the 50th anniversary of the Confait case, which involved a tragic murder and the wrongful arrest, charging and sentencing of minors, which was later overturned.

PACE tackled a number of areas of growing public concern, including the treatment of suspects in police stations and cells, the length of detention without being charged, the conduct of interviewers and access to lawyers. In cases where the suspect is a child or vulnerable person, PACE requires the presence of an appropriate adults, also known as AA.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend not only for securing the debate, but for the really important speech she is giving. On the role of the appropriate adult and how it has evolved over the 50-year period, does she agree that there need to be more checks and balances on how appropriate adult schemes are used in our police stations, and that there needs to be greater monitoring and robust scrutiny of

those roles to ensure that any child in custody has an appropriate adult within a reasonable timeframe? We do not mean within three hours but within a couple of hours at most.

**Janet Daby:** My hon. Friend has captured the essence of my speech. She is entirely right that assurances need to be put in place to make sure that children have an appropriate adult to help, guide and support them throughout the whole process. I will cover this issue in some detail later in my speech.

The principal intention of the appropriate adult safeguard was to reduce the risk of a miscarriage of justice as a result of evidence being obtained from vulnerable suspects, which by virtue of their vulnerability led to unsafe and unjust convictions. Some 50 years later, children in custody are being failed because of the length of time they are spending in detention without being charged and because appropriate adults are not being contacted quickly enough. Child suspects are almost invisible to policymakers and politicians.

**Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate on a subject that really needs to be discussed. On children in police custody, does she share my concerns about how the use of force is applied? Footage has circulated recently of force being used on a 16-year-old child in my constituency, and there is recent footage of force being used on a 14-year-old boy, in what turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. Both incidents are being investigated by the Metropolitan Police Service Directorate of Professional Standards, but does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be an urgent review into how force is used, particularly when it is applied to children? If it is used in a case of mistaken identity, there are long-term mental effects, particularly when it happens to children. If it is not appropriate, something needs to be done to review it.

**Janet Daby:** I thank my hon. Friend for that really important intervention. It is very distressing to hear about the abuse of power by professionals in a trusted position. It is even more distressing to hear that certain incidents happen to young people and children. They could be our relatives—our children, our nephews, our nieces. It is upsetting, and we need to get to the bottom of it. My hon. Friend mentioned the investigations that are rightly taking place, but the Government need to do more to hold public servants to account and ensure they are operating in the manner in which they should.

In the recent Adjournment debate I led on harm to adults, the Minister said:

“It is right and proper that children are acknowledged as a protected group with specific needs.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 737.]

In response to a question I asked last week, the Minister for Crime and Policing confirmed the Government's commitment to driving down the number of minors held in custody and the duration for which they are held. Although the Government recognise the significance of the role of the appropriate adult, they need to do far more, and I hope I will get a more satisfying response this afternoon.

There is consensus that work needs to be done with minors in custody, but tragically I fear there is a danger that the Home Office will continue to miss my point.



The law is not functioning as it should. We are not living up to the UN convention that we ratified. The legislative status quo fails to adequately safeguard children, and something needs to change. Children are left waiting an average of six hours before the arrival of an appropriate adult, and are sometimes held overnight. I remind Members of my constituent, who spent nine hours waiting for an appropriate adult.

**Marsha De Cordova:** Outrageous!

**Janet Daby:** It is indeed outrageous. Despite the rules requiring the police to secure the attendance of an appropriate adult as soon as possible, I am told that in some cases appropriate adults are asked to attend only when the police are ready to interview. That severely hinders the appropriate adult's ability to enact their role of providing oversight and welfare throughout the whole process of detainment. A Children's Commissioner report found that, in cases where the parent is unable to fulfil the appropriate adult role, there was an average of a seven to eight-hour delay before the police requested an appropriate adult from a local scheme. Again, children are being failed. If a child aged between 10 and 17 years old is left alone in a police cell for extended periods of time, one can only imagine what they are thinking and how they are feeling. If it were our own child or a child from our constituency, we would be deeply concerned. The Government should be deeply concerned about all children across our nation.

I have spoken to a constituent who told me that, as a child, they accepted a guilty plea even though they were innocent. They did that because they wanted to avoid having to stay any longer in a police cell. They will not be the first person to do that, and the Government need to re-address that injustice—that wrong—quickly.

A recent trial in the Metropolitan police has demonstrated that such delays are not inevitable. A trial took place, using the acronym CHILD, to focus on the importance of contacting the appropriate adult at the point of booking in, whether that was the parent or an individual in a local scheme. In that trial, average detention times for children reduced by 10 hours—sorry, not 10, although I would like it to be; they reduced by seven hours, which demonstrates that safeguarding the interests, rights and welfare of the child is achievable. I hope that the Minister will join me in praising the Met's initiative and work, and that the Government will roll out that successful pilot to all Met stations and all regions of our nation. Is there a plan to do that?

Many elements are built into the youth justice system that differentiate it from the broader criminal justice system. In the youth court, the judge and the probation officers are youth specialists—in my previous life, I was trained as a youth probation officer, so I have some knowledge of that. All the language is adjusted to remain appropriate to the age of the child. Broadly speaking, the youth criminal justice system seeks to avoid punitive measures and tries to put the child first. As we have heard, that is not the case in police custody.

According to academics Dr Vicky Kemp and Dr Miranda Bevan, specialists in this area, child suspects who are not convicted and who are uncharged experience disproportionately harsh treatment. The rules say that children are to be detained for the “shortest appropriate period”, but children are often detained as long as adults. Children are not adults, so why are they treated like adults? Data shows that the average stay is increasing.

In 2019, following a freedom of information request, it was uncovered that a 10-year-old child spent a staggering 23 hours in a police cell. That beggars belief—it is actually hard to take in, but it is true. In one particular police force, the average detention period was 18 hours—not for one child, but on the 1,293 occasions on which a child was detained overnight in police custody.

Long detention times deeply traumatise children and scar them for life. They are deprived of liberty, trapped in incredibly intimidating conditions and often deliberately kept in the dark. After an overnight stay, one 12-year-old said:

“I didn't know they could do that to you...it was awful and I wasn't sure I was going to be okay”.

**Marsha De Cordova:** My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful point. Does she agree that those moments in which that poor child, or any child, is detained in custody will have a long-term and sustained impact on their mental health and wellbeing, their confidence levels and their ability—because they are children—to understand what has actually happened to them? It is a form of abuse.

**Janet Daby:** I agree with my hon. Friend that, in such instances, it is abuse. It is harmful for children to be in such situations. The very service that is there to protect them is also doing them incredible harm. The Government have to take that on board and to accept their responsibility and the role they need to play. The welfare of the child is “paramount”—it says that in the Children Act 1989. If the welfare of the child is paramount, their welfare needs to be paramount on all occasions and in all situations. The very services that are there to protect and support them need not only to carry out justice—absolutely—but to consider the welfare of the child.

I am sure we want more for our children—I am hearing that already—but we must not keep them in a state of despair. That is simply wrong. As I said, the Government can change that. Even with children who end up being convicted, we cannot bury our heads in the sand and carry on with a system that is devoid of compassion.

Cutting the detention clock for a child in custody would mean that the appropriate adult is likely to be called out quicker and is more able to stay for the duration of the detention. It would also lead to a decrease in the frequency of overnight stays. That would be better for the public purse economically, but also for the physical and mental wellbeing of the child.

For the police, it would improve relations with key communities in the area, reduce reoffending rates and ensure that all their collected evidence was reliable. It would prevent the collection of evidence from being hampered by the lack of sleep or the worry and stress stemming from 13 or so hours in solitary confinement. To be clear, calling for a reduction in the child detention clock would not hinder the police's ability to fight crime. The police currently have the power to request an extension from the superintendent if the case is complex. That power would be retained even if a lower detention cap was implemented.

During the previous Adjournment debate, the Minister failed to respond to my call to cut the stay limit from 24 hours. Will she hear me now and respond to that call? There is evidence calling for a stay limited to 12 hours instead of 24.

[Janet Daby]

I will mention two other things before I finish. First, there must be far higher reporting and monitoring of the use of strip searches in police custody. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for her recent parliamentary question. The current rate of strip searches is woeful. They are degrading and humiliating and, as we have seen, they completely traumatised children. Will the Minister commit to increasing transparency and accountability on this issue and exploring technological alternatives that are less intrusive, less emotionally harmful and less damaging to the child?

Secondly, a decade of legal aid cuts has meant that firms cannot afford to send down more than minimally trained representatives to police stations, and then only for the shortest possible period. Lawyers therefore often arrive just before the interview, when the child is too exhausted to engage—if the child gets a lawyer at all. Currently, children have to opt in for legal advice, and too many children forgo their right to legal representation; they are burnt out, emotionally exhausted and probably do not fully understand, and they falsely believe it will make the process go faster. The fallout from this kind of misunderstanding can be avoided if we instead implement an opt-out system.

There is also a danger that post-pandemic remote legal advice will begin to spread. Research from Transform Justice shows that remote legal advice increases the stress and anxiety of children and impedes the communication between lawyer and child. To ensure high-quality advice that serves the needs of the child, it is vital that the Minister continues to champion in-person legal advice, moves towards an opt-out system and bolsters legal aid.

As I draw to a close, I ask the Government to maintain public safety and to protect children throughout the youth criminal justice system. I call on the Minister to review the detention clock for children, to roll out the Met's new approach to appropriate adults across the Met and the police nationwide, which will allow us to begin finally to have a child-first approach to police custody suites, and to implement opt-out legal representation system for children. I ask again whether the Minister will commit to increasing transparency and accountability for strip searches and exploring technological alternatives that are less intrusive and harmful to minors. As a country, we should see the welfare of the child as paramount in all instances and across all services at all times.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** The debate can last until 4 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 3.37 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes each for Her Majesty's Opposition and the Minister. Janet Daby will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. I believe that three Back Benchers are seeking to catch my eye, so there should be plenty of time for everyone to get in.

2.49 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) on raising the issue. I can well recall when she secured the debate in the main Chamber, which I attended to support her and ask questions. I had a discussion with her before and after the debate. The issue is very real for her,

and although it may not be for us in Northern Ireland, I understand the issues and her concerns. I wanted to come along, as I do to many debates, to support those who bring forward matters that are important for their constituents and for us across the whole United Kingdom.

It is a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), in her place, and the Minister. I am convinced that the Minister will be keen to respond to the questions that the hon. Member for Lewisham East has asked and that others will ask. We in this House have a responsibility to ensure that while children are in custody, they are safeguarded and their welfare is promoted. I can well recall the case—I could not believe that it took place—in which a young person was arrested and detained with absolutely no action taken to protect, safeguard or look after them. That is the issue for me, as it is for the hon. Lady, and it is why I am here.

This is a huge issue. There are fluctuations in the number of children being arrested, as well as an increase in the number of children reoffending and being re-arrested. I understand that there has to be law and order—there has to be a system—but protection for young people needs to be paramount in the legal system. That is why many of us were flabbergasted when we read that that incident had taken place. While there is absolutely no excuse for crime, we must ensure that the process is done in the right way, to safeguard and yet discourage.

The hon. Lady has provided some useful and insightful material in relation to child arrests, for which I thank her, and she has made some incredibly important points. It was of particular interest and concern to me that from the age of 10 children who are arrested are expected to choose whether or not to have legal advice. I would have thought it would be normal to give them legal advice there and then. I cannot understand why they would be asked, "Do you want legal advice or don't you?" They do, and the law of the land should protect them—it should reach out to them and ensure that they know their rights.

I am not aware of any 10-year-old who understands the meaning of the term legal advice. I am a grandfather, and my oldest grandchildren are aged 12 and eight. Neither of them would be aware of their rights, and I presume that they are an example of the rest of society when it comes to knowing what is right and what is wrong, so an appropriate adult must be present at that stage. Children should have appropriate advice at all stages, and they must have an appropriate adult present to give them the advice they need. If the family are not available—sometimes that happens, for whatever reason; someone may be working, or they may not be accessible or available—it is important that the state steps in to provide that assistance.

In addition, children are often detained in adult cells, with no immediate support to help them understand what they have done. The hon. Member for Lewisham East referred to that fact while setting the scene, which she did extremely well. To help those children to realise that wrongdoing has taken place, talking is one of the first things that should happen, and young people must know their rights. Sometimes, they may be shy; they may be introverted and not know how to react; or they may be extremely scared. I suspect that for many, it is the latter, so those are things that we need to sort out.

As the Minister knows, I always give a Northern Ireland perspective in these debates. It is just to add a flavour to the debate, not necessarily to ask her to take any responsibility, because she has no responsibility for Northern Ireland. A report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office has revealed that it costs £324,000 per year to keep a young person in custody in Northern Ireland. We have one youth detention centre, Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre in Bangor, County Down, just north of my constituency. Each year, an average of 100 youths between the ages of 10 and 17 serve convictions there, and the figure for those placed in custody is much higher. Although we must ensure that children in police custody are dealt with through the correct process, they are initially arrested for a reason. That reason has to be proven, of course, and how it is done has to be monitored, but it is an extremely big deal when a youth crime is committed, and lessons have to be learned.

I spoke in a previous Westminster Hall debate on sentencing for repeat offenders, where Department of Justice figures revealed that the reoffending rate across the United Kingdom is 38.5%. It is quite a large figure—reoffending seems to happen to more than one third of those who are detained originally. Maybe the Minister could give us some help and indicate what has been done to reduce those reoffending rates, because the figures are quite alarming and concern us all. There must be a firm reminder that youth custody is not a respite but an essential part of the judicial process for lessons to be learned. Although I agree that children should have additional safeguarding, it is not a soft measure that should be taken for granted.

Young girls should have access to female support—it should be available each time—and not have to wait eight or even 10 hours, as I think the hon. Member for Lewisham East said, for someone to come. Oh my goodness, it is incredible that the wait time should be so long. Let us honestly address the fact that for ladies and girls, this is also about hygiene and personal issues, and they are incredibly important to a vulnerable young person who needs help. All young people should have access to a parent or guardian, and not be subject to intimidation or violent treatment.

However, it is so important that those young people still understand that their choices have led them to a place that they simply never want to be. That goes back to reoffending and the question that I have asked the Minister. What has been done to ensure that young people are treated in the right way, with compassion, understanding and persuasion, so that they are not unduly afraid of the system but they understand it better and, hopefully, never have to reoffend again?

While I respect the fact that Northern Ireland falls under our own Department of Justice, the concept of how we deal with youth offenders should be the same. I want safeguarding for children, as the hon. Member for Lewisham East does, but I also want the correct education, so that crimes are not committed to begin with. We must look deeper at the issues and why these things happen. We also cannot ignore society and where they live. Is it a poor community? Is there poverty in the family? Is there parental control? Are gangs taking advantage of young people? Those are all things in the bigger picture that must be addressed.

I look to the Justice Minister back home, in many cases, but I also ask the Minister here what commitments have been made to ensure that young people have rights and are safe in custody, whether here or back home. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Justice Minister at the Northern Ireland Assembly? It is always good to exchange ideas and see what is working. We should be looking at what is working around the United Kingdom, and at what is perhaps working better in Northern Ireland or, indeed, in Scotland or Wales.

I agree that children should be detained only for serious offences. I get quite concerned that people may see the police as the enemy because of the nature of where they live or the arrest system. However, as I have highlighted, that does not mean by any means that petty crime should be ignored. A lack of deterrent and/or punishment will lead to serious reoffending. This always seems to come back to the reoffending issue, as I have done on three occasions.

To conclude, Mr Hollobone, I commend the hon. Member for Lewisham East for bringing this issue forward, and I commend others who will speak. I agree with many of the points that have been made, but there must be a reminder that it is never okay to commit crime, and we must not allow custody for children to be a respite. They must be represented well, they must never be let down, they must always know their rights and they must be held to account under the correct procedures of the law with a compassionately firm hand, persuasion and understanding. We must show young people that there are alternatives to the route they are on that will take them away from a wrongful path.

To me, it is all about putting people on the right path, with the right focus and the right direction—I think that today's debate does that in many ways—and protecting young people. That is ultimately what the hon. Member for Lewisham East said in her debate in the Chamber. I fully support her on that, and on the goals and achievements she is aiming for. I very much look forward to the Minister's responses. I am quite hopeful we will get the responses that we look for, and I hope that the hon. Member for Lewisham East will be satisfied with them.

2.59 pm

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) on securing this important and timely debate. I thank the many organisations that have worked really hard to raise awareness of the issue, including the Howard League for Penal Reform, Just for Kids Law and many experts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East highlighted that she had an Adjournment debate on the subject recently, and I went back to it for reference. I thank her for sharing her constituents' experiences, and I thank her constituents for their bravery in sharing those horrific experiences. I recently had a similar case in my own constituency, where a young child in their school uniform was kept in police custody for just under 24 hours—it was 23 hours and some odd minutes. That child was found to have suffered some serious failings in relation to their safeguarding while in custody. Worse still, the child was not charged with anything; they went through that horrific experience and there was no charge.



[*Marsha De Cordova*]

I recognise that custody is a core element of our policing. It is crucial to ensuring justice and to keeping the public safe. However, it must be balanced with the safeguarding of children, as the safety and welfare of children is paramount. Public bodies have a responsibility to protect minors. The Children Act 2004 places a statutory duty on the police in relation to children. Article 37 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child makes it clear that children should be detained only as a last resort, and for the shortest appropriate period possible, as we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East and for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare).

It was therefore deeply worrying to read the Just for Kids Law report, which found through a freedom of information request that 21,369 children were detained overnight in police custody, either pre or post charge, in 2019. That statistic should worry us all. Those children have potentially been scarred for life. That statistic is still a significant underestimate, because it only includes the responses of 34 police forces, which tells us the number could be higher. Black children are disproportionately detained in police custody overnight, according to the responses from 31 of those 34 police forces. As an MP representing a London constituency, I am particularly concerned that more than 44% of children detained overnight in police custody in 2019 were black children.

It is not right that there is such a huge racial disparity, and it points to the institutional and structural racism in the policing of our black children. The Government can no longer deny or dismiss that, because the data and the evidence are quite clear. For a child, spending a night in police custody is an extremely traumatic and frightening experience. Spending a long time in such an environment has serious consequences for a child's mental health and wellbeing. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East has already spoken about that, and that is why she is right when she says that reform is desperately needed.

It is quite clear that legislation written 50 years ago—be that PACE or other pieces of legislation—is outdated. We need to look at reforming the current system. That is why I agree with the recommendations in the Just for Kids Law report. We need a reduced time limit on how long children can be detained in police custody, because the current 24-hour limit is the same for adults and children. That cannot be right, because we know that children and adults are not the same, so it must be reduced to 12 hours or less.

The issue about appropriate adults is key, because we have already heard that children have to wait for hours in police custody without an appropriate adult. That system has to be overhauled. If it is about safeguarding the child, I am not sure what can be done if we cannot overhaul that aspect of the process.

I cannot stress enough the importance of data. Data and evidence are crucial to this process, because they really help to illustrate and paint a picture of the crisis in our policing of children. We also need a review of the collation of data so that we know what is being collated, and we need consistency across the country over what is collated.

Publication of this data will be important, because it helps with scrutiny and it helps to give robust oversight of what is actually going on. That is why publication should be mandatory. No police force in this country should decide on a voluntary basis to record data. I am not sure how that can be acceptable. Just for Kids Law was unable to access all the data in relation to its freedom of information request; it only got data from 34 police forces, when 43 could have responded.

I recently asked an oral question at Home Office questions—I think it was just over a week ago. I am calling for mandatory recording and publication of the data on children who are strip-searched. Everybody was horrified at the case of child Q, but we know now that that was not an isolated incident and that many children—including young girls, whether they are on their menstruation cycle or not—are being strip-searched. These are people's children, and we all have a responsibility and a duty to protect them. Will the Minister commit to looking into the mandatory publication of data in relation to police interactions with young people? As I have highlighted, at the moment the police are required to record and publish such data only if an arrest has been made. However, as was the case with child Q, who was not arrested—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. I said right at the start of the debate that no reference should be made to any cases where there are ongoing legal proceedings. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady made a glancing reference, which is fine, but she should not repeat the reference to child Q any further in the debate.

**Marsha De Cordova:** I apologise for that, Mr Hollobone, and I will not refer to that case in the rest of my speech.

Finally, I believe we need a review into the policing of black children. They are being over-policed and treated with less care and protection. That perception of maturity—a term that is used is the adultification of our young black children—is another form of racism.

I have seen many examples of that when I have seen young children being detained by multiple officers, and the police say afterwards, “Based on the evidence before us, nothing is wrong here.” If that is the case, something is wrong with the way our young children are being treated. I really hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, she will refer to that. The disparity in the treatment of black children across policing is bound to lead to a breakdown in community relations, and a lack of trust and confidence in the police force. All I try to do, as an elected representative, is to help the police to build trust and confidence in our communities.

I do not believe that the solution can simply be boosting diversity in recruitment; although diversity is important, there are other elements to consider. The solution is not just about providing cultural changes, either. We need an urgent root-and-branch review that investigates the policing of our black children and sets out clear recommendations about how the police can reduce disproportionality and build and restore trust.

I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, she will agree with me that we need a review, and if she does not agree, that she will explain why, so that I can understand. No one can be against a proposal that will help to reduce the racial disparities facing our children. We all know that our children are our future. It is on us to create that fair, better future for them.

3.10 pm

**Claudia Webbe** (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for securing this important debate.

I am mindful not to speak about cases currently going through the courts. I intended to allude to child Q, unaware that the case is in court. I will modify my speech accordingly. None the less, it is damning in the 21st century to be talking about children being strip-searched by police officers while at school and in their own environment. It is also damning to have seen the public report, which I hope I can speak about. Perhaps I cannot, as I have just received an eye from the Chair. That report is public and gives a damning account of what—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. Will the hon. Lady resume her seat? I am acting to try to protect the hon. Lady. She was honest to say that her speech was to be about a particular case, and now she is going to do her best to talk about the same issues without referring to the particular child, but we all know who she is talking about. She will have to be very careful and speak only in general terms. I am saying that to protect her and Parliament.

**Claudia Webbe:** Thank you for your guidance, Mr Hollobone.

We know there are cases where children are not given an appropriate adult when brought into custody, are not presented with their rights, or are asked whether they want representation. Such practices must end. We must come to a better understanding of how we treat children, not only when protecting them from crime, but when they are brought into custody and falsely accused, or otherwise.

I have dealt with cases in my constituency where children innocently engage in social media and are then caught in a spiral in system where they are brought in for questioning; they are frightened by the type of questioning and the way it is posed. They are immediately so fearful of that questioning and the adults in the room that they are ready to sign anything in order to get out of there as quickly as possible. Children should have an appropriate adult; they should be told their rights in a manner that gives them an informed choice about having proper representation. If necessary, a pause should be given, so that they can make that informed choice. It is important that they have an adult in the room and have proper legal representation because what they say and admit to in that room can rest with them forever and a day and affect every aspect of their life going forward. It is important that children get the right representation from the outset, because many of them are in the midst of important, serious exams that will affect the rest of their lives. They need to be in the right mindset to do those exams.

In one of the schools in my constituency, children had been accused of a form of bullying, which turned out to be a conflict between ethnicities and races. The children and parents were not given the proper support and advice, and the children were told to stay away from the school environment until the investigation was complete, without being given any support to study at home or do anything that enabled them to have a better understanding of the education that they need to continue with.

I am continuing to be mindful not to talk about child Q, Mr Hollobone, but I will say that it is important that children are allowed to feel safe in their school environments, neighbourhoods and communities, and that they know that the first action by the police will not be to bring them into an invasive situation wherein they have less power, but that the police will treat children as children, with the right and proper support around them. I hope that all the recommendations that come out of many of the serious and important reports on the way that children are treated in custody are implemented, and that somebody is appointed at a senior level to ensure that this is the case. Too often, recommendations remain unadopted and sit at the bottom of the shelf, but they need to be implemented to protect the future. It is even more vital that racist and misogynistic attitudes are left out of the custody suite and interactions with children. Far too often, black and other globalised children are left reeling from racism and, if they are young women, misogyny.

Institutional racism and misogyny in the police force needs to be seriously addressed, especially when it involves children. At the end of the day, we are talking about police services that have already been deemed to have used sexist, derogatory and unacceptable language when it comes to dealing with people in their custody. We know of adults being wrongly strip-searched. We also know that two serving Metropolitan police officers were jailed for sharing photographs of the bodies of Bibaa Henry and Nicola Smallman, two young black sisters from north London who went missing in June 2020. The officers shared the photos with 41 members of a police WhatsApp group. The police were also accused of showing a lack of interest in the fact that the two sisters were missing, which delayed their search.

The Metropolitan Police Service was recently forced to deny that it is plagued by a culture of misogyny, after an official report revealed shocking details of officers sharing messages about hitting and raping women, as well as about the deaths of black babies and the holocaust. The Independent Office for Police Conduct said in its report on behaviour at Charing Cross police station that there was a culture of “toxic masculinity” and that the behaviour was not confined to rogue individuals, but was part of an offensive Metropolitan police culture. The report states:

“We believe these incidents are not isolated or simply the behaviour of a few ‘bad apples’.”

Of course, that inquiry came after the brutal police crackdown of a vigil in the memory of Sarah Everard. I do not believe that that case is—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The debate is about the rights of children while in police custody. I understand that the hon. Lady has made the remarks that she has for reasons of context, but the debate is specifically about the rights of children in police custody, so I would appreciate it if she came back to that subject.

**Claudia Webbe:** Thank you for that guidance, Mr Hollobone. Indeed, I was highlighting a policing culture that no adult, let alone a child, should be subjected to. We simply cannot expose children to that type of policing culture. It is therefore vital that measures to avoid holding children in police custody, or to reduce the time that they spend in it, are strengthened and enforced.

[Claudia Webbe]

The Youth Justice Legal Centre found that children are not interviewed under caution outside a custody suite as often as they could be. Too often, children who are refused bail are not transferred to local authority accommodation, as is legally required; instead, they are kept in police cells. That must end. I also support the calls from the Just for Kids Law charity for an end to the overnight detention of children by police. Children are currently subject to the same time limit as adults. We cannot allow that to continue and it must change.

We must redouble our efforts to end the scourge of racism and misogyny that plagues our police forces and all aspects of society, and in doing so, we must ensure that our children are not exposed to unnecessary harm in police custody.

3.22 pm

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute, as others have done, to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who shared individual cases and statistics revealing that children and young people spend lengthy periods in custody. I thank her for securing the debate, for being a true champion and campaigner on this issue, and for the all the different ways she has used the parliamentary tools at her disposal to keep the spotlight on securing best practice.

Children and young people are a protected group with specific age-related vulnerabilities. Their treatment in detention is governed not only by domestic law, but by the UN convention on the rights of the child, which the UK has signed and ratified. Legislative requirements and best practice are outlined in various documents, including, most significantly, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—commonly referred to as PACE—and its codes of practice, guidance from the College of Policing, and the Home Office's concordat on children in custody.

It is absolutely right that officers must take into account the age of a child or young person when deciding whether statutory grounds for arrest apply. Police should pay particular regard to the timing of any necessary arrests of children and young people, ensure that they are not detained any longer than necessary, and avoid holding them overnight in police cells unless it is absolutely necessary.

The College of Policing is right to stress in its guidance that

“Everyone who works with children has a responsibility for keeping them safe.”

That means that they have a role to play in identifying concerns about a child's safety and wellbeing, sharing information and taking prompt action when it is needed to protect a child. A child who has been detained and is in police custody presents an opportunity to understand why, to disrupt their behaviour if it is criminal, and to safeguard them and the public from further harms.

West Yorkshire police's violence reduction unit has undertaken several pieces of significant research to better understand the relationship between young people and violent crime. Nationally and in West Yorkshire, the number of proven offences committed by 10 to 17-year-olds has fallen dramatically, particularly over the past five years.

The number of young first-time entrants into the criminal justice system has also plummeted. However, worryingly, in 2019-20, more than half of the offences committed by 10-17 year olds were violence against the person, compared with 39.7% in 2013-14.

We know that children and young people are capable of committing serious crimes and we cannot shy away from that, given the impact on victims, who are often children themselves. One comprehensive piece of research undertaken by Crest with the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership and the violence reduction unit found five key health inequalities that are influential in the lives of young people in West Yorkshire and their journey either towards or away from violence and exploitation: deprivation and socioeconomic disadvantage, trauma and unmet mental health need, education engagement, poor quality or lacking service provision and delivery, and contextual harm. More than 61,000 of 11 to 25-year-olds in West Yorkshire—13% of the population—were at risk of serious violence as a result of income deprivation and high levels of neighbourhood crime. One reality drawn out of the research that I find particularly depressing is how young people are being drawn into gangs and criminality by family members who are already involved. The report found that young people are often recruited by their own family. The reasons young people get involved in crime and find themselves in police custody serve as a reminder that some children's lives could not be more different from our own and that harm and risk is all around them.

How can we ensure that encounters with the police and any time spent in custody have a positive impact on these children's trajectory and do not compound the negative experiences surrounding them? The West Yorkshire violence reduction unit research recommended the development of trauma-informed practice across partnerships such as the complex childhood trauma steering group, which should be used to evaluate and standardise the trauma-informed offering across the region, and more and better mental health support for young people, all of which could and should be a feature of a child's limited time in custody. The aspiration has to be that the more we understand the risks and recognise the value of targeted intervention upstream, the more time in custody can be avoided entirely for children and young people.

One of the key features of the opening speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East was about the provision of appropriate adults. Research conducted by Dr Miranda Bevan of Goldsmiths, University of London, and Dr Vicky Kemp from the University of Nottingham, and shared by my hon. Friend found that it is not unusual for appropriate adults to not arrive until six or more hours have passed. Having got a better understanding of some of the reasons for that from my local police just today, I am sympathetic that trying to make contact initially with parents, who may or may not be available and who, sadly, are sometimes not willing to attend, then approaching the emergency duty team within child social care, and then, if they can still not get someone to attend, approaching the National Appropriate Adult Network, starts to show where the practical barriers to making swift progress are—and that is when attempts are made straightaway, which, as we have already heard, is not always the case.



From speaking to colleagues in West Yorkshire's liaison and diversion team earlier today, I know that problems are often exacerbated when looked-after children are in custody. Lines of parental responsibility prove harder to establish at a time when some of the most marginalised children are required to make serious decisions, without support, in conditions that are designed to be uncomfortable. Indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who it is always a pleasure to see in Westminster Hall, made the right and powerful point, which has been supported by almost all the speakers made here today, about asking these children to decide for themselves if they want or require legal representation, when it should be the default.

In its research, the National Appropriate Adult Network points out that children in custody are disadvantaged by more than just cognitive development. They are much more likely than other children to have poor mental health, to have a learning disability, at up to 22% for that cohort compared with 4% in the wider population, to have a communication disorder, at up to 90% versus 7%, to be autistic, at 15% compared with 1%, and to have suffered a head injury with loss of consciousness for more than 20 minutes, at 18% versus 5%. If we are looking for confirmation of why appropriate adults are essential for children in those circumstances, the statistics could not make the case any clearer.

We know that there are routine delays in getting someone to attend on behalf of a child. Are we not able to establish a model of best practice that works for both the police and the child, and moves things forward by having someone skilled on hand to provide that service? I hope the Minister will share her thinking on that when she responds, and address the pilot scheme that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East outlined, which appears to be delivering significant results. Once we have that in place, it opens up conversations about how swiftly we can move a child through police custody, and we can look again at 24 hours.

I am very much taking into account your comments, Mr Hollobone, but the Minister will be aware that alarm has been raised about strip searches in recent weeks. In response to a written question tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the Minister for Crime and Policing confirmed that the Ministry of Justice is supporting a project with the National Police Chiefs' Council with the aim of addressing the difference in experience of ethnic minority children and adults in police custody. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) shared some particularly powerful experiences of her constituents.

The Minister for Crime and Policing said that a wide range of agencies and independent advisers have contributed to that work, which engages a number of police forces across the country and builds on existing initiatives in the workplace, including a dedicated independent strip search scrutiny panel in Norfolk and Suffolk police. He said:

"From December 2022 we will be including more detailed custody data in the annual Police Powers and Procedures statistical bulletin which will include data on whether an appropriate adult was called out for a detained child and the number of strip searches & intimate searches carried out, broken down by age, gender, ethnicity, and offence type."

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea also spoke about the importance of data. That piece of work is welcome, so will the Minister confirm when it will be

concluded and published? It struck me that the response to that written question said that the research will determine if an appropriate adult was called. I very much expect to see that that requirement was upheld entirely.

I have spent a great deal of time trying to improve the modern slavery provisions in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and looking at when children come into custody. If there are concerns that they are victims of child criminal exploitation, county lines gangs or trafficking, the push to keep children out of custody for all the right reasons cannot mean that we cut corners and miss opportunities in our safeguarding obligations. Where the police arrest children and seize drugs or cash due to unlawful possession, they and other statutory agencies should fully understand the potential dangers for those children of being releasing without them, potentially back into the grasp of those who have been criminally exploiting them. We must work through that by involving all the relevant safeguarding agencies to truly disrupt the criminal activity that has a grip of the young person, and deliver that wraparound support as urgently as possible.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East once again for securing this debate, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to her powerful calls for best practice, scrutiny and oversight, and for making sure that children in custody are recognised and treated as children.

3.33 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to respond to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). I am especially grateful to her for the way she continues to bring issues relating to the rights and protection of children in police custody to the attention of this House.

All Members have spoken about the vital element of trust and confidence in policing, which I am absolutely sure we all share. I want to put on the record my thanks to our police officers in every force across the country. Although we all understand and recognise some of the incidents of substandard and unsatisfactory practice—alleged, because these are often ongoing cases—that have been highlighted by Members, who are obviously doing a good job in raising the interests of their constituents, as we would expect, it is right to say that the vast majority of police officers in our country do an extremely good job under very difficult circumstances. Ultimately, the work they have to do in those types of situations is very sensitive. They have to navigate and make that judgment while balancing the rights of the child and the rights of the victims of the alleged crime. We all share in the collective endeavour to ensure that the criminal justice system supports that.

We have moved on from March, when I set out the criteria for police custody. Police custody is an important element of our criminal justice system. Being able to question suspects in the controlled environment of the custody suite is instrumental to progressing criminal investigations and to bringing offenders to justice, protecting victims and keeping everybody safe. Forgive me, Mr Hollobone, as I forgot to thank the Members who contributed and made excellent speeches, particularly

[*Rachel Maclean*]

the hon. Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe). I will pick up their points in the course of my speech.

Children should be detained in custody only when absolutely necessary and when there is no other practical alternative. They are rightly acknowledged—this Government agree and stand behind this—as a protected group with specific needs and vulnerabilities. For that reason, opportunities to divert them away from police custody should always be considered first as a priority.

I very much welcome the comments from the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who spoke about the excellent work done by the violence reduction units in her area. However, they are national schemes and I think House would be interested to know a little bit more about that work. I will not go into a huge amount of detail because time prevents me, but this is a truly groundbreaking, long-term project, and a Conservative Government initiative. My officials will correct me if I am wrong, but I think we have committed £500 million over a very long period to work out, as she said, which initiatives and practices actually work to divert young people away from crime and prevent them from getting involved in the first place.<sup>1</sup> I think we can all agree that it is an incredibly compassionate approach.

We want to ensure that perpetrators are dealt with appropriately and that sentencing is tougher and meets the needs of the public, but we also want to look at the vulnerabilities of young people and understand why they are drawn into crime in the first place. That is why this detailed work is taking place across the country—and, as the hon. Lady highlighted, in her own area—working in a granular way with local agencies that know their communities and those children best. I strongly encourage any Member who is interested in youth justice, prevention of crime and a social justice approach to visit their violence reduction unit if they have one in their area, to learn more about that.

Turning back to the issue at hand, custody procedures and police decision making in custody are, quite rightly, subject to scrutiny and oversight. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services regularly inspects police custody suites, monitors the treatment and welfare of detainees in custody, and makes recommendations for police forces and partners. We expect forces to take those recommendations seriously and to take action to address issues in response.

In 2017, as Members have referenced, the Government changed the law so that children aged 17 were entitled to the specific safeguards intended for children under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. These include a legal requirement for an appropriate adult to be present for interviews and strip searches to ensure their rights are protected. Officers must consider a child's age and welfare when deciding whether to arrest them.

Members raised a number of specific comments, concerns and complaints. Many of them fall under the category of cases that are currently going through legal proceedings, but it is fair to say that this Government and the public rightly expect the highest standards from our police officers. The ability of police to perform their core functions of tackling crime and keeping the public safe is dependent on their capacity to maintain the

confidence of the public. That is why we take the reports of these incidents extremely seriously. We have the safeguarding structures and the scrutiny in place.

Several recent incidents have been referred to the IOPC, which is investigating or determining whether an independent investigation is required. That work is ongoing and I cannot say more at this point. It is an independent body and must be allowed to carry out its work free of political influence. The Government's role, however, is to consider any recommendations for legislation or policy change carefully. I think I can say, without prejudicing anything, that, in the case of child Q, the IOPC has served four officers of the Metropolitan police with notices of gross misconduct. That means that they are being investigated for alleged misconduct that is such a serious breach of professional standards that it could warrant dismissal if proven.

I welcome the comments of Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. He released a statement following the publication of the child Q safeguarding report outlining his concerns about cultural issues within the Met police to which some Members have referred. It is the Mayor's responsibility in his function as police and crime commissioner for London, supported by the deputy Mayor for policing and crime, to hold the Met police to account for delivering the necessary improvements.

I note that the Met has put a robust plan in place, in the light of the incidents, which includes adultification training for all officers in the central east command unit, which covers Hackney and Tower Hamlets, reviewing the policy on further searches of children to ensure that it recognises that the child in such circumstances might be a vulnerable victim of exploitation—a point made well by the hon. Member for Halifax—and introducing new measures, so that an inspector must now give authority before a search takes place to ensure appropriate oversight. Furthermore, a Merlin report has to be submitted to ensure that safeguarding of the child is a priority.

Often in these debates, the problems and concerns are outlined and the challenge to the Government is to do more. We all understand the delicate balance in this country between the operational independence of the police and the important role played by police and crime commissioners, elected by their communities, with their various important powers. We do not shy away from acting where we need to, but we will also shine a light on all those other important individuals who have a responsibility to deliver on some of these serious failings.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Minister rightly points out the independent role that the IOPC has to play, but the key point here is about children in custody, safeguarding and prevention. Frankly, we should all be striving for cases not needing to go there, because the incidents should not be happening in the first place. She talked about what the Met is doing, but this is a national issue. Does she agree that there needs to be a review of how the policing of black children is taking place?

**Rachel Maclean:** I will come on to the point that the hon. Lady made about black children, but I hope she heard my earlier comments about the importance that the Government place on prevention. That is the reason for the hundreds of millions of pounds we are spending over the long term on violence reduction units, to look at what actually works in this space to prevent young

1. [Official Report, 29 June 2022, Vol. 717, c. 4MC.]

children from being drawn into knife crime, gang culture and a life of crime. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, did someone wish to intervene?

**Claudia Webbe:** Obviously, the Minister was referring to the policing of black children, not the criminalisation of black children.

**Rachel Maclean:** I will move on in my speech and address those points.

Turning to the issue of children being detained in police cells, whether they are black or any other ethnicity, looking at the system as a whole, I am pleased to say that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services reports that its custody inspections show a decrease in the number of children held in custody in recent years. I think we can all agree that that is positive, although we must continue to keep that under review.

We take our responsibilities towards children in detention seriously. Those aged under 18 should not be treated in the same way as adults in the criminal justice system. They should not be placed in a cell or be allowed to associate with an adult detainee in any circumstances. We are clear that all new custody suites must be designed with the capability to allow separation of adult males, adult females and children.

Members have made reference to data in their speeches. I can tell the House that the Home Office will publish data on strip searches in custody for the first time this year as part of a wider custody collection, which will greatly increase transparency and accountability. We anticipate that this collection will ultimately become mandatory.

**Marsha De Cordova:** Will the Minister give way on that point?

**Rachel Maclean:** I will just finish my point, as I may well be answering the question. We are exploring with forces the feasibility of collecting more detailed data on thorough searches following stop and search to complement this. A number of datasets are part of this work. One such set could well be the time taken for appropriate adults to be present, as the hon. Member for Battersea referred to in her speech.

**Marsha De Cordova:** On the point about data collection and strip searches, as it stands, a strip search will take place where there has been an arrest, and that data is recorded. A strip search could also take place where there has not been an arrest, and that data is currently not mandatorily recorded. Could the Minister confirm that that is now going to be the case?

**Rachel Maclean:** I will write to the hon. Member on that point. As I am sure she knows, the Minister who would normally be responding to this debate is the Minister for Crime and Policing, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). He has the knowledge and policy expertise on all these matters, and I am sure he would be able to answer the hon. Lady were he not in the main Chamber. We will absolutely write to the hon. Lady to update her on those points.

The hon. Member for Battersea referred to levels of trust in police among ethnic minorities and young people in particular. She is right that recent incidents have raised some serious issues within the police, and it is right that the Government ask difficult questions to drive positive change. Our police are more diverse than ever before. Forces have worked hard to improve community engagement, and we have seen major improvements in the way the police deal with racist crime. However, we still know that there is much more to do. That is why attracting more officers from a wide range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds is a core ambition of our drive to recruit an extra 20,000 officers.

As we set out in the "Inclusive Britain" report, the Government and policing partners will create a new national framework for how the use of police powers such as stop and search is scrutinised at a local level. We will also explore sharing body-worn video footage with scrutiny panels and removing unnecessary barriers to its use to increase community oversight. I welcome the Ministry of Justice's support for a project with the National Police Chiefs' Council to develop scrutiny panels on the use of strip search with the aim of addressing the difference in experience of ethnic minority children and adults in police custody. I am sure the hon. Lady can agree with and welcome this significant programme of work to tackle some of the concerns she has raised.

I would like to respond to a few more specific points. Before I do, I want to thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his thoughtful contribution. He is right that we have no direct oversight of police forces in his constituency, but his suggestion that I meet with my counterpart in Northern Ireland is an extremely good one. He has form in filling up my diary, because the last time I responded to a debate he spoke in, I was a transport Minister and I had a really productive conversation with my counterpart in Northern Ireland, so I am happy to do that again.

Members have referred to the issue of the detention clock, the timing of it and the work done by Dr Miranda Bevan and Dr Vicky Kemp. The Home Office is fully aligned and engaged with this work. This is a complex issue, as I am sure Members will understand. We meet frequently with police, solicitors and wider stakeholders. Dr Kemp has addressed these meetings with updates on the findings, and we are committed to considering the final outcomes carefully. Of course, we will take Dr Kemp's recommendations very seriously.

I was asked about legal advice and whether it should be an opt-in or opt-out pilot. We would all have the view that children should be prioritised for in-person legal advice. I know that colleagues in the MOJ are running a pilot scheme, which I understand is being trialled by the Metropolitan police. That is very important because of the significant representation of arrested ethnic minority children. That pilot is ongoing, and it will be important to look at how it progresses, take lessons from that and see what the implications are for national policing.

I think I have addressed all the key points raised by Members, Mr Hollobone, but obviously they are always free to write to me about any specific points of details. To finish, this is a really important and sensitive area. I thank Members for the way in which they have raised the concerns of their constituents and communities.



[*Rachel Maclean*]

We take the issue very seriously and we recognise that there is a lot of work to do in this space. I hope Members are reassured that we understand and prioritise the issue. We are funding the police to do their job. We look at policy areas where things are failing, but we also recognise that the police have an incredibly difficult to job to do. I again thank the hon. Member for Lewisham East for her consistent advocacy for vulnerable children.

3.51 pm

**Janet Daby:** I thank everybody who participated in this afternoon's debate. All hon. Members, including the Government and Opposition spokespeople, spoke comprehensively. Many issues were touched on, but the thread that ran through everybody's contribution was the need to safeguard the wellbeing of young people, children and minors.

I was particularly struck by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). She spoke about a young person who had been held in a custody cell for 23 hours and then discharged without being charged with any offence. Young people who are arrested by the police are sometimes not charged at all because no evidence is found that they have committed a crime.

I have worked closely with the police in previous jobs and have had brilliant professional relationships with police officers. I do not believe that anybody comes to work to do a bad job; I think everybody goes to work to do a good job, including the police, but people do not always have the tools or training they need to do that or the policies in place to enable that. There is room for change, which I will mention briefly in the time I have left.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution and comments, which were very meaningful. He mentioned the rights of children and

that a 10-year-old child is still learning about what is right and what is wrong. Those children may not have the ability to say whether they need legal representation or not, but they absolutely need it.

The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) spoke about young people needing to be protected and about preventing overnight detention, as well as being an advocate for safeguards to be in place for strip searches.

I welcome the Minister's comments about what is happening in regard to strip searches. I would be interested to see the information she offered to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea to clarify if it relates to all strip searches; it is an issue we need to be open and transparent about. I was interested to hear about the Government's work to prevent the adultification of young people, as well as about the new design for custody suites.

The main point of the debate was about the detention of children and about appropriate adults. As I mentioned, successful child trials have been rolled out with the Met. I press the Minister and the Government to look at that trial to see whether it could be pushed forward across the Met and other police forces to ensure that children are not detained longer than necessary. I also press them to consider minimising that stay from 24 hours to 12, to look at the whole legal aid system, in order to ensure that all children can access legal aid, and to consider the opt-out system.

Thank you very much for your time, Mr Hollobone.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Thank you for yours.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the rights of children while in police custody.

## Dead Crustaceans (North-East Coast)

3.55 pm

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** We are going to move straight on to the next debate. Will Members who are leaving please do so quickly and quietly? We are going to discuss the important issue of dead crustaceans on the north-east coast.

**Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered dead crustaceans on the North East coast.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Mr Hollobone. I seem to get you in the Chair quite a lot when I have debates. It is good to see you there.

Our fishing industry in north-east England has been dealt a huge blow in recent months, with catches decimated and businesses on the edge of ruin. The mass die-offs and the reason behind them have been causing serious concern along the north-east coast since the first dead sea creatures were discovered in the early morning of 6 October last year.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has held several calls with local MPs and I recognise its efforts to engage with us. However, there is still a huge amount of concern among our constituents, many of whom feel that the Government have not gone far enough in their investigations and that it is high time Ministers stepped up and provided some financial support to the industries that have been so severely impacted.

DEFRA has not updated its conclusions since last November, when it settled on the hypothesis that a rare algal bloom had caused the deaths. Even then, it was reported that DEFRA had not found one single causative factor, but rather that:

“A harmful algal bloom present in the area coincident with the event was identified as of significance.”

I am aware that the investigation by the Environment Agency, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and the Marine Management Organisation did examine other possibilities, such as licensed dredging, chemical contamination, activities related to offshore wind farms and aquatic animal disease. The investigation was closed after live and healthy crabs and other crustaceans were found in more recent catches.

However, the die-offs are still ongoing. We had one last December, another this February and a big one in April, with the most recent one occurring just two weeks ago. There is a real sense among the communities affected that the Department has not addressed the later die-offs, especially as the algal bloom was not definitively identified as the cause even back in the autumn.

It was for that reason that I wrote last month to the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is here today, requesting that the inquiry be reopened. To my deep disappointment, my request was refused by her colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I have therefore brought the issue to this Chamber in the hope that the voices of the affected communities will now be listened to.

The local fishing industry are still reporting higher than average amounts of dead crustaceans in its catches. I am told that fishermen from Hartlepool, Redcar and Whitby are still returning negligible catches from our inshore waters. Just last week, a crew set off from Hartlepool with 50 pots to catch lobsters. When they retrieved the pots, there were only four lobsters; of those four, only one was alive. I heard of another crew whose total catch was one crab and seven lobsters. Again, three lobsters were dead and two of the living lobsters were on their backs, already dying.

Considering those numbers, it seems that the decision to close the investigation was premature, and that it is possible that there is more to this issue than the hypothesised algal bloom—something the North East Fishing Collective also believes to be the case.

**Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** This is a very interesting debate that applies not only to the north-east but the whole UK coastline. I am not convinced that an algal bloom is responsible for the deaths of thousands of these creatures. Contamination by a chemical such as pyridine is a likely cause; it is not a chemical that is routinely examined or inspected for by the Environment Agency, but it could be the cause of the problem. Does the hon. Gentleman concur?

**Alex Cunningham:** I am grateful for the hon. Member's intervention, and will mention that very chemical later in my speech.

Our local fishing industry, which was already in a perilous state as a result of Brexit and the pandemic, deserves more robust answers from the Government. Will the Minister explain to our fishing communities why DEFRA will not reopen the investigation? As she knows, many in the fishing community believe that the cause of the die-offs may be linked to the dredging of the Tees in connection with the establishment of the Tees freeport, which is potentially stirring up historical pollutants. With a further 2 million tonnes of sediment licensed to be dredged from the Tees this summer and dumped at sea, can the Minister explain why the decontamination and repurposing of that sediment is not being considered, when no definitive cause of the die-offs has been established and dredging has remained a constant over the past nine months?

Indeed, some have suggested a direct link between the location and timings of the dredging by the UKD Orca and the die-offs. To that end, can the Minister confirm whether the spoil site where 250,000 tonnes of dredged sediment was dumped by the UKD Orca between 26 September 2021 and 5 October 2021 has been sampled and tested? I am aware of the Department's response, which says that dredged material

“must meet the highest international standards protecting marine life”

before it can be disposed of at sea, but there are concerns that those standards are not robust enough, and that they allow the companies that want to dispose of that material too much latitude in the collection of samples. My understanding is that such sampling happens every few years, and there is no specific sampling at the sites people believe may be connected with the die-offs. I recognise that the Department has far greater expertise in this area than I do, but the fact is that the local community is still grasping for answers.

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some important points regarding this issue, which is of significant concern for the whole of the Tees valley community, not least myself and my constituents. Could he illustrate for us what efforts he has made to discuss this issue with the port authority, PD Ports?

**Alex Cunningham:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention. I have not personally discussed the issue with PD Ports—perhaps its representatives would like to contact me so that we can have that discussion—but the important thing is that the Government take the lead and sort out the issues in the Tees valley. Perhaps the hon. Member will join me in calling for compensation, or at least some assistance, for the fisherpeople who are losing their businesses as a result of what is happening in that area.

It may well be that the hypothesised algal bloom is the primary factor causing the marine deaths, but it strikes me that too much un-investigated evidence is being peddled about. Another theory is the potential leakage of weed killer from the MV *Stora Korsnäs* Link 1, which sank off the coast of Saltburn in 1991 just before the by-election that saw Ashok Kumar elected to this House.

While I am not suggesting that any one thing is the definitive causative factor, there is enough evidence to warrant further inquiries, and our local fishing community agrees. The Government must engage further with our communities' concerns, and if they are sure that dredging is not the issue, provide evidence definitively proving that to be the case. Instead, fishermen have been left to crowdfund independent reports because they cannot get the Government to answer their questions. When that is put in the context of our fishing communities' reduced income as a result of Brexit, covid and the die-offs, it is appalling that the Government have left them having to pay out of their own pockets for the answers their industry needs to survive.

I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on the work of Tim Deere-Jones, an independent marine pollution consultant with 30 years' experience, who has suggested that the cause is linked to the chemical pyridine, quantities of which were more than 70 times higher in crab samples taken from Saltburn and Seaton than a control sample from Penzance. In the words of Mr Deere-Jones,

"How Defra has not seen that and felt it requires further investigation, I don't know".

It is vital that further action is taken soon. The reports of last year's impact on the marine landscape of the Tees estuary and the coasts of the north-east of England are horrifying. We are blessed with a beautiful and diverse marine landscape off our coast, but it is being decimated. Just last month, piles of crabs, lobsters, razor clams and dried seaweed formed on the beaches at South Gare and along the coast to Saltburn, an area popular with my constituents, as well as others further afield. As local marine rescuer, Sally Bunce, put it,

"It's a dead zone. Fishermen in Saltburn have also reported pulling pots that are full of black silt."

Sally first got involved in this cause because she rescues seals. She told me that most seal pups have starved to death this year. In their first months, they feed off sea life on the seabed but, because of these mass die-offs, there was nothing there. She rescued seal pups

that, at four months old, should have been 35 kilograms, but were 15 kilograms. Sadly, some of them were too far gone to be rescued and rehabilitated. This year, 14 porpoises have washed up dead in a period of 10 weeks, which is a huge increase on normal numbers.

I understand that the Department did not provide funding for toxicology tests to be carried out on the porpoises. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain, given the circumstances, why it was not thought such a report would be needed. I am also interested to hear from the Minister of any investigation her Department has carried out on the effects of this prolonged mass mortality on the full range of regional marine wildlife. If what has been done so far has been insufficient, will she commit to a full investigation of the range of issues affecting our marine environment?

Scuba divers who dive off the coast from Marske have reported that areas that used to be full of wildlife are now desolate, and even the seaweed bleached white at the ends. Although the destruction of marine life is already devastating from an environmental perspective, the impact it is having on the fishing industry in the north-east could be terminal.

I have already shared cases of diminishing shellfish catches, and those where the lobsters are already dead. In the first die-off in October, the local fishing industry reported a 95% decline in the lobster and crab catch. The picture is truly catastrophic. There have also been reports from fishermen that they have caught flounder that have been covered in blisters. It is not good enough for the Government to sit back and let this fishing industry die. It will be yet another Tees industry that the Tories have seen over the edge, just like they did with our steel industry. The Government cannot level up our country if they turn a blind eye, and simply allow the industries and communities such as ours to die away.

I have been calling for a support package for the fishermen since February. Back then, the Department said it was not considering compensation. I wonder whether now, as issues remain ongoing, the Minister will reconsider her Department's position and provide vital support for the north-east's decimated fishing industry. The hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) raised the matter at Prime Minister's questions earlier this month. I want to ensure that it is clearly on the record that the £100 million that the Prime Minister referred to in his reply is not new money to support the fishermen in response to this crisis, but the existing £100 million of the UK seafood fund that was announced in early 2021, before the die-offs had even begun.

That sum was to support the industry because of the financial losses it has suffered as a result of the Government's bungled Brexit. We need additional funds to be identified to support the industry given this new challenge. I hope the Minister can commit today to consider such a support package. If the Department is unable to provide such a package, I wonder whether the Tees Valley Mayor has the powers, if he is willing to provide some form of support, to ensure that we do not lose the few remaining fishing boats from Teesside and Hartlepool.

Our industries desperately need support and they deserve more definitive answers. The Government need to pay more attention to this ongoing crisis. They cannot continue to stick their heads in the sand and hope that the situation will resolve itself. We want our seas back



and we want our fishing industry back. I hope that the Minister gives our local communities' concerns the attention and respect that they deserve.

4.10 pm

**Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate on an issue that has been at the forefront of all our minds since October last year.

I should start by drawing attention to the fact that, as the MP for Redcar, I sit on the boards of both Teesworks and the Teesside freeport. I do not get paid to perform those roles; I sit on the boards to advocate for my constituents. However, I will first tackle the myth that has been spread online that somehow Teesworks, the freeport and, by implication, the Tees Valley Mayor are linked to dredging in the River Tees.

The Tees Valley Mayor has no control, legislative remit or authority over any of the Tees mouth. PD Ports is the statutory harbour authority and organises dredging activities. No dredging has taken place as part of the Teesside freeport, Teesworks or the South Bank Quay project, and any and all dredging must be done in accordance with the requirements and related regulations of the Marine Management Organisation, as has always been the case with all the dredging on the River Tees that has happened since the year dot.

I think it is a misconception to get lost in a conversation about dredging, because we know that contaminants exist in the riverbed. That is why sampling is undertaken before any dredging takes place; it is also why dredging that does not meet the requirements of disposal at sea is dealt with separately and handled onshore. While, as the hon. Member for Stockton North said, the joint investigation into the mass death of crabs has not been able to come to an absolute conclusion—no such investigation would ever be able to do that—it has been able to rule out chemical pollution and dredging as the likely cause of the crustacean die-off.

I am not a scientist. I am not trained in marine biology; nor is the hon. Member for Stockton North, and nor, indeed, is the Minister. We are here as politicians, to ask the pressing questions that need to be asked, to challenge ideas that are presented to us, and to accept the evidence when it is provided in an independent way, as is being done by the Environment Agency, the Marine Management Organisation, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, and every other organisation involved in this case. If someone thinks that all those organisations would somehow conspire to hide the real cause of these crustacean deaths, they must be having a laugh. That would not happen. Why would all these leading scientists come together to try to cover this up in some way? That does not make sense.

Instead of going down that route and accepting the evidence for it, my plea to the Minister is that she continues to ask challenging questions of those organisations but that the real message that she should take away—this is something that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Stockton North—is the huge impact that this mass-mortality event has had on towns and communities such as Redcar, Whitby and Hartlepool. If we are to

have a fishing industry in towns such as mine, it is vital that the Government extend support when we are faced with these freak acts of nature.

As the hon. Member said, when I raised this issue at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister highlighted the UK seafood fund, but we need to know how the Government will help the fishermen in Redcar today. Redcar originated as a fishing village in the 14th century; people have fished in Redcar for more than 700 years. Will the Minister please go away and consider what further help could be available for a community such as mine, to ensure that the thousands of crab deaths off our coast do not lead to the death of a 700-year-old industry?

4.13 pm

**The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I, too, thank the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young); together with my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson), he asks me almost daily whether I have an update on this issue, which is very important for their constituents. It is fair to say that the mass wash-up of dead crabs and lobsters in the Tees area last winter had a really significant effect, both on the local community as a whole and on the fishing industry.

The Environment Agency led the initial emergency response with the support of others, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs then co-ordinating a multi-agency response involving the EA, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, the Marine Management Organisation, the Food Standards Agency and the UK Health Security Agency.

It must be remembered that we really did not know what was causing the mass mortality. Extensive testing, research and analysis followed, which included testing for chemicals and other pollutants such as pyridine, dredging activity, disease, and seismic activity. In summary, no chemicals tested were identified at levels that would explain the cause of the mortality. A harmful algal bloom that was present in the area at the time was shown in the satellite imagery and confirmed by the consistent detection of algal toxins in the washed-up dead crabs and lobsters.

The Government experts' joint report on those findings was published last month, and I hope that the hon. Member for Stockton North received it. It was published only on 31 May, not at the end of last year. Although we concluded that the most likely cause was the harmful algal bloom, we may never know for sure what caused the event. I will go on to detail the continuing testing, and I undertake to keep the hon. Gentleman informed as that process is gone through.

Our focus now is to understand the impact that the event has had on shellfish stocks in the region, and to try to monitor the recovery. We are also doing a very wide-ranging piece of work to better understand the impact of algal bloom on crustaceans. In a really important step forward, Government technical leads met industry-commissioned researchers last week to share knowledge gained from the work completed so far. There should be

[*Victoria Prentis*]

no suggestion that two different bodies of science are being created out of this industry, because it is really important that we pool resources, work together and are completely transparent in what we find. We also met to discuss planned university and DEFRA-commissioned research, and I am pleased that we are able to do that together. We will continue to share our findings and work collectively with all the experts wherever we can.

The EA is carrying out monthly sampling and testing of the water quality, and it continues to monitor water in the Tees as part of its normal programme. CEFAS is contributing to work on algal blooms and parasites in crustaceans, and it is also undertaking work to further understand the science, including that of pyridine. That is due to be completed in March 2023. It is a really large body of work, which will help us to interpret the scientific findings of the incident in 2021. I hope that it will also increase the suite of analytical tools that we have across DEFRA to respond should any such incident occur again.

**Alex Cunningham:** I appreciate the Minister's response and I know of the terrible constraints, but this situation has now lasted nine months. Just two weeks ago, we had another incident. A few weeks before that, we had a major incident. I do not know whether the same cause is to blame every time, but what is happening to identify whether there is an ongoing cause? What is going to happen to the fishermen?

**Victoria Prentis:** I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am being kept informed weekly by my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool and for Redcar, and by my own officials, who are monitoring the situation very closely. If I may, I will continue to set out the work that we are doing on testing, because it shows how seriously we are taking the issue.

We are waiting for a report associated with some of the parasite findings in the lobster samples that we took recently. CEFAS is actively investigating the intelligence that some of the lobsters have been found to be heavily parasitised, and it is examining them very carefully. The EA continues to monitor the water, including by conducting chlorophyll and phytoplankton sampling, as well as chemical sampling. The North Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Association continues to monitor the health of shellfish stocks by following trends in catch and effort reporting, actively working on survey pots, conducting observer trips onboard fishing vessels and on the quayside, and supporting any additional biological sampling and testing work that is undertaken by other lead organisations. For the sake of completeness, I will say that the MMO is satisfied that the disposal of dredge material has been carried out in accordance with sampling guidelines set out under OSPAR.

**Alex Cunningham:** Will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am just moving on to dredging on the Tees.

Dredging has been taking place for many years. It is essential to maintain navigational safety and access to ports and other facilities, and it plays a fundamental part in the operation of local businesses. It has been ruled out as a likely cause of the wash-up.

Before a marine licence is granted, samples of dredge materials must be tested. The MMO has looked at the test results before and after the dredging. The sampling of sediment licensed by the MMO for disposal to the designated sites of the Tees confirmed that no chemical determinants exceeded levels of concentrations that would be harmful to marine life. A further review found no evidence of a link between the disposal of dredged sediment and the mass crustacean deaths. The Environment Agency could not find anything of note in its testing, either. Sediment that is going to be dredged in the Tees is tested and sampled at least every three years prior to the dredging, and the MMO found nothing in the dredging sphere that would explain the deaths.

**Alex Cunningham:** The Minister referred to the three-yearly testing. I want to understand whether there has been any specific testing of that dredge material in the last nine months—since we have had this problem.

**Victoria Prentis:** I would be delighted to share with the hon. Gentleman the information that we have already shared with the scientists not related to the Government who are involved in the work. We have shared with them absolutely everything that we feel could be relevant, because it is very important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar said, that no conspiracy theories abound.

**Jacob Young:** To help the Minister out slightly, the joint agency report from May states clearly:

“Testing of sediment at the Inner Tees disposal site has already taken place in April 2021 and there was no evidence of significantly elevated contaminants in sediment”.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes. The point I was making is that we have shared all these findings; they are not in any way being kept secret. I completely accept why the local community is very distressed; it was an extremely distressing event. I understand that there are further crustacean deaths taking place from time to time. People locally are extremely worried by that, and that is understandable. However, it is important that we look at this with an open mind, and that scientists are able to share the evidence and work together to try to establish why on earth it has occurred.

I also understand that the local fishing industry has been put under enormous pressure during the last eight or nine months. It is not our normal practice to pay compensation when natural events occur, as they do annually all around the country. For example, very sadly, we have to close fisheries from time to time when stocks become unavailable. We are not currently considering compensation, but I am very willing to work with colleagues—I have extended this offer to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar already—to see whether there are items or infrastructure bids in the UK seafood fund that would be suitable for the local communities. Members may wish to work together, as a group, to see whether there is something that we can do through that considerable fund to help the local community.

If I might slightly correct the hon. Member for Stockton North, the UK seafood fund was not in any way meant to compensate for the trade and co-operation agreement; instead, it was to get the industry ready for the fishing opportunities of the future and for the

increased quota that has come our way following Brexit. It is very much a fund that looks to the future, and I would be very keen to meet any of the hon. Members present to discuss how best we can look into how that works for their area.

Last month, I visited Hartlepool and met my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool, the MMO, the inshore fisheries and conservation authority and a very helpful representative from the local fishing industry. Together, we looked at some dead crustaceans and spoke about the recent reports and the future of the investigation. My officials have been meeting the various agencies weekly to share intelligence and assess the situation, and the officials with me today would be delighted to speak to any hon. Member after the debate, to allay fears wherever possible.

Clearly, this situation has not yet been put to bed; we need to continue to monitor and assess. The report was a substantial and serious piece of work but I know that concerns remain locally—I hear and understand colleagues when they say that that is very much the case. I will therefore convene a meeting to update MPs when more of the evidence that I described earlier is available to us. I reassure all colleagues present that we keep this issue very much at the top of our agenda.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Derby County Football Club

4.27 pm

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** We are going to move straight on to the next debate, so would all those Members who are not participating please be courteous enough to leave quickly and quietly because we come on to the important issue of the administration of Derby County football club.

**Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the administration of Derby County Football Club.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. At the outset, I would like to thank the Minister for his support and for his willingness to discuss this issue with local MPs. That has really been appreciated.

Last week marked nine months since Derby County entered administration on 22 September 2021—nine months of pain and uncertainty for Rams fans, who have shown so much devotion and dedication to the club during this, the toughest of all seasons. Since September we have seen a string of deadlines set, and missed, by Derby administrators Quantuma and the English Football League. We had an urgent question on the Floor of the House in January because the EFL had set a deadline of 1 February for the club to exit administration. That, like every other deadline throughout the process, was missed and the administrators were allowed to delay again.

In April we finally got the news we were waiting for: a preferred bidder, Chris Kirchner, was announced. We were told on 3 May that it was “almost done”, on 14 May that it was “almost complete”, and on 27 May that they would be closing by the end of the month. On 2 June, we were told that the delays were nothing to worry about and that UK and US bank holidays were preventing the bank transfer, which no one on either side of this multimillion pound deal had apparently foreseen or planned for. All along, the administrators had assured Team Derby—made up of Members of Parliament, councillors and local stakeholders—that nothing was wrong and that Kirchner’s deal would be completed.

Two weeks ago, it was announced via the media, rather than a direct communication from the administrators, that Kirchner had pulled out. Quantuma had made a terrible miscalculation in giving Chris Kirchner 65 days of exclusivity, which could have been spent seeking other, more credible buyers. Those 65 days have come at an absolutely crucial time for the club. We really are at one minute to midnight. Derby has only seven players contracted for next season, and the EFL has not yet lifted the transfer ban. Derby needs to be able to sell season tickets and agree sponsorship and commercial deals, and there are just weeks to go until next season.

In a spark of good news, local businessman David Clowes has been announced as the new preferred bidder and, crucially, has already acquired Pride Park, the stadium, so he is in a good place to finalise his deal. We very much hope he is able to conclude the sale of the club by tomorrow, Wednesday the 29th, but Derby fans have been here before and will not believe it is over until the ink has dried on the contract.



[Mrs Pauline Latham]

However, it was also announced this week that our inspirational manager, Wayne Rooney, who has given his all to the club over the past year, has left. He fought against all the odds to rescue us from relegation. Despite a transfer ban and a 21-point deduction, he very nearly achieved that feat. Without our points deduction, Derby would have finished comfortably out of the relegation zone, in 17th place. I thank Wayne for all he has done for Derby County. We understand the difficulties and challenges he faced. Rams fans will be giving all our support to interim manager, Liam Rosenior, who has supported Wayne throughout the past year and now has the chance to lead the team forward and hopefully eventually back to the championship and beyond.

With all that context in mind, I have three main points I would like the Minister to respond to. My first relates to the conduct of the administrators, Quantuma. For some time, I have been very concerned about its competence in handling a business of Derby's size. It took more than a month to work out that Kirchner was not able to provide the funds he promised. There are reports that it failed to communicate effectively with other interested buyers, and it has therefore run the club dangerously close to the edge of liquidation over the past nine months.

Furthermore, Quantuma's manner of communication with local stakeholders through Team Derby has been incredibly poor. It has constantly told us that it is on the edge of breakthroughs, which never materialised. Our weekly updates barely had any new information. Quantuma refused to discuss key matters, on the grounds of commercial sensitivity, only for those matters to appear in the newspapers the next day. It is reported that Quantuma racked up more than £2 million in costs in the first six months of the administration. Its latest response to supporters' groups assures us that no fees have been drawn so far, but not that it will not be taking them out of the sale proceeds.

It appears to me that the conduct of the administrators has fallen far short of what Derby County has a right to expect. However, there are no fans' voices in this process. Fans have had no say in who the new owners of Derby County will be, and the administrators have failed time and again to communicate clearly with the fans.

**Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on her and other local MPs' tremendous efforts and leadership in championing the needs and future of Derby Town. This fate could befall any football club or any large sports club. She reflected on the conduct of the administrator. Does she have some suggestions for the Minister about how the process could be improved? We all look at our local football clubs and do not want to see a similar situation occurring. If it does, we want to make sure that the situation can be remedied as quickly as possible.

**Mrs Latham:** I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. I must correct him: it is Derby County, not Derby Town. Yes, this is a problem that could happen to any club at any time and in later remarks I will address what could be done.

The fans and the club deserve so much better. Can the Sports Minister update us as to how best we can hold Quantuma to account? In particular, how would he expect administrators to consult and communicate effectively with fans during a sale process? Furthermore what, specifically, will the Sports Minister do to ensure that Quantuma is acting in the best interests of Derby's fans? The club is not out of the woods yet and I have lost all confidence in Quantuma. Therefore, I call on the Sports Minister and the Secretary of State to take a close interest and ensure that the interests of Derby fans are represented in what are hopefully the very final stages of the sale to Clowes Developments Ltd.

My second point relates to the English Football League, which has an important role in saving Derby County. It is responsible for the particular set of insolvency rules that govern football clubs and for resolving disputes between clubs. Unfortunately, its apparent desire to take a back seat has been very damaging to Derby County. The well-publicised claims by other clubs made Derby a much less appealing prospect for potential buyers, particularly given the EFL's refusal to confirm that those claims did not amount to football debts, which need to be paid in full. It was only after Chris Kirchner pulled out of the process two weeks ago that the EFL finally announced it would amend its position and become fully involved in the process of finding a buyer alongside Quantuma. That is far too late and should have taken place much earlier in the process.

In addition to assisting with the negotiations with interested parties, there are other key actions that the EFL can take that would help Derby County fans. First, it must lift the ban on Derby signing and re-signing players. With just weeks until the start of the season, Liam Rosenior has only seven players to choose from. The EFL must immediately allow Derby to sign players or at least to re-sign existing squad members to contract extensions. Secondly, fans have been squarely behind Derby County throughout the whole process. They have turned up to matches, and the grounds have been at capacity. However, fans have not yet been able to buy season tickets for next season, which not only hurts them but reduces the income for the club at a time when it is so desperately needed.

Derby County is a founder member of the English Football League, which has treated our club and our fans poorly, when it should be doing everything possible to ensure that the club is not liquidated and has enough players to compete in League One next season. What discussions has the Sports Minister had with the EFL to ensure that Derby fans are not punished, that they will be able to get season tickets for the upcoming season and that the club will be able to field a full side for its opening games? The EFL has been incredibly slow to step in and oversee Quantuma's work. What assurances has the Minister received that it will be much more active in securing the future of one of its member clubs going forward?

My final point relates to the actions that we can take in this place. So much of the situation could have been avoided if the recommendations from the fan-led review into football governance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) has championed, had been implemented already. The

hon. Lady sends her apologies; she desperately wanted to be here and support Derby and its fans, but she has been held up.

Creating a new independent regulator for football governance requires primary legislation. An independent regulator is needed so that fans' voices are heard throughout the process to ensure that the right people are in charge of football clubs. Football clubs are not just commercial assets or businesses; they are community assets of huge sporting, cultural, economic and historical value to the local area—no club more so than Derby County, an historic founder member of English football. It has fans not only across the region, but across the world, and its game days provide an economic boost to Derby and the east midlands.

All too often in recent years, we have seen the effect on the local area of a football club going into administration. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) made the point eloquently during my urgent question in January about Bury football club. An independent regulator is desperately needed to ensure that the right people are in charge of football clubs and are meaningfully taking the views of fans into account. Please, for the sake of Derby fans, Bury fans and so many more, will the Minister confirm that that crucial legislation will be brought forward?

In conclusion, I have concerns—to which I would like the Minister to respond—about the administrators, the EFL and the fan-led review of football governance. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their participation in the debate. I know that the Minister will be able to see the strength of support for Derby County here in the Chamber. I also want him to be aware that other colleagues would have liked to contribute to the debate, but cannot because they are Whips or Ministers. None the less, they are still local Members of Parliament who have also been involved. Many Members support our cause, because if these things can happen to a club such as Derby County—a founder member of the Football League—they can happen to anyone.

I look forward to the Minister's response and hope for assurances that he and the Secretary of State will be taking a keen interest in the resolution of the administration over the next day or two—a resolution firmly in the interests of Rams fans.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** The full-time whistle on this debate goes at 5.30 pm; the half-time whistle, when we switch from Back Benchers to Front Benchers, is 5.07 pm. The guideline limits for the Front Benchers are 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and three minutes at the end for Pauline Latham to sum up the debate. So, for Back-Bench time until 5.07 pm, there will be a time limit of six minutes, which means that you all get to contribute. We are led to the kick-off by Dame Margaret Beckett.

4.43 pm

**Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to take part in this discussion under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am particularly mindful of your observations about time. Not least because of the admirably comprehensive case made by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), I shall be extremely brief.

My purpose in contributing to the debate is partly to express a degree of sympathy with the Minister, who has had his ear bent extensively over the weeks during which these unfortunate events have taken place. I say that not least because, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and given the existing legislative framework, he might feel that there is a limit to what he can contribute. However, primarily, I want wholeheartedly to endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire in calling for changes in the structures of football governance of the kind that have been recommended, which could make a considerable difference to how such events are handled.

I am one of the Members of this House who is not a lawyer, so it is always a bit of a surprise to discover to what extent, in handling legal matters, people are confined and restricted. It has certainly been a revelation to me to hear about the power that rested with the administrators and about the incapacity of any other player in this dispute to influence them in any way or even to gain reliable information.

I will not withhold from Members present that I for one—I am not alone in this—have grown impatient to a degree with the lack of information that has been made available. I recognise, of course, and I am very conscious of, the need for information to be properly held, maintained, respected and all of that. I do not need any lectures about that, but I would almost say that those who have sought on a cross-party basis to work with and support the club and its fans have on occasion been treated with contempt by a variety of people taking part in these discussions. That has been quite alarming, and I have every sympathy with those affected. The fans' organisation has been very powerful and enthusiastic—and, on the whole, incredibly polite, given the level of frustration the fans and all of us have experienced. They have held the interests of Derby County close to their heart, and I am sure they have bitten their tongues on many an occasion when they would have wished to express themselves forcefully.

As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire said, it is a source of great regret to us all that Wayne Rooney has not felt able to stay with the club. There is no criticism of any kind implied in that remark; I think we all recognise the debt owed to him and honour his willingness to stay for so long and to see the club through so many difficult times. I share the concerns that have been expressed about the role of the EFL, which has not always acted as one might hope.

In the early days, when we first became involved as a cross-party group in trying to support the club to move forward, it was often with, and in conversation with, the EFL that we got bogged down and not really able to make progress, because of considerations other than the specific circumstances of Derby County. I will not say any more about that, except to pick up on what was mentioned a few minutes ago about fans not being punished. I certainly felt during a large part of these proceedings that there were those who had various reasons for resentment against Derby County, including some who had been involved with it in the past. That is perhaps understandable, but it is a matter for them. I certainly felt that there was a very real likelihood—a danger, as we said—right at the outset of our involvement in all this of Derby County being the inadvertent victim of people's wish to penalise others for what they felt

[Margaret Beckett]

were their offences. That may or may not have been understandable, but the club and the fans were put at risk in a way that was inappropriate.

I share the view that we should look at football governance, and I hope the Minister will be able to tell us that that is something he and his colleagues can do.

4.49 pm

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett). I find myself wanting to agree with pretty much everything my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) said in her opening remarks. I thought she gave an eloquent and helpful walk-through of the timeline we have experienced in Derbyshire. I have to praise her in particular for never accepting no as an answer and for demanding constant meetings and updates. I think she has spearheaded the campaign on behalf of her constituents, Derby residents and all Rams fans. I cannot thank her enough on that front.

I sympathise with fans of Derby County, because it has been an incredibly stressful and difficult experience. I find myself wondering who puts fans first. We have talked about the administrators, and perhaps they have a particular job. We have talked about the fan-led review, which I will return to later. I also look at the EFL and ask: why is it there, who is it for and what does it do? I remember that in the urgent question the right hon. Member for Derby South hinted in that direction, and I agreed with her at the time. What would be the Minister's best defence for the EFL's existence? It feels like it puts fans at the bottom of the list. It has been a constant issue to get information and comms from it, and to try to work out what it is there for. I look optimistically to the fan-led review and a new regulator, as mentioned previously, in the hope that we may see something.

Football clubs up and down the country keep coming back to financial security issues and poor ownership. When I have a spare moment, I love football. I want football to thrive. Our communities all love football and love watching it. But we see the same situation over and over again, of teams that have been around for a long time—as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire outlined, founder clubs that have been around forever are pillars of their community—being completely undermined by unfit owners or unsuitable financial arrangements. We find ourselves in a very difficult cycle.

I look to the Minister and plead, as have others, for progress on legislation. We are in the right place, and the Minister in particular deserves considerable credit, and not only for what he has done with Derby County—not an insignificant amount—but because a lot of the information we have had is as a result of his efforts. I do not think it is a secret that he has joined meetings from the car, going from visit to visit, to try to keep us up to date. I praise him for his involvement, but we are in a slightly unsustainable position. For those of us who love the beautiful game, it is one that we do not want and that it is difficult to defend.

When this debate was originally called for, the situation on the ground was slightly different from where we are now. Other than Wayne Rooney's departure as manager,

we have a greater sense of optimism about the purchase of Pride Park and the preferred buyer. That should be reflected in the situation. We may have cause for hope—I really hope that is true.

I come back to the fans, the EFL and the financial situation because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire outlined, the number of players that Derby has for next season, the lack of season tickets and the lack of certainty is unfair. The Rams need whatever is left of the summer to build up, because they are not and should not be a league one club. They did not deserve to be relegated last season—it was unjust.

I find myself in total agreement with my colleagues, but perhaps with a harsher emphasis on the fact that I do not understand what the EFL does, why it does it and who it is for. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

4.53 pm

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate of huge local interest.

At this stage, the most constructive way to deal with this matter is to look at how we got here and what we can do to ensure that no club and no fans end up suffering the anguish that Derby fans have had to suffer over many months. We have to look at the historical actions of the English Football League, as mentioned by colleagues. There have been significant issues with its regulations. In 2016 an absolutely nonsensical regulation change relaxed the rules in order to allow clubs to sell their stadiums and still comply with the financial fair play regulations. I ask the Minister, what consideration did the English Football League give to the idea that owners that were looking to gamble would use this loophole to abuse the system, allowing them to spend huge amounts of money and separate the club from its stadium?

The history of football is littered with examples of the consequences of a club being separated from its stadium, and the financial problems that inevitably follow. Indeed, Wimbledon lost its entire club from the borough as a result of that loophole. The loophole has now been closed, but had the Derby County owner not had the option of selling the stadium in order to circumvent the financial fair play rules, then I do not think we would be having this debate today. There is no doubt in my mind that this presents a huge failing in regulation by the English Football League.

I turn next to the football creditor rule, of which Derby County also fell foul. Many weeks of the administration were spent dealing with legal claims against Derby County by Middlesbrough football club and, to a lesser extent, Wycombe Wanderers football club. During that time I spoke to both Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Middlesbrough football club owner about what, to many people, was a fairly opportunistic and spurious claim that was undoubtedly causing huge problems for the sale of the club, because the claims for so-called cheating were categorised as a football debt by the English Football League, with a potential liability of over £40 million. That understandably made interested parties rather nervous, as no one can ever predict the outcome of any litigation with 100% certainty, and this was during an administration.



With the delays caused by this action, the value of the club decreased day after day and cost the creditors money, including the taxpayer through the liability to HMRC. This example will surely put pressure on the football creditor rule, a point about which I warned various regulators, including the English Football League, while we went through this very painful process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has been particularly critical of the administrator, Quantuma. Some of her criticism is valid, and certainly the naivety and the failure of due diligence on the Kirchner bid was particularly erroneous. Quantuma has certainly been poor on communication, but I reserve some judgment. The administrator will be able to put its side of the story only when the Derby County sale is successfully completed and explain why certain actions had to be taken. We should be cautious about pre-judging that and give Quantuma the opportunity to defend itself.

However, it is certain that many Derby County supporters have suffered considerable distress over the past nine months or more, and many creditors have been left out of pocket. With a resolution looking likely, it is important that Members of this House take the necessary action to ensure that the Government do everything they can to learn from this painful process so that the same mistakes are not made again. I wish Derby County and its many supporters across the midlands the very best for the future, and I hope the new owners will cherish it.

4.58 pm

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): It is pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the debate.

If someone had told me 30 years ago, when I watched Notts County cruelly deprived of a championship play-off place by a late own goal at the old Baseball Ground, that I would have some role to play in trying to save the club, I might have expressed some doubt, but it is at this sort of time that the football family comes together. The only reason we have rivalries is because our rivals stay in existence; no one wants to see any club go out of business, least of all a club with the size and history of Derby County.

If I knew 20 years ago, when I watched my team, Notts County, spend three seasons in administration, that we would still have situations where owners could recklessly gamble the future of a club by overspending, in the hope of promotions that do not turn up, and that the club then ends up in a lengthy, expensive administration with preferred bidders who turn out not to have the money they said they had and those deals never quite complete, and we end up with millions of pounds still owed to HMRC, I would not have believed that we would not have found a way of fixing those problems. However, here we are again, with the same situation of a club effectively allowed to overspend, despite financial fair play rules being introduced in the meantime, and somehow racking up tens of millions of pounds of debt to HMRC when the Football League had procedures in place that meant if it did not pay one month's pay-as-you-earn or one quarter's VAT, it would receive a transfer ban so that debts could not be racked up to that size. That was to prevent that sort of situation.

I know that covid was one of the excuses, but somehow we have all of those situations still in play. That does not suggest that the financial regulation of football is anywhere near where we want it to be. We want that regulation so that we do not risk losing clubs in this situation because they have been allowed to recklessly overspend in an attempt to get a promotion to the promised lands and fortunes of the premier league, thinking, "Well, somebody else will pick up the bill at the end of the day."

What thoughts does the Minister have on how we can further strengthen the rules that were meant to be in place to stop this, so that, finally, we can say that it cannot happen again. We could actually get the real-time monitoring in place. We could get advance approval of a budget. We could get advance approval of decisions. Perhaps we could say something like, "If you want to sign a player on ridiculously high wages, you must put the money in the club to pay the transfer fee and those wages in advance before the Football League will sign off the transfer", so that the money is there to pay those wages all the way through to the end of the contract, and we do not find out, halfway through, that they cannot afford those players' wages after all.

Perhaps such ideas should be in place to ensure that clubs have the money before they embark on ridiculously extravagant transfer operations or the situation we saw with Derby County. Otherwise, we will have all of these warm words and will slightly tweak a regulator, or get a new one, but fundamentally there will always be this temptation, and supporters will always want it—"Oh, if only we could just sign a striker in January, we could get in the play-offs this year and get promoted." They then end up spending £25,000 a week on wages for a four-year contract that they cannot really afford because of the £100 million bonus. The temptation will always be there.

As a football fan, I want the dream that some very rich person will come and buy my football club and get me four promotions straight to the premier league, and that we can be in the champions league. That dream has worked for Man City, Newcastle, Chelsea, and for Blackburn a few years ago. We all want that dream, I suppose, so we do not want to stop any chance of somebody coming along and putting loads of money in. However, we must ensure that it is done in a sustainable way, and that it is that person's money at risk, not the future of the football club. I would urge the Minister to focus on that, and on how we can get the regulations working, whoever the regulator is.

I am afraid that these situations will never be easy, because we have the cold, hard reality of insolvency law coming into play with the emotion of football, and those two things will never work in that situation. If we are being frank, the mess that Derby County was left in would have sent any ordinary business into bankruptcy. The only reason football clubs survive is the loyalty, history, tradition and community links that they have. Derby was unviable as a business, given the amount of debt it had racked up, which was almost more than its underlying value. That is why we must get this right.

Perhaps one other lesson we have learned from this process is that we do not want litigation getting into sporting competitions. We have had the Middlesbrough and Wycombe claims against Derby, and the rumours that Burnley or Leeds were going to take legal action

[Nigel Mills]

against Everton because of its overspending. We want to know who has won the title or been relegated on the last day of the season, not four years later at the end of a court process.

I urge the Minister to look urgently at ensuring that, whoever the football regulators are, they have the real-time monitoring enforcement of the rules in place and can take quick decisions. When these issues come around, they should be resolved quickly, not several seasons later, issuing a points deduction that means not that Wycombe stays up, but some team three seasons later, which was not even in the league at that time or was in relegation trouble. It is completely unfair for those sanctions to come in years and years later. As we saw with Derby, the point deductions that got it relegated this season were for offences that were seasons and seasons before. It makes a mockery of the integrity of sporting competition if we cannot get the financial aspects of these rules right, and not only to protect clubs but to ensure that we have an actual competition with a fair result at the end of the season.

5.4 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the debate and very clearly setting out the history and importance of this issue, as well as the pressure of the deadline; I think she used the phrase “one minute to midnight”, and that is how it feels with the deadline coming up tomorrow. Both the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) set out the concerns and frustrations of people in Derby and fans of the club. They particularly mentioned the issues with the EFL’s behaviour, as well as that of the administrator; we hope that after tomorrow we will be able to look at those questions with more time to judge them. They also expressed praise for Wayne Rooney, and I echo that praise, although as a Manchester City fan I do so through gritted teeth—a Manchester City fan living the dream, as was said earlier.

We also send our best wishes to Liam Rosenior and the limited band of players he now has to work with. We wish them well for the new season, because the last 300 days have been a tough time to be a Derby County fan. A club such as Derby is the heart and soul of its community, a source of pride and identity for its supporters, and to see your club in administration and on the brink of going out of business—to see your team relegated, not because the players were not good enough, but because of points lost due to bad administration—is tough.

For hope to be raised, as it was when a deal seemed to have been struck with Chris Kirchner, and then dashed as that deal fell apart, is also tough. The uncertainty that has prevailed until recently, when the David Clowes bid was accepted, has been a very difficult time for supporters to endure. Let us hope that the fans’ ordeal is now coming to an end and that the deal goes through tomorrow. It is very positive that Mr Clowes is already involved in actively supporting the club. He is a genuine supporter of Derby County, and it is good news that he now owns the stadium, Pride Park. As we heard from

the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), it is never good when the ownership of a club and its stadium are separated.

We all hope that Mr Clowes will be the owner that Derby needs, and will be able to stabilise that club and return it to its former glories, because it is hard to overestimate the importance of a football club to its local community. The loss of a club would leave a hole in people’s lives, which is why it is so important that we protect our football clubs with a governance framework that safeguards those clubs for future generations. That is why I join other right hon. and hon. Members in urging the Government to move quickly and bring forward detail on the future of football governance, because this situation is just the latest crisis that demonstrates that we cannot afford to wait. It is yet more compelling evidence that the Government need to act quickly to implement the recommendations of the fan-led review and ensure that football has a governance regime that is fit for purpose, safeguards our great clubs and our national game, and—as the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire pointed out—gives fans a voice.

On the subject of fan and stakeholder voices, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch)—sadly, she is not present today—did a fantastic job of consulting all the stakeholders in football to set out a recipe for the future of football. Her set of proposals would put much-needed independent regulation in place, protect the heritage of our clubs and, vitally, create a structure of financial and governance oversight that would mean club owners would not be able to risk the future of their clubs in pursuit of success.

I remind Members that when the football review panel led by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford met Mel Morris, the previous owner of Derby County, shortly after her interim recommendations were published, that panel asked him specifically whether he thought the club would be in a different situation if an independent regulator and real-time financial monitoring had been in place. He said, “Yes, without a doubt.” To me, that shines a light on the need for independent regulation and a governance structure that is fit for purpose. The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) is absolutely right: we do not want football to be ruled by litigation in future

The case is clear, and the Government have accepted that case and the need for change—I have welcomed the Minister’s assurances on that point on a number of occasions—yet the Bill is delayed and a White Paper is due. I appreciate that the Government say that it is a complicated issue, which it is, and that we need to get the details right. However, the longer we leave it, the more likely it is that another club will be in crisis like Bury or Derby, so I seek some reassurances from the Minister. When are we likely to see more detail and the White Paper? Importantly, what is the timescale after that for implementation? It is looking increasingly unlikely that we will see a Bill before the next election, whenever that might be. I hope the Minister is able to correct me on that, but it just feels and looks unlikely at this stage, and fans and stakeholders in the game are all frustrated at the slow progress on this issue. We need to see action to safeguard our clubs and to make sure that the situation with Derby does not happen again.

I want to finish by wishing Derby good luck. We all have our fingers crossed that the deal will go through tomorrow and give their fans some comfort that the

club is now safe, and that they can look forward to the new season with optimism. Let us make sure that this does not happen to any other clubs in the future.

5.10 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this important debate on the administration of Derby County football club, and I thank all of those who have participated, including my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith).

It is also important to stress, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire did, that several other colleagues have played very close attention to the club's situation, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Derby North (Amanda Solloway) and for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), and the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who have had frequent conversations with me, my officials and others. As we get to the final stretch, it is important that our constituents are aware of how much time, attention and effort has been put in by all the right hon. and hon. Members I have mentioned, because they recognise how important the future of Derby County is to their constituents. I applaud everybody I have mentioned for their efforts, which show the House at its best. Along with all Members present, I am hopeful about the recent positive developments, and I hope that the matter will soon be resolved to the betterment of the club. I hope that any future parliamentary engagement we have about the Rams will not be in the face of such jeopardy.

Like many Members of this House, particularly those who have joined today's debate, I know that football clubs are at the absolute heart of our communities, and it is incredibly worrying to see them at risk. That is why the issue is so high on the political agenda here in Parliament and in so many constituencies, especially when there are significant shocks to clubs' financial security. Match days are days of pride and community and of bringing people together, and the ongoing success of clubs affects the local economy and the wider finances of the football ecosystem overall. The Government understand the importance of this, as does the whole House. That is why we have had the fan-led review of football governance, which has received strong support from all parties.

We are working at pace on the White Paper, which will set out further details on how we will implement wide-ranging reforms in this area. My opposite number, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington, has asked me on many occasions to confirm when it will be published. He knows that it will be in the summer, although there is often parliamentary debate about when the summer starts. I can assure him that my officials are moving at pace, and I appreciate that he recognises that this issue is complex. It is one thing to say, "Let's set up a regulator," but the devil is in the

detail. The scale, scope of responsibilities, location and financial support of the regulator all need quite a lot of work, but we are working on them.

Turning to Derby County football club, the situation has for too long remained worrying for fans, the local community and the football ecosystem alike. I know that this environment of uncertainty is frustrating for all stakeholders. That the club has kept its focus, and that the fans have been so loyal despite this uncertainty, is a huge credit to them. Along with colleagues, I praise Wayne Rooney, who confirmed this weekend that he will be leaving the club with immediate effect, one year earlier than planned. I pay tribute to his efforts and those of the wider team on and off the field.

No one wants to see a founding member of the Football League in administration and facing threats to its survival. I am sure that the team's efforts this season have made an extremely positive contribution to securing this historic club for years to come, for the Derby County fans of the future. We remain clear that the governance surrounding the administration of Derby County is a matter primarily for the English Football League, the administrator and the club. I thank the right hon. Member for Derby South for understanding that there are things I can control and have influence over, and other things that I cannot. These are self-organising private sector entities that are making commercial decisions.

However, as all hon. Members have said, this is an issue that everybody is interested in. The Government take an interest in the very real concern of Derby County fans, particularly because the club has endured such a long period of risk and uncertainty—so long, in fact, that it has recently begun to threaten the club's place in the EFL next season, and there are potentially greater ramifications for the club as a whole, as several hon. Members have pointed out. For that reason, I have been receiving regular updates for some time. Most recently, I convened the EFL, the administrators and many hon. Members here today to receive reports on progress. I hear hon. Members' comments about the frustrations they have experienced with the EFL and the administrators. I will ensure that I communicate those frustrations to those stakeholders.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on all the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire made, but I will always call on all stakeholders to be pragmatic, act at speed and put the interests of fans at the heart of everything they do. As several hon. Members said, I have regularly called on the administrators and EFL to keep MPs and other stakeholders updated. I specifically said, "If you don't, I will be called to the House in Westminster Hall debates and others to answer on your behalf," and here we are, so that point is particularly relevant. I am somewhat disappointed to hear the frustration of many hon. Members, who said that they do not believe they were appropriately updated. There are potentially lessons to be learned for the future if such a situation were to arise again.

Similarly, I have had regular engagement with the EFL, and I will pass on hon. Members' comments. The EFL has many stakeholders, and of course its responsibility is not to support one club, but to work on behalf of all its members. That sometimes causes contradictions and conflicts that are difficult for the supporter of any



[Nigel Huddleston]

individual club to understand, but if we were in a slightly different situation, mindsets might change. As I say, I will pass on all those comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire raised the Middlesbrough issue, which was obviously resolved by the clubs Middlesbrough and Derby County themselves. I am afraid that I do not necessarily agree with his suspicions about ulterior motives. I was glad that the situation was resolved, and I believe that the EFL acted in good faith. There were also concerns about legal issues, and they were matters to be resolved directly between the clubs. As I say, I will pass on the concerns that hon. Friends and others raised.

The collapse of the purchase by the previous preferred bidder, Chris Kirchner, was a very difficult moment for the club, but I was reassured that other parties remained interested in it. The EFL also set out that there were a number of ways in which the club could continue in the 2022-23 season, with or without a long-term buyer in place. However, there have been numerous developments in the past week, which I hope are broadly welcomed by the fans. As we speak, Clowes Developments has issued a loan to the club to demonstrate the funding necessary to start the next season. Its chair, David Clowes, has purchased the stadium and had an offer for the club accepted by the administrators. As hon. Members have noted, there are hopes that the purchase of the club could be completed this week, and I certainly hope that that will be the case.

Of course, the sale raises questions about the wider financial sustainability of football, which was focused on by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley. I can give him the reassurances he was looking for. If everything was right in football, and all the regulatory frameworks working as they should, we would have had no need to implement the fan-led review. We did so because there were failings across the board in football. Financial sustainability and financial regulation are at the heart of the role of the regulator, to do precisely the things that my hon. Friend called for. The finances of too many clubs are unsustainable. Consistently spending greater than 100% of revenue is not a viable long-term business model, but for some reason that seems prevalent in football. Ongoing financial monitoring will be a key role of the regulator. The Government accepted all 10 recommendations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). As I have said, we are proceeding at pace with the White Paper, which we will provide more information about soon.

Our plans amount to very significant reform in our national game, and our vision sets a clear direction for that reform, which will reduce the likelihood of financial distress and make football more resilient and sustainable in the long term. I understand that the conversation with Mel Morris was very stark. He did say that, had we had the proposed system in place, Derby County might not have been in the situation it finds itself in now. I think that probably applies to several other clubs that have been in financial distress.

We will publish the White Paper, setting out more details on the breadth of changes that we will make via legislation. I am fairly confident that we will get the support of most, if not all, of the House for that legislation. At the core of those reforms will be an independent regulator

for English football. As I have said, the regulator will focus on financial sustainability, overseeing a licensing regime, which covers the top five leagues in English football. We will also act on our view that the current owners' and directors' tests do not go far enough and must be strengthened. That will include enhanced checks on the source of funds and the strength of business and financial plans.

The Government are fully committed to reforming football governance, to enable a long-term, sustainable future for the game. Accepting all the strategic recommendations within the review is the next step to do exactly that, and will represent a wholesale change in the way in which football is governed in England. In the meantime, the Government will continue to engage closely with the EFL, the administrators and, of course, hon. Members, until it is confirmed that this fantastic club has been saved. I hope to hear very good news very soon.

5.23 pm

**Mrs Latham:** I thank the Minister for his remarks, and I look forward to seeing the proposed legislation. I hope that it will go a long way to solve the problems at Derby County. I also thank right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. It is interesting that there are not many debates where Members on both sides of the House completely agree on what has gone wrong and where we need to move forward. That is because this is more important than party politics. It is about the heart of Derby and the heart of Derby County. Even Notts Forest fans would like Derby County to continue because, if it does not, who will they hate in future?

We are not having this debate just for the fans; it is for the whole community of Derby. The fans are very important and have been left out, but this is about the economy of the city of Derby and the jobs that big clubs such as Derby County bring. Those poor, uncertain people who work at the club still do not know, and have not known for months, whether they will have a job at the end of this. It is important that we do not forget those people, who in some instances have given many years of their lives to Derby County. That is so important, because they are relying on the future of Derby County and its new owner. I sincerely hope we will see the solution in the next day or so. If we do not, I really do not know what Derby will do.

I have to say that I never thought that my time in Parliament would end up with me knowing so much about football and even leading a debate on it. It is not my specialist subject, although it has become much more specialist than I ever thought it would.

David Clowes has come in at the last minute and acted quickly and honourably. I do not know him personally, although I did know his father. However, I know that, as a fan, he has a drive to get this issue sorted and to get it right. It is really important that he is allowed to do that so that he can bring Derby County forward and ensure we continue to be successful and go back up into the next league, which is what Derby County fans want. They want us to be up, not down. They would like to be further up still, as we were in the days of our former manager. It is really important for Derby that we are successful.

I worked for Midland Bank years and years ago. I remember that, if we lost on a Saturday, people were depressed on the Monday morning at work, but if we won, the whole atmosphere was different. It is no different now. This is such an important event for Derby to be successful—having David Clowes at the forefront, as a local person and a fan who does have the money. That is an important thing to recognise. I would like to wish him good luck. I also wish enormous good luck to the interim manager, Liam Rosenior, who has a huge job to follow after Wayne Rooney, who has been so loyal and so fantastic. I am really sad to see him go.

Thousands of my generation go to see Derby County, but it is not just them—it is my children's generation and my grandchildren's generation, too. They all turn

up to fill that stadium week after week after week, even during this time of uncertainty. It is important that Derby County survives. I know that Steve Bloomer continues to watch over Derby County.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the administration of Derby County Football Club.

5.28 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Tuesday 28 June 2022

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Energy Supply Company Special Administration Regime

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a number of contingent liabilities arising from the issuance of letters of credit for the energy administrators acting in the special administration regime for Bulb Energy Ltd (“Bulb”). These letters of credit replace previous ones provided, announced within past written ministerial statements, which soon expire.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

I have ensured that Parliament has been afforded the full 14-sitting day notification period to allow the proper scrutiny of these new contingent liabilities.

Bulb entered the energy supply company special administration regime on 24 November 2021. Energy administrators were appointed by court to achieve the statutory objective of continuing energy supplies at the lowest reasonable practicable cost until such time as it becomes unnecessary for the special administration to remain in force for that purpose.

My Department has agreed to provide a facility to the energy administrators, with letters of credit issued, with my approval, to guarantee such contract, code, licence, or other document obligations of the company consistent with the special administration’s statutory objective. I will update the House if any letters of credit are drawn against.

The legal basis for a letter of credit is section 165 of the Energy Act 2004, as applied and modified by section 96 of the Energy Act 2011.

HM Treasury has approved the arrangements in principle.  
[HCWS145]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Census 2021

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler):** The 22nd decennial census of population for England and Wales was taken on 21 March 2021. Today, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes the first results, which I have laid in a report before the House this morning. These results are just the start of an extensive range of Census 2021 statistics and analyses to be published during 2022 and 2023 and beyond.

Census 2021 was a great success. Delivered against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, the first digital-first census achieved response rates of 97%, with 89% of households completing it online. This household response rate far exceeded the ONS’s target of 94% nationally and local response rates were above the target of 80% in each local authority area. I thank the public for their response.

The figures published today show that the usual resident population of England and Wales on Census Day—21 March 2021—was estimated to be 59,597,300—56,489,800 in England and 3,107,500 in Wales; this was the largest population ever recorded through a census in England and Wales. The population of England and Wales grew by more than 3.5 million (6.3%) since the last census in 2011, when it was 56,075,912. The report laid before the House provides estimates of the population down to local authority level, broken down by age and sex, as well as the number of households, data on population density, and changes in population and households over time. The statistical datasets underlying the report have also been published today on the ONS website, along with other analysis and information.

Census data are critical to planning and delivering local services as well as informing decision making at national and local levels. Early data from Census 2021 have already been used to inform management of the coronavirus pandemic. Information on where Ukrainian communities are located in England and Wales has been used to inform our humanitarian response to the crisis. The huge range of high-quality data and detail from the census, combined with other sources, will ensure the changing needs of society can be understood and met.

Over the coming months, the ONS will publish data and analysis covering the range of topics and questions included in Census 2021, including the new questions on sexual orientation, gender identity and previous service in the UK armed forces. These will be followed by data releases which will allow users to conduct in-depth analysis using data across multiple census variables, as well as a range of ONS analytical publications exploring the data in more detail across the range of census topics. In total, these releases will include some five billion census statistics. Further detail of the planned releases and publications can be found on the Census 2021 outputs pages of the ONS’s website.

The ONS is producing a suite of tools to enable users of all levels of experience with population data to explore the results of the census. To maintain the privacy of personal census responses, strict measures of statistical disclosure control ensure that no individual person or household can be identified from the information released.

The census in Northern Ireland was conducted on the same day as in England and Wales. However, the census in Scotland took place in March 2022. The statistical offices of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are working together to ensure the production of harmonised statistics across the UK and to address issues arising from the census in Scotland taking place a year later.

Alongside the delivery of the digital-first census in 2021, the ONS is transforming the population and migration statistics system. This work will enable more frequent and timely statistics about our population using administrative data supplemented by surveys.

In addition to Census 2021 outputs and regular mid-year estimates, throughout this year the ONS will continue to publish research updates, building towards “experimental” monthly age/sex profiles of the population relating to 2022. This will start with a proof of concept for admin-based monthly population estimates as soon as possible after the first Census 2021 results are released. As its methods mature, the ONS will embed these into its official estimates and move on from the “experimental” status. The ONS is continuing to develop its methods for producing population and migration statistics. It also aims to publish a proof of concept that demonstrates the feasibility of producing statistics from admin data combining two or more characteristics, starting with income by ethnicity, which builds on research published last year on admin-based income and ethnicity statistics. This new approach will inform a recommendation by the National Statistician in 2023 on the future of the census and population statistics in England and Wales.

[HCWS147]

## DEFENCE

### Countering State Threats: Call-out Order

#### **The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey):**

A new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called into permanent service to prepare for, participate in, or support operations by Her Majesty’s armed forces to counter state threats.

States engage in and orchestrate overt and covert action which falls short of general armed conflict but nevertheless seeks to undermine or threaten the safety and interests of the UK, including the integrity of its democracy, its public safety, its military advantage and its reputation or economic prosperity. The characteristics of state threats are changing, diversifying and evolving. States who engage in hostile activity against the UK and our overseas interests are becoming increasingly emboldened, asserting themselves more aggressively, to advance their geopolitical objectives and undermine the UK’s democracy, security, prosperity, resilience, values and global strategic advantage.

The Ministry of Defence is regularly tasked to support broader HMG objectives. As part of this support, reserve forces will be on standby, routinely as part of a whole force approach with regular services, to deliver a range of Defence outputs, including support to partners across Government. Outputs will be enabled by reserve forces providing capabilities such as—but not limited to—formed sub-units, individual augmentees and specialist skills.

The order shall take effect from the day on which it is made and shall cease to have effect 12 months from the date on which it is made.

[HCWS148]

## EDUCATION

### Children’s Homes

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince):** Today I am providing an update on the Department’s response to whistleblowing allegations made to Ofsted and the BBC by former employees of

Calcot Services for Children. The allegations describe shocking abuse and safeguarding failures in children’s homes run by Calcot, including allegations of grooming, rape, sexual assault, and of Calcot cutting corners on staffing ratios. This is something that I, and the Department, take with the utmost seriousness. We expect all children’s homes to provide the right support, care and protection for children who live there—no organisation should exploit those in need.

Calcot runs eight children’s homes and three independent schools in Reading and the surrounding areas for children with complex emotional, behavioural difficulties and or learning disabilities. Ofsted is responsible for regulating children’s homes and ensuring that action is taken where homes are not providing good quality and safe care for the children they look after. I met Her Majesty’s chief inspector at Ofsted on 14 June to discuss my concerns about Calcot. In the light of the most recent concerns, Ofsted have further accelerated their planned programme of inspection across Calcot’s children’s homes and schools. Following recent inspections, the first inspection report was published on 21 June and the children’s home was rated as inadequate. Ofsted has issued the home with compliance notices and it is restricted from taking more children until it can demonstrate it has improved the quality of care.

As some inspections are still in progress, I cannot say more on the outcomes at this time. However, three further homes have had restrictions imposed limiting the number of children they can care for. If Ofsted find widespread and systemic failings, they will not hesitate to issue a notice to suspend the registration of the home and consider serving a notice to cancel the registration of the home if necessary. This action would be taken if Ofsted considered that the children were not safe and if they did not have confidence that the provider could make appropriate and sufficient changes quickly enough.

The safeguarding of the children in our collective care remains paramount and as these inspections progress Ofsted will update the Department, and both will continue to work with placing local authorities to ensure that appropriate and proportionate action is taken to safeguard children.

With regards to the three independent schools run by Calcot, the Department is working with the inspectorates to ensure they are meeting the independent school standards and keeping their children safe.

Independent schools should meet all of the independent school standards at all times. Where any school has serious failings or failings for an extended period of time, the Department may consider whether enforcement action is appropriate under its published regulatory and enforcement policy action, which can be found at the following link:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/attachment\\_data/file/809551/Ind\\_schools\\_enforcement\\_policy\\_statement\\_post\\_consultation\\_13061](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/attachment_data/file/809551/Ind_schools_enforcement_policy_statement_post_consultation_13061)

Separately, in January, the Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), agreed that the independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel should undertake a national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings. It will ask some important questions about how children with disabilities are safeguarded. Most importantly, it will seek to identify ways in which practice and policy might need to change to protect children better in the future.

We will consider all this information together with the findings from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and Competition and Market's Authority market study, to inform our implementation strategy, due to be published later this year.

[HCWS144]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Nationality and Borders Act 2022: Implementation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove):** In April, the Nationality and Borders Act achieved Royal Assent. This landmark legislation will help to deliver a fair but firm asylum system; deterring illegal entry into the UK, breaking the business model of people-smuggling networks and speeding up the removal of those with no right to be here. In turn, this will free up the asylum system so we can better support those in genuine need of asylum through safe and legal routes.

Today, new measures from the Act will come into effect, including:

*Amended criminal offences with increased maximum penalties* for those attempting to arrive in the UK illegally—from six months to four years—and maximum life imprisonment for people smugglers, including pilots of small boats in the Channel and others who dangerously smuggle migrants into the UK. In addition, we have increased the maximum penalty for Foreign National offenders who return to the UK in breach of a deportation order from six months to five years; *A suite of asylum reforms*, with the central principle that those seeking protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. Our reforms also introduce a new differentiated approach, whereby those who did not come to the UK directly, did not claim without delay, or did not show good cause for their illegal entry or presence, may be given lesser entitlements than those who have complied with these requirements, for example refugees who have come to the UK via safe and legal routes. The different entitlements include a shorter grant of permission to stay—a minimum of 30 months instead of five years—no automatic right to settlement and access to family reunion only where a refusal would breach our international obligations.

*An ability to impose visa penalties*—this means slowing or stopping our services where countries pose a risk to international peace and security and those that refuse to take back their own citizens who have no right to be in the UK.

*Nationality changes*, creating fairer access to British nationality.

*Changes to bail and returns*, which includes strengthening the early removal scheme for Foreign National offenders to remove them sooner than was the case previously.

These reforms sit alongside other important changes, including a world-leading migration and economic partnership with Rwanda. Further reforms from the Act will be implemented over the coming months and into next year as we seek to build and deliver a fair but firm asylum and immigration system.

[HVWS150]

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

### India Trade Negotiations

**The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** The fourth round of UK-India free trade agreement negotiations began on 13 June and concluded on 24 June. The negotiations, at official level,

were conducted in a hybrid fashion, with some negotiators in our dedicated UK negotiations facility, and others attending virtually.

During this round, talks focused on draft treaty text. Technical discussions were held across 20 policy areas over 71 separate sessions, with draft treaty text advanced across the majority of chapters.

The fifth round of official-level negotiations is due to take place in July 2022.

We remain clear that any deal the Government strike must be in the best interests of the British people and the economy.

The Government will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS149]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Machinery of Government: Arbitration Policy

**The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson):** I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government change.

Responsibility for private commercial arbitration policy and the Arbitration Act 1996 will move from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Ministry of Justice from 1 July 2022. This transfer will locate private commercial arbitration policy alongside other forms of dispute resolution policy. This will allow the Ministry of Justice to pursue a comprehensive and unified approach to the promotion and continued competitiveness of the UK as a world-leading destination for all forms of dispute resolution. The transfer of policy responsibility will also allow the MoJ to meet its responsibilities of working in the interests of all parts of the UK's legal sector, of which arbitration is a vital component.

[HCWS151]

### UK Covid-19 Inquiry

**The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson):** On 15 December 2021, I appointed the right hon. Baroness Heather Hallett as chair of the UK inquiry into covid-19. Earlier this year, I published terms of reference for the inquiry in draft and asked Baroness Hallett to conduct a public consultation in order to inform refinements to those terms of reference. I am grateful to Baroness Hallett for the very extensive consultation she conducted and for the subsequent amendments to the inquiry's terms of reference which she put forward as a result.

Having considered Baroness Hallett's proposals carefully and consulted the administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, I am content to accept her changes in full, subject only to a small number of clarificatory amendments put forward by the devolved Administrations and agreed with Baroness Hallett. The inquiry's final terms of reference are set out in full below.

In appointing Baroness Hallett as the inquiry's chair I confirmed that I proposed to appoint additional panel members in order that the inquiry has access to the full range of expertise needed to complete its important



work. I can now confirm that I propose to appoint two such panel members, and that I propose to do so in the coming months.

The UK inquiry into covid-19 is now formally established and able to begin its important work. Its terms of reference are as follows:

“The Inquiry will examine, consider and report on preparations and the response to the pandemic in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, up to and including the Inquiry’s formal setting up date, 28 June 2022.

In carrying out its work, the Inquiry will consider reserved and devolved matters across the United Kingdom, as necessary, but will seek to minimise duplication of investigation, evidence gathering and reporting with any other public inquiry established by the devolved governments. To achieve this, the Inquiry will set out publicly how it intends to minimise duplication, and will liaise with any such inquiry before it investigates any matter which is also within that inquiry’s scope.

In meeting its aims, the Inquiry will:

- a) consider any disparities evident in the impact of the pandemic on different categories of people, including, but not limited to, those relating to protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and equality categories under the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
- b) listen to and consider carefully the experiences of bereaved families and others who have suffered hardship or loss as a result of the pandemic. Although the Inquiry will not consider in detail individual cases of harm or death, listening to these accounts will inform its understanding of the impact of the pandemic and the response, and of the lessons to be learned;
- c) highlight where lessons identified from preparedness and the response to the pandemic may be applicable to other civil emergencies;
- d) have reasonable regard to relevant international comparisons; and
- e) produce its reports (including interim reports) and any recommendations in a timely manner.

The aims of the Inquiry are to:

1. Examine the COVID-19 response and the impact of the pandemic in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and produce a factual narrative account, including:

a) *The public health response across the whole of the UK, including*

- i) preparedness and resilience;
- ii) how decisions were made, communicated, recorded, and implemented;
- iii) decision-making between the governments of the UK;
- iv) the roles of, and collaboration between, central government, devolved administrations, regional and local authorities, and the voluntary and community sector;
- v) the availability and use of data, research and expert evidence;
- vi) legislative and regulatory control and enforcement;
- vii) shielding and the protection of the clinically vulnerable;
- viii) the use of lockdowns and other ‘non-pharmaceutical’ interventions such as social distancing and the use of face coverings;
- ix) testing and contact tracing, and isolation;
- x) the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the population, including but not limited to those who were harmed significantly by the pandemic;
- xi) the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the bereaved, including post-bereavement support;
- xii) the impact on health and care sector workers and other key workers;
- xiii) the impact on children and young people, including health, wellbeing and social care;
- xiv) education and early years provision;

xv) the closure and reopening of the hospitality, retail, sport and leisure, and travel and tourism sectors, places of worship, and cultural institutions;

xvi) housing and homelessness;

xvii) safeguarding and support for victims of domestic abuse; xviii) prisons and other places of detention;

xix) the justice system;

xx) immigration and asylum;

xxi) travel and borders; and

xxii) the safeguarding of public funds and management of financial risk.

b) *The response of the health and care sector across the UK, including:*

i) preparedness, initial capacity and the ability to increase capacity, and resilience;

ii) initial contact with official healthcare advice services such as 111 and 999;

iii) the role of primary care settings such as General Practice;

iv) the management of the pandemic in hospitals, including infection prevention and control, triage, critical care capacity, the discharge of patients, the use of ‘Do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation’ (DNACPR) decisions, the approach to palliative care, workforce testing, changes to inspections, and the impact on staff and staffing levels;

v) the management of the pandemic in care homes and other care settings, including infection prevention and control, the transfer of residents to or from homes, treatment and care of residents, restrictions on visiting, workforce testing and changes to inspections;

vi) care in the home, including by unpaid carers;

vii) antenatal and postnatal care;

viii) the procurement and distribution of key equipment and supplies, including PPE and ventilators;

ix) the development, delivery and impact of therapeutics and vaccines;

x) the consequences of the pandemic on provision for non-COVID related conditions and needs; and

xi) provision for those experiencing long-COVID.

c) *The economic response to the pandemic and its impact, including governmental interventions by way of:*

i) support for businesses, jobs and the self-employed, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, loans schemes, business rates relief and grants;

ii) additional funding for relevant public services;

iii) additional funding for the voluntary and community sector; and

iv) benefits and sick pay, and support for vulnerable people.

2. Identify the lessons to be learned from the above, to inform preparations for future pandemics across the UK.”

[HCWS152]

## TRANSPORT

### Active Travel England

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** I am pleased to announce further progress on standing up Active Travel England, the new Executive agency which will help deliver this Government’s £2 billion commitment to active travel and creating a new golden age of walking and cycling.

A number of senior leadership appointments have now been made for Active Travel England. Chris Boardman MBE has been confirmed as England's National active travel commissioner on a permanent basis. After his appointment as the interim Commissioner at the start of the year, he will continue to lead Active Travel England and chair the interim board which has now been established.

The Department expects to be able to confirm shortly the appointment of Danny Williams as Active Travel England's chief executive, who will be starting full time in August. He will bring a wealth of experience to the role from successfully setting up and growing both large and start-up businesses and from his dedicated campaigning for improving walking and cycling provision.

Louise Wilkinson has been appointed as Active Travel England's chief operating officer. She has a successful career in financial management for the civil service and local government and has most recently been a finance deputy director in the Cabinet Office.

The Department expects to confirm shortly the appointment of Graham Grant as its director of planning. He was until recently the assistant director of transport at Newcastle City Council.

Brian Deegan has also started as the director of inspections. He has successfully developed and delivered street designs for improving active travel in Greater

Manchester and London and will work with local authorities to design high quality schemes. A small number of Department for Transport employees will also transfer to the new body.

Despite only having a handful of officers in place, Active Travel England has already started to deliver significant benefits, in line with the Gear Change commitment to deliver a step change in the quality of walking and cycling infrastructure. It has assessed and awarded £161 million of funding for 134 active travel fund projects, announced on 14 May 2022, which will deliver high-quality schemes in 46 authorities in England, outside London. This early work will enable 16 million extra cycling and walking journeys to take place each year. It has also developed a suite of tools which will help local active travel projects deliver high-quality infrastructure, and it has delivered training and engagement events for local authorities. Its work will significantly improve value for money of cycling and walking schemes.

Improved active travel provision has many benefits. It will play an important role in improving the health of the nation by reducing physical inactivity and it is vital to the Government's commitment to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Better walking and cycling provision will also help make local areas greener, healthier and better places to live.

[HCWS146]





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**not later than  
Tuesday 5 July 2022**

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